

READING ECCLESIASTES 'EPILOGICALLY'

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Summary

The epilogue of Ecclesiastes tells the reader how to understand the book, but at first sight its summary is far off the mark. However the epilogue does display a surprising degree of lexical and thematic uniformity with the body of the book, and when its message is taken seriously as a guide to reading, the results are both coherent and compelling. This article is an appeal to modern readers to treat the epilogist with more respect.

I. Introductory Matters

In the quest to pin down the message of Qohelet,¹ the epilogue (12:9-14) is perhaps the most unexplored of regions. This is primarily because it tends to be perceived as a later addition² and—worse—one which 'introduces wholly alien categories.'³ The aim of this article is to challenge the second of these assumptions on both formal and thematic grounds, and to present instead an epilogue which, together with 1:1-2 and 12:8, provides the reader with the book's own key to the message it sets forth. The two main vehicles for this challenge will be a lexical study of the epilogue, and an exegesis of

¹Throughout this article, we distinguish between the *book* of Ecclesiastes and the *person* of Qohelet.

²The confusion which often surrounds this view is typified in O. Kaiser ('Qoheleth', in J. Day *et al.* [eds.], *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J.A. Emerton* [Cambridge: CUP, 1995] 83-93), who reasons that 'Since the epilogue in xii 8-14 is clearly divided into two parts, verses 8-11 and 12-14, there are obviously two epilogists responsible for it' (p. 85)—and must therefore go on to make statements like '[The second epilogist] also made insertions in xi 7-xii 7, which share the viewpoint of this summary' (p. 87f.).

³J.L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1988) 48.

Ecclesiastes 7:23–8:1 which is guided by the agenda the epilogue provides us. But first some structural observations are required.

The structure of Ecclesiastes is elusive: for example, formal and thematic procedures yield quite different structural units.⁴ The one convincing structural feature is the ‘frame’ of 1:1-2 (or 3) and 12:8-14, through which a ‘frame narrator’ or ‘epilogist’ presents to his readers the ideas and experiences of the person Qohelet.⁵ This frame narrator presents himself as the transmitter (not the creator) of Qohelet’s words. We have argued in an earlier article⁶ that the most natural way to read such a frame-structure is as a double frame consisting of an outer frame (1:1 and 12:9-14) which mentions Qohelet by name and speaks of him in the third person, and an inner frame (1:2 and 12:8) which quotes him in direct speech. This double frame has a double theme:

1:1	1:2	inner frame: ‘Vanity’	12:8	12:9-14
outer frame: ‘Fear God’				

The conclusion ‘Vanity’ (הבִּל) is an indicative, the result of much observation and thought. The conclusion ‘Fear God’ is an imperative, the result (we must suppose) of the revelation of Israelite religion. It is important to notice that it is *these two conclusions taken together* which represent the frame-narrator’s synthesis of Qohelet’s message. Not only is the juxtaposition of the two conclusions of 12:8 and 12:13 suggestive, but the epilogue by itself makes the same point.

The epilogue is divided into two halves by וְיִתֵּן (‘and in addition’, vv. 9, 12); the first half consists of two verses about Qohelet and a proverb, while the second half contains a

⁴For example there is a notable positive refrain which recurs in various forms seven times—‘There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God’—but it corresponds to no clear structural-thematic programme.

⁵This has been well demonstrated by M.V. Fox, ‘Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet’, *HUCA* 47 (1977) 83-106.

⁶A. Shead, ‘Ecclesiastes from the outside in’, *RTR* 55/1 (1996) 24-37.

proverb and a two verse conclusion, corresponding to a 2-1 : 1-2 pattern. Within this framework there is considerable structural unity, achieved in part by the use of the 'word chain', whereby single words or phrases are repeated from verse to verse so as to create an a-b, b-c, c-d pattern.⁷ Verses 9-11 speak positively about Qohelet's wisdom, but suggest that acquiring wisdom is a painful process ('wise men's words are like goads... like implanted nails'). As a good proverb should, v. 11 brings the implications of vv. 9-10 into sharp focus and generalises the observations about Qohelet into a statement about wisdom.⁸

The next proverb (v. 12) refers back to the preceding verses,⁹ and adds to them a warning. It is unnecessary to see here a criticism of Qohelet, which would effectively negate the previous affirmation of his wisdom. Rather, 'there is a warning here, but it is the warning that true wisdom comes only at the end of an arduous, demanding, all-consuming search.'¹⁰ Therefore the youth must realise that the value of such activity lies not in the activity itself, but in what it reveals in the end when all has been heard (v. 13). Verse 12 functions like v. 11 with respect to its own section, though in reverse sequence, and as a contrasting rather than reinforcing generalisation. The contrasts are between אֵין קֵץ ('there is no end', v. 12) and סוֹף דָּבָר ('end of the matter', v. 13), and between עֲשׂוֹת סִפְרִים ('making of books', v. 12) and כָּל-מַעֲשֶׂה ('every deed', v. 14). That is, in contrast to (Qohelet's) endless activity, there is something final that can be done: fear God and keep his commands. For all that we do/make (including

⁷Shead, 'Ecclesiastes', 31. Ec. 11:1-12:7 is analysed in this way by R. Reich, 'Word Chains in Ecclesiastes' [Hebrew], *Beth Mikra* 36 (1990) 94-96.

⁸Since most of the uses of דַּעַת ('knowledge') are in 1:16-18 and 2:21-26, which describe the frustration and pain Qohelet's search for wisdom brought him, the fact that it is דַּעַת he teaches in 12:9 suggests that learning wisdom is painful but worthwhile. It is this hint that 12:11 crystallises.

⁹מִדְּבַר אֲחֵר can be rendered: 'there's something else to be said.' See M.V. Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions* (JSOTS 71; Sheffield: Almond, 1989) 326.

¹⁰G. Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987) 212.

books on wisdom) will be judged. סוף דבר means 'in conclusion',¹¹ literally 'end-of-word', and it is unique here in the Old Testament. דבר ('word') is repeated four times in the epilogue, and links back word-chain fashion to the 'words' of Qohelet in v.10: it is the conclusion of Qohelet's words that is set forth in v. 13.¹² The next words in v. 12 confirm this point: הכל נשמע ('all has been heard'). 'All' is repeated three times in vv. 13b-14, an 'interanimation of words'¹³ that defines 'the all' which has been heard in terms of 'every man', 'every deed', and 'every hidden thing'. The distinctive use of 'all' with the article is seen in the inner frame: הכל הבל ('"the all"' is vanity'),¹⁴ thus giving v. 13a the sense 'the whole of life in all its fullness is vanity, and having heard this our conclusion is "Fear God".' That is, fearing God is for the frame-narrator not the alternative to the vanity observation, but its result.

In brief (says the frame narrator), Qohelet says that life is vanity—the failure of our work to achieve its end, and of our knowledge to predict the results of given causes, is painful and morally outrageous—but the one activity which makes life liveable is fearing God. Indeed, life can only be called vain (a value judgment) as long as there is a God (the ground of human values) who is worthy of our fear. Or again, we are to fear God *because* life is vain, *because* we can derive no profit from human wisdom. The epilogue claims with this synthesis to be summarising the essence of Qohelet's wisdom; we are convinced this claim is valid, and will begin to deal with some potential objections in the next section.

II. A Lexical Study of the Epilogue

Most scholars object that the epilogue is at odds with the rest of Qohelet, and should be treated as secondary, and it is in

¹¹C.D. Ginsberg, *Coeleth* (London: 1861) 477.

¹²Indeed, the entire book is referred to in 1:1 as דברי קהלה ('The words of Qohelet')—it is not accidental that דבר is used both to introduce the book in 1:1 and to speak retrospectively about it in 12:13.

¹³R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985) 165.

¹⁴The phrase reappears in 1:14; 2:11; 3:19; 7:15.

order to provide some sort of base from which to assess the merits of these claims that we have made a lexical study of the epilogue. The first aim of such a study is to show the lexical contiguity of the epilogue and the body of Ecclesiastes, as a confirmation of the validity of an integrated approach. The second aim is to determine which words in 12:9-14 are echoes of key terms used in the body of the book. In this way an indication may be given of the nature of the epilogue's connection with what precedes.

Ecclesiastes is wisdom literature. To read it as such we must pay close attention (among other things) to the repetition and arrangement of words. The Biblical authors did not pick words at random, but evidently made careful use of language in ways often quite subtle and powerful. This is all the more true of wisdom writers, for whom one of the hallmarks of wisdom was the sophisticated crafting of language (see Ec. 12:9-10).¹⁵ Work has been done on the distinctive vocabulary and style of Ecclesiastes from the time of Delitzsch (1891)¹⁶ and before. But we have chosen to interact with a more recent writer, O. Loretz.¹⁷ He pointed out that there is a very large degree of repetition of 'favourite' words and phrases, so much so that over 20% of the book's words are 'favourites'. However, Loretz's choice of words to be included as 'favourites' is sometimes puzzling: he selects words which occur as few as five times, which suggests that he defines 'favourites' as words that are *relatively* frequent. But other words which he singles out are typical wisdom vocabulary, just as common in Proverbs as in Ecclesiastes (e.g. חכם, 'wise'; רע, 'evil'; כסיל, 'foolish'; שמח, 'joy'), thus ruling out relative frequency (unless we want favourite wisdom words in general). More seriously, he omits common words that Ecclesiastes uses proportionately far more often than other Old Testament books (e.g. כי, 'because', אי, 'is not', מצא, 'find').

¹⁵See for example Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 167-68.

¹⁶F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* (ET; Edinburgh: 1891).

¹⁷Qohelet und der Alte Orient: Untersuchungen zu Stil und theologischer Thematik des Buches Qohelet (Freiburg: Herder, 1964) 166-80.

Finally, Loretz restricts his survey to the body of the book (1:4–12:7). This is a restriction which is not justified by the evidence; even using Loretz's 'favourite words', the epilogue shows the distinctive lexical traits of the rest of the book. And when the epilogue itself is analysed, the results are beyond doubt.

The method used was to take a word in the epilogue and look for other uses of it in the body of the book, as well as in Proverbs, Job, and the rest of the Old Testament.¹⁸ The relative frequency of the word's use was then calculated in each of the above categories. The value of such a study is twofold: firstly, it can be seen whether a word in the epilogue is used in the body of Ecclesiastes, and if so, how often (the low number of words in the epilogue makes comparing relative frequencies unreliable at this point). Secondly, the selected vocabulary of Ecclesiastes can be compared with other wisdom books and the rest of the Old Testament to establish what words are 'favourites' of Ecclesiastes. These are the words with significantly higher relative frequencies in Ecclesiastes than elsewhere.¹⁹ The results of this study are as follows:

(1) The vocabulary of the epilogue is entirely characteristic of that of the rest of Ecclesiastes. For a start, 58 of the 74 words in the epilogue (78%) appear in the body of the

¹⁸The source of these statistics is A. Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance of the Old Testament Using the Hebrew and Aramaic Text* (2nd ed.; Jerusalem: 'Kiryat Sefer'/Baker, 1993). The number of words in each category was divided by the number of words in each book or books, using the following estimates (p. xiii): Ec. 1:1–12:8 = 2923; Ec. 12:9–14 = 74; Ec. = 2997; Pr. = 6912; Jb. = 8392; Rest of the Old Testament = 286 600. The frequency data were checked with the AcCordance™ biblical database programme (by OakTree Software Specialists; version 1.1a, March 1995). Inseparable particles (such as *waw* and prefixed prepositions) were not counted as separate words.

¹⁹In determining a significant result, the general principle is that the more common the word, the smaller a margin of relative frequency is needed for the result to be significant. Thus, although דבר ('word') occurs only 60% more often in Ec. than in Pr., it is common enough for this to be a significant result. At the other end of the spectrum, חפץ ('delight'), which occurs only 7 times in Ec., is considered a favourite because it is 6 times more frequent than in other wisdom books, and 25 times more frequent than in the rest of the Old Testament. Some relatively frequent words were ruled out as significant on the grounds that they are late entries to the Hebrew language (e.g. הרבה, 'many').

book; and more significantly, although these 58 words are just 1.9% of the 2997 words of the book, this vocabulary is used so often throughout Ecclesiastes that it makes up 29.5% of the book's total words! Even if we restrict ourselves to vocabulary which is distinctive in some way to Ecclesiastes, whether by virtue of being idiomatic Hebrew or because it comes from the author's pool of 'favourite words', we find that 33 words from the epilogue (45%) fall into this category, and that these words make up 20% of the rest of the book. (Only 15 words in the epilogue do not occur in the rest of the book, and 5 of these occur 4 or less times in the Old Testament.) So for example the idiomatic or late terms יוֹתֵר ('addition'), קֹהֶלֶת ('Qohelet'), הַרְבֵּה ('many'),²⁰ תִּקֵּן ('straighten'), סוּף ('end')²¹, and the stylistically unusual שְׁהִיָּה ('which was'),²² הַכֹּל ('the all/whole'), הָאָדָם ('the man'), and הָאֱלֹהִים ('the God'), feature in both the epilogue and body of Ecclesiastes but virtually nowhere else.

(2) There are many words in Ecclesiastes as a whole (body and epilogue) which are not considered late Hebrew, but which nevertheless are significantly less frequent in the rest of the Old Testament. Some are typical wisdom vocabulary, seen in Proverbs or Job, but many are favourites of Ecclesiastes alone.²³ The words in the epilogue²⁴ which are 'favourites' of Ecclesiastes include מָצָא ('find')²⁵, חִפְּץ ('delight'), נָטַע ('plant'),

²⁰The verb רָבָה is found elsewhere, albeit with far less frequency, but the Hiphil inf. abs. form has 30% of its occurrences in Ec.

²¹A less clear-cut example, appearing thrice in Ec., twice elsewhere, and five times in Aramaic Dn.

²²This term occurs only twice outside Ec. (Ps. 124:1, 2).

²³Wisdom vocabulary in the epilogue includes הָכֵם ('wise'), דַּעַת ('knowledge'), מִשַּׁל ('proverb'), בִּקֵּשׁ ('seek'), יֶשֶׁר ('uprightness'), בַּעַל ('master'), בָּשָׂר ('flesh'), שָׁמַר ('keep'), and רַעַיָּה ('evil').

²⁴Of course there are other favourites which we have missed because they do not occur in the epilogue; to that extent this study is incomplete. But apart from עֵת ('time'), סָכַל ('foolish/ness', and perhaps מִי ('why?') and לֵב ('heart'), these words tend to be concerned almost exclusively with defining and refining Qohelet's understanding of הַבַּל ('vanity'), which features in 12:8. Thus terms such as רָעוּת רוּחַ ('chasing after wind'), עֲמָל ('toil'), וְחַתּוּת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ ('under the sun'), are summed up in the conclusion 'Vanity'. One more favourite, יִתְרוֹן ('profit'), is alluded to by its synonym יוֹתֵר in 12:9.

²⁵Far more frequent than in any other Old Testament book except Ct.

כל ('one'),²⁶ עשה ('do/make')²⁷, מעשה ('deed'), אין ('is not'), כל ('all'), האלהים ('God'), כי ('for'), זה ('this'), אדם ('man'), and טוב ('good'). Marginal candidates include דבר ('word'),²⁸ נתן ('give'),²⁹ and ירא ('fear').³⁰ Some of these are more favourite than others; the last three are words Ecclesiastes is very fond of, but so are a few other Biblical books; the unfootnoted words stand out by their frequency far beyond any other Old Testament writing. It is logical to assume that along with other 'favourites' of the body of the book, these words lie close to the heart of the distinctive contribution of Ecclesiastes to Old Testament wisdom. Admittedly, everyone has their own idiomatic and stylistic preferences; it is one thing to show 'favourites', and another to show that they have particular or unusual 'loadings' as far as their meaning and significance is concerned. That further judgment is one for contextual exegesis: how does the author use his favourite words? The assumption we have made, however, is that where a favourite word is used with a particular and self-conscious shade of meaning (as opposed to being merely the first word he thinks of when he wants to express a thought), it is not used in isolation from its uses elsewhere. Therefore these words from 12:9-14 perform a specific function in Ecclesiastes: they forge allusive links between the epilogue and earlier material that has the same vocabulary. A contextual interpretation of the epilogue is called for.

(3) When other words from the epilogue are added to the above list, namely, words that appear earlier in the book, whether or not they are 'favourites', certain passages appear to have particularly high concentrations of vocabulary in common with the epilogue. In other words, the epilogue is particularly reminiscent of certain parts of the book, and this suggests that the epilogue is in some way interacting with such passages, whether by way of implicit commentary, or perhaps

²⁶More common in Nu. only.

²⁷More common in Ex. and Est. only.

²⁸It tends to be more frequent in books with many 'this is the word of the Lord' formulae, *i.e.* Ki., Je., Hg.

²⁹More in Est., Ezk., 1 Ki., Dt.; almost as much in Jos., Joel, 2 Ch.

³⁰More common in six of The Twelve and Ps.

allusion for the sake of reiterating the message of the sections in question. The passages in question include 1:12-18; 2:1-11; 3:11-17; 4:8-12; 5:3-8; 7:13-18; 7:23-29; 8:10-17. Especially significant are passages in which a word or words from the epilogue are repeated often enough to make them a major theme of that passage, for example, the word עשה ('make') in chs. 2 and 8, or the word מצא ('find') in 7:23-29.

(4) Finally, the potential problem of words unique to the epilogue must be addressed. After all, it only takes a few highly dissonant ideas to bring into question the essential unity of epilogue and body, despite the prevailing lexical homogeneity. Of the words which only appear in the epilogue,³¹ only משל ('proverb') and בני ('my son') have been thought problematic. A third 'problem' word, מצוה ('commandment'), appears elsewhere only in 8:5, and in quite another sense. It should thus be added to the list.³² The presence of these words is only a thematic problem: at the formal level there is an overwhelming cohesiveness between epilogue and body, and we will reserve judgment on the question of irreconcilable content until we discover by reading the whole book whether such a reading of Ecclesiastes as the epilogue proposes can in fact be sustained. In the next part of this article we hope to take a small step in this direction.

To summarise: the 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; 'favourite' and idiomatic words in Ecclesiastes make up almost half the words in the epilogue. In other words, far from being the alien addition of one or two redactors, the epilogue is entirely characteristic of the rest of the book from a

³¹למד ('teach'), משל ('proverb'), כתב ('write'), ישר ('uprightness'—but the adj. occurs in 7:29), אמת ('truth'), דרבנה ('goad'), משמרה (nail), רעה ('shepherd'), בני ('my son'), ספר ('book'), סוף ('end'), and the *hapax legomena* און ('weigh'), חקר ('search out'), אספה ('collection'—but the vb. occurs in 2:26), להג ('dedication'), יגיעה ('weariness').

³²Apart from these three it should be noted that the problem words 'fear' and 'judgment' are not on the list. Indeed, the exhortation to fear God in 12:13 finds clear echoes in 3:14; 5:7 [MT 6]; 7:18 and 8:12-13, and the idea of God's judgment is seen in 3:16f. and 11:9.

lexical point of view. Of course, the possibility is not excluded that redactors could have written in the style of the original with great skill,³³ but this is irrelevant to a study of the book as literature: the fact remains that body and epilogue speak with one voice. The preponderance of 'favourite' words throughout the whole book lends both a peculiar sense of unity to the work, and a feeling of intertextual allusiveness. In particular, the epilogue resonates allusively with a few passages whose vocabulary is especially similar. In the next section of this article we propose to examine one of these passages, namely 7:23–8:1, with the aim of discovering whether the 'epilogue-oriented' reading suggested by lexical traits can be sustained in practice.

III. A 'Frame-Controlled' Reading of Ecclesiastes 7:23–8:1

1. Exegesis

The delimitation of this passage is debatable.³⁴ We agree with Eaton's scheme (7:23–24, 25–29, 8:1), but we prefer to see his divisions as subdivisions of one larger unit.³⁵ We view 8:1 as a conclusion to ch. 7 as a whole, and a bridging passage into ch. 8. This is because it is about wisdom in general, not Qohelet's wisdom in particular, and because it reflects the tone of 7:11, 12, 19, rather than 7:23–29. However it clearly echoes 7:23. In short, the terminus of this passage is unclear.

³³R. Gordis (*Koheleth—The Man and His World* [New York: Schocken Books, 1968] 349) claims that the resemblances in vocabulary between epilogue and body merely reflect the same period and environment.

³⁴Ogden's division (*Qoheleth*, 116–19) is 7:19–24, 25–29; Gordis (*Koheleth*, 265–72) 7:15–25, 26–29; Murphy (*Ecclesiastes* [Dallas: Word Books, 1992] 68–74) 7:15–24, 25–29; Crenshaw (*Ecclesiastes*, 144) and Delitzsch (*Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*), 7:23–29; Fox (*Qohelet*, 237) 7:23–8:1a.

³⁵M. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: IVP, 1983) 115–17. The large unit is adopted by J.A. Loader, *Ecclesiastes: A Practical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 91; R.B. Scott, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (New York: Doubleday, 1965) 238; R.N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 123.

The meaning of the passage is also debatable; as Murphy says, 'the final word on this text has not been written. Thus far, it refuses to yield its secret.'³⁶ It is with a passage like this that an interpretative guideline really comes into its own. When it comes to a choice between several possible meanings, we will be guided by the frame of the book, as well as by the other passage which mentions Qohelet—1:12-18.³⁷ This is not arbitrary, since the vocabulary of 7:23-29 is highly redolent of both of these contexts, and we believe that such repetition of vocabulary performs an allusive and inter-referential function in Ecclesiastes.

The form of the passage is a first-person narrative in the perfect tense, interrupted only by a cry from the heart in v. 24. The subject of the passage is a search: מֵצֵא ('find') and לֹא מֵצֵא ('not find') are repeated eight times, and בִּקֵּשׁ ('seek') and הִשְׁבּוּן ('calculate') six times. The object of this search according to vv. 23, 25 and 8:1 is wisdom, although there seems to be a disconcerting shift in focus at v. 26. The structure suggested by this and the repeated words and phrases is as follows (I present the structure in both Hebrew and English; the '1st p.s.' column marks verses which use first person singular verbs; the 'general themes' columns mark words which reappear across sections; the 'paragraph themes' columns mark words which are repeated within a single section only):

³⁶Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 78.

³⁷It is interesting to note that the name קֹהֵלֶת ('Qohelet') appears seven times in the book: three times in the outer frame (1:1; 12:9, 10), twice in the inner frame (1:2; 12:8), and twice in the body of the book (1:12; 7:29).

Paragraph themes #5	Paragraph themes #4	Paragraph themes #3	General themes #2	General themes #1	1st p.s.	V.
		רחוק רחוק		חכמה אחכמה	Yes	23
			מז ימצאו		—	24
	לבי... לדעת לדעת לבה	בקש... השבון	מצא	חכמה	Yes	25
טוב אלהים					Yes	26
	אחת לאחת	השבון בקש	(ראה) מצאתי למצא		Yes	27
	אחד		לא מצאתי מצאתי		Yes	28
			לא מצאתי (ראה) מצאתי		Yes	29
אלהים ישר		בקש... השבנות				
				מחזכם חכמת	—	8:1

From the 'general themes #1' column it can be seen that each section of the passage starts with a reference to wisdom, thus tying the passage together. Such a subdivision is borne out by the paragraph themes: רחוק ('far', #3) marking part 1 (vv. 23-24), and בקש—השבון ('to seek—to reckon/sum', #3) marking part 2 (vv. 25-29). Part 2 is then subdivided by לב—לדעת ('heart—to know', #4) and אחד ('one', #4), giving the subsections vv. 25-26 and vv. 27-29 (parts 2A and 2B). This subdivision is borne out by the use of הקהלת³⁸ in v. 27. Parts 2A and B end with the motif ישר—אלהים—טוב ('good—God—upright', #5). Finally, מצא ('to find') is used once in part 1, once in part 2A, and is then confined to part 2B. Guided by these structural observations, the meaning of the passage seems to be as follows.

³⁸It appears that a scribal error has moved the definite article from קהלת to the previous word: it is not plausible that Qohelet could be the subject of a feminine verb.

V.	1st p.s.	General themes #1	General themes #2	Paragraph themes #3	Paragraph themes #4	Paragraph themes #5
23	Yes	wisdom		far		
24	—	wise	who ... find	far		
25	Yes	wisdom		seek... sum	heart..know	
26	Yes		I found		know heart	
27	Yes		(see) I found to find	sum	one to one	good...God
28	Yes		not found	sought		
			found		one	
29	Yes		not found	sought...		God upright
			(see) I found	...schemes		
8:1	—	the wise wisdom				

Part 1 (vv. 23-24) is a statement that wisdom is beyond our ability to find; that life under the sun is opaque to Qohelet's wisdom. The first interpretative issue is the referent of כל־זֶה ('all this') in v. 23.³⁹ Whether we see כל־זֶה as pointing back or forward, however, it refers to the same thing: life under the sun; and more specifically, the *wise understanding of life under the sun* which will give a person control over their future and so bring profit into their days.

The opening of the passage is reminiscent of 1:16f., where the goal of Qohelet's wisdom is to increase his wisdom. Thus in 7:23 Qohelet tests life under the sun with wisdom (בַּחֲכָמָה) in order to become wise (אֶחְכְּמָה—the only cohortative in the book, expressing strong resolve), but such wisdom is far from him (רָחוֹק).⁴⁰ The word רָחוֹק ('far off') is picked up

³⁹The choices from the following verses are 'what has been' (מִה־שָׁדָיָהּ; v. 24) and 'wisdom' (v. 25). But it is more natural to read זֶה as pointing backwards to the first part of ch. 7.

⁴⁰What sort of wisdom is it that a wise man cannot grasp? Some (e.g. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 270) say the ultimate wisdom reserved for God;

in the following verse and combined with *ועמק עמק* ('and deep, very deep') to create a line of assonance and passion, leading to the despairing conclusion *מי מצאנו* ('who can find it?'). The lack of a first-person framework makes this verse stand out as the central principle which Qohelet's personal experience serves to illustrate. Thus an expectation is created that the later repetitions of *מצא* ('find') will be developing the conclusion of v. 24 in some way.

Part 2 (vv. 25-29) then goes on to support this initial conclusion by an account of Qohelet's experience. The subject of this part is Qohelet's seeking of a *השבון*—a calculation, a construct of life under the sun, which will yield wisdom for him.⁴¹ The first-person narrative is resumed in v. 25, using language taken from 1:13 in v. 25a (*ולבי לדעת ולחור*, 'So [I turned] my heart to know and to investigate'), and 1:17 in v. 25b (*והסכלות חוללות*, 'and foolishness is madness'). These allusions to ch. 1 suggest that this is a retrospective of some sort; perhaps an addendum to the earlier 'royal fiction'. Certainly part 1 has raised the same issues that were dealt with in those chapters. Why then is this passage separated from 1:18ff.? We cannot be certain, but one effect its placement has on the reader is to prevent them concluding from wisdom passages like 7:1-14 (and later, 10:1-20) that Qohelet has moved on from his initial impasse to achieve success in his search for wisdom. In addition, the removal of 7:23ff. from the earlier royal context prepares the reader to see the new discovery which begins to emerge from v. 26 of this passage.

others (e.g. Fox, *Qohelet*, 239) deny that Qohelet fell short of wisdom, and aver that the antecedent of *זה* *וזה* is *זה* ('this', v. 23). That is, despite Qohelet's wise examination of all that occurs in the world, it (what occurs) was beyond his grasp. However the point remains the same: life is not susceptible to explanation by wisdom. Actually, I define 'wisdom' less broadly than Gordis at this point, but more broadly than Fox; it is not just knowledge of what is, but knowledge of what always is, and what will be, a knowledge that issues forth in control over circumstances, even if such control falls short of divine omnipotence.

⁴¹*השבון* 'refers to both the process of reckoning and the solution reached' (Fox, *Qohelet*, 241). This rather mathematical rendering is chosen because the context in v. 27 suggests it.

Part 2A (vv. 25-26) presents Qohelet's story: having turned his heart to know wisdom and folly, *her* heart snared it. Who is the woman of v. 26? This is a hotly debated issue,⁴² and there may well be overtones of the wicked woman of Proverbs 5-7, but the link with the royal fiction is more immediate, and this is perhaps best seen as an allusion to the notorious domestic life of Solomon. The conclusion of v. 26 is that sin had a part to play in this (as implied by the mention of God in conjunction with the words טוֹב ('good') and חַוִּיתָּ ('sinner').⁴³ In particular, Qohelet's sin has upset his calculations and hindered his quest.

Part 2B (vv. 27-29) elaborates by comparing what Qohelet has found with what he has not found. The simplest way of understanding vv. 27-28a is to see the first מָצֵאתִי ('I found') as introducing Qohelet's finding which he then goes on to detail: literally, 'one to one in order to find a calculation which my soul still sought, but I did not find.' That is, Qohelet has found that his calculations are of no effect; he has found that he *cannot* find.⁴⁴ He has thus learned something about

⁴²Verse 26 has been variously interpreted as an interpretation of the proverb 'more bitter than death is Woman' (K. Baltzer, 'Women and War in Qohelet 7:23-8:1a', *HTR* 80/1 [1987] 128); as a positive statement elaborating the line 'woman[']s love] is stronger than death' (*ibid.*, 128f.); as a reference to the 'strange woman' of Pr. 5-7 (Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, 51); 'a particular kind of woman' (Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 116); a metaphor for premature death (Ogden, *Qoheleth* 121); a commentary from a husband's perspective on Gn. 3:16 (Garrett, 'Ecclesiastes 7:25-29 and the Feminist Hermeneutic', *Criswell Theological Review* 2 [1988] 309-21). But it is hard to read this as anything but Qohelet's own conclusion—מָצֵאתִי ('I found') does not suggest an opinion he repudiates (Fox, *Qohelet*, 238) or a proverb he cites. Of those who see genuine misogyny here, some (e.g. Fox, *Qohelet*, 238) regard it in the light of wry banter which combines with the ironic self-denigration of v. 23f. to demonstrate the remoteness of wisdom.

⁴³Fox (*Qohelet*, 241) and others see טוֹב as meaning favour from God, not righteousness. But the parallelism with v. 29b (the other use of אֱלֹהִים, 'God', and in conjunction with the moral word יָשָׁר, 'upright') and the links with the epilogue (see below) suggest otherwise.

⁴⁴Does זה ('this') in v. 27 refer to v. 26 or v. 27b? The use of זה in v. 29a makes a prospective use more likely, and shows that אֲשֶׁר ('which') is resumptive. But the similarity of subject matter suggests that v. 26 is also in mind. Certainly the verses are linked by מָצָא ('find'). It is

himself. And the link with part 2A implies that this inability to find what he seeks is due to sin. Verse 28b is notorious.⁴⁵ Scholars generally take 'one person [אֶחָד] from a thousand' to mean one upright person, and this finds support from the context of v. 29. But it is worth considering whether the phrase could be an ellipsis for 'one *wise* person', given the theme of this passage. In support of this is the fact that it echoes אֶחָד לְאֶחָד ('one to one') in v. 27 (albeit feminine in v. 27 and masculine in v. 28). Our suggestion is that Qohelet is implying that the ability to construct wisdom out of observation ('one plus one', v. 27) is extremely rare ('one person in a thousand') because of sin. Of course, wisdom and righteousness are closely linked, and the smooth transitions in this passage from wisdom to righteousness (vv. 25-26) and from righteousness to wisdom (7:29-8:1) are in our opinion the key to this difficult verse.⁴⁶ In Qohelet's search for wise/upright people, he found no woman. Why not? And why say this anyway? How does it further the argument? The full answer as we see it involves v. 29, so must be delayed for a paragraph. Whatever v. 28 means, it is summarised in the next verse, which concludes part 2.

Verse 29 introduces the only thing Qohelet did find. ישר is not a neutral term, but means moral uprightness. Thus v. 29

probably best to see v. 27 as building on v. 26 to arrive at a new finding which then becomes the main focus of interest. The mention of the name Qohelet adds to the sense that v. 27 introduces something new.

⁴⁵אֶלֶף in v. 28 has been rendered 'army brigade', thus giving a verse that says there are no women in the army, *i.e.* that men are responsible for war (Baltzer, 'Women', 131). On this reading, v. 29b is said to refer to engines of war. But Baltzer fails to reconcile many of the passage's details. Likewise, Ogden's view that this refers to longevity ('man') as opposed to early death ('woman') is strained. Murphy (*Ecclesiastes*, 75) and others take v. 28b to be a proposition Qohelet denies, being a referent of זֶה מָצָאתִי ('this I have found') in v. 27. But this would make מָצָא and לֹא מָצָא ('not found') refer to the same thing. However it does highlight the fact that v. 29 makes a negative assessment of all people, men and women alike. Did Qohelet fail to find a wife rather than a [good] woman (Fox, *Qohelet*, 243)? One of the problems with this verse is that 'it does not state what it is that the speaker has sought, and which he has or has not found' (Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 127).

⁴⁶As well as to larger issues of the book's themes and their relationship to the epilogue.

contrasts righteousness with seeking many calculations, and the fact that it uses a variant form of השבון (השבנות) suggests a related but distinct shade of meaning from the earlier uses.⁴⁷ That is, as opposed to the potentially fruitful calculations referred to in vv. 25 and 27, people use their deductive abilities to stray from God. This is a symptom of the problem of sin—a problem which is seen in Qohelet's life in particular. Firstly, the fact that the entire book of Ecclesiastes describes Qohelet's search for השבנות turns this verse into a piece of self-directed irony.⁴⁸ But more particularly in the context of this passage, this verse reminds us of Qohelet's problems in his dealings with women (v. 26).

Thus there are three factors which, taken together, illuminate v. 28b. The first is the Solomonic connection established by the use in v. 27 of the name קהלת, Qohelet. The second is the personal nature of Qohelet's search: it is not the abstract existence of wise/upright people that concerns him, but the characters of the people with whom he personally has had contact. The third factor is the one which emerges from vv. 26 and 29, that is, Qohelet's confession of sin in his relations with women. When Qohelet (remember Solomon!) 'found' a woman, the end result was never the 'successful calculations' of wisdom, but rather the debacle of v. 26. Thus this negative reference to women furthers the argument by serving as a fresh confession of weakness on behalf of Qohelet. It is yet another factor which prevents him from attaining his goal.

To summarise: Qohelet is showing from his own experience the truth of the statement that wisdom is too far from us to be found, and he is pointing out the part sin has to play in creating this predicament. This focus on the effects of sin is prepared for by 7:20-22, and complemented in 8:1 which concludes the section by praising the rare (one in a thousand?) person whose deductions about things (פֶּשֶׁר דָּבָר) are not

⁴⁷השבנות is a *double entendre*, referring to 'the mental corruptions by which man has distorted the originally upright nature given him by God... [and] the futility of the attempt—of which Qohelet's own experiment recorded in these verses is an example—to discover by wisdom "the sum of things"' (Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 127f.).

⁴⁸Fox (*Qohelet*, 243)

marred by sin. Indeed, 8:1 is not a *volte face*, but a necessary affirmation of the possibility of arriving at true wisdom despite the presence of sin. For although all attempts to assemble by wisdom the various elements of our life experience into a coherent whole will be frustrated, there remains still a path to wisdom, and this is a path which Qohelet eventually trod successfully, as 12:9 shows. Indeed, when we allow the epilogue to exercise the sort of hermeneutical force it demands, the progression from Qohelet's past failure (7:23) to a real hope for the faithful (8:1) reflects in microcosm the movement in the whole book from the questionings of 1:3 and the royal fiction to the positive statements which culminate finally in 12:9-14. But more remains to be said about the way in which the book's ending focuses and refracts the message of 7:23f.

2. Ecclesiastes 7:23ff. and the epilogue

We begin our intertextual comments by referring back to our lexical study. It is interesting to note that of all the words isolated from 7:23–8:1 which have structural significance, דעת ('knowledge'), טוב ('good'), אלהים ('God'), מצא ('find'), אחד ('one') appear in the epilogue as 'favourites', and בקש ('seek'), ישר ('upright/ness'—a noun in 12:10, adj. in 7:29) also appear in the epilogue. Of the remainder, חכמה ('wisdom') is cognate to חכם ('wise', 12:9) and along with לב ('heart') and מי ('who?'), is a favourite word of Old Testament wisdom literature.⁴⁹ From this we conclude that (i) the structural markers in 7:23ff. are important words in the book as a whole; this suggests we have made good choices in our analysis of structure and selection of key words; (ii) most of the key words in 7:23ff. find echoes in the epilogue as well as in the rest of Ecclesiastes; (iii) The fact that there are 'favourites' in Ecclesiastes which are not found in the epilogue does not invalidate our lexical study, but shows which

⁴⁹חשבון ('calculation') is found only in Ec. 7:25, 27, 29; 9:10; 2 Ch. 26:15 (excluding the proper name); and רחוק ('far') comes only twice in Ec. and is not especially unique to the book, albeit not common elsewhere either.

of the favourites in the whole book the epilogue chooses as germane to its task.⁵⁰

How is the vocabulary of 7:23ff. used in the epilogue? Firstly, Qohelet is described in 12:9 as wise and a teacher of knowledge—qualities that were 'far from' him in 7:23. It is true that the frame-narrator probably considers Qohelet's negative findings in 7:23ff. to constitute wisdom, but the difference between the two passages is greater than that: the picture painted of Qohelet in the epilogue is more like 8:1. Although Ecclesiastes has no plot *per se*, the epilogue gives us a person whose searching has achieved something. Qohelet may not have brought his environment under control, but he did eventually succeed in 'straightening proverbs' (12:9). In 12:10 we are told that Qohelet 'sought [בִּקֵּשׁ] to find [לְמַצֵּא] words of delight and written uprightness [יִשְׁרָ], words of truth.' The verbs are the same as in ch. 7, but their objects differ—rather than 'all this', 'a calculation', and 'folly and madness', Qohelet in the epilogue seeks 'words of delight:' words linked with uprightness and truth. That this search is spoken of more positively reflects the conclusion of ch. 7 that the search for wisdom will fail in a moral vacuum. And not only this, but it helps account for the differences between the Qohelet of 7:23 and the Qohelet of 12:9. The fact that Qohelet ended up searching for 'uprightness' (cf. 7:29) suggests that the discoveries reported in ch. 7 helped move him from the futile endeavours of his royal activity to a type of search which did not try to discover meaning in competition with God's intentions for us. Needless to say, Qohelet's rightly-directed search in 12:9ff. did not free him from pain, ignorance, or futility. But the reader is reassured in 12:11 that behind Qohelet's ignorant and feeble efforts lies the wisdom of the 'one shepherd', which gives a measure of confidence to Qohelet's conclusions—a confidence which the very conclusions themselves would undermine if their foundation was Qohelet alone. His failure to add 'one plus one' in 7:27 is

⁵⁰So the absence of מַדּוּ ('why?') in the epilogue is because it is time for answers not questions; the same could be said for לֵב ('heart'), given the way it is used earlier. See also n. 24 above.

thus thrown into sharp focus by the 'one' in 12:11 which did add up.

Four elements of the above exegesis are particularly influenced by our views on the structure and function of the frame of Ecclesiastes. Firstly, our recourse to the biography of Solomon was justified by the recurrence in 7:23ff. of vocabulary from the royal fiction and from the frame, which also alludes to Solomon (1:1). We believe that such words (including the name Qohelet) function inter-referentially. Secondly, our identification of morality in such potentially morally neutral words as טוב ('good') was a result of their use in a moral context in the epilogue (טוב in 12:14; ישר, 'uprightness', in 12:10). To put it another way, the epilogue directs us to see the words of Qohelet, including 7:23ff., in such a light. Thirdly, the association of righteousness and wisdom is authorised by the same association in 12:10, 13. Thus, fourthly, the abrupt change of tone in 8:1 is to be understood as a change of the same order as is found between 12:8 and 12:9-14: whereas the 'one plus one' wisdom of achieving control over and knowledge of life under the sun is doomed to failure, the life of uprightness—of fearing God—will turn out in the end to have been truly wise.

IV. Can Ecclesiastes be Read 'Epilogically'?

We have proposed that the epilogue, together with the book's frame, encapsulates the essence of Qohelet's words, thereby providing the reader with a guide for reading. We have tested this theory so far in two ways: formally, through a lexical study, and heuristically, through a sample exegesis of a passage with significant common vocabulary. It remains finally to address some thematic issues surrounding our understanding of 12:9-14.

There are three types of thematic objection raised to 12:9-14 which we will address, albeit briefly: the objection that the epilogue is a secondary canonical comment, the objection that the epilogue misrepresents the book's message, and the objection that the epilogue gives Qohelet's words a novel emphasis. We can do no more here than interact with a

representative objection of a representative scholar under each heading.

1. 'The epilogue is a canonising addition!' (G. Wilson)

Writers such as Sheppard and Wilson⁵¹ believe that the epilogue was appended to connect Ecclesiastes with the canon. Wilson, for example, has argued that we have in מִשְׁל (‘proverb’) a reference to the book of Proverbs, and such a link has been made as early as Rashbam (d. about 1165). However most commentators see no reason to accept this. The word could refer to the proverbial material in Ecclesiastes, or more generally describe the book as a whole,⁵² or alternatively describe Qohelet’s activity rather than his book.⁵³ בְּנִי (‘my son’) is distinctive to Proverbs, and most scholars believe that it reflects an editorial judgment (approving or disapproving?) by a member of the traditional wisdom schools.⁵⁴ Of course the frame-narrator, who penned Ecclesiastes 12:12, was almost certainly well versed in school wisdom, but since we believe (with Fox, ‘Frame-Narrative’) that the frame narrator also penned the body of Ecclesiastes, the issue is not one of an ‘alien’ epilogue, but rather of the degree to which the integral verses in 12:9-14 cohere with what has gone before. That is, whether or not the epilogue links Ecclesiastes with the canon has no

⁵¹G.T. Sheppard, ‘The Epilogue to Qohelet as Theological Commentary’, *CBQ* 39/2 (1977) 182-89; G. Wilson, ‘“The Words of the Wise”: The Intent and Significance of Qohelet 12:9-14’, *JBL* 103/2 (1984) 175-192; N. Lohfink, ‘Les épilogues du livre de Qohélet et les débuts du Canon’, in P. Bovati and R. Meynet (eds.), ‘Ouvrir les écritures’: *Mélanges offerts à Paul Beauchamp à l’occasion de ses soixante-dix ans* (LD 162; Paris: Cerf, 1995) 77-96.

⁵²Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 153; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 191.

⁵³Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 125.

⁵⁴Ogden (*Qoheleth*, 211) says that the editor is commending Qohelet’s work to his own students; for Loader (*Ecclesiastes*, 134-35), 12:12-14 is a warning against accepting Qohelet uncritically; for Wilson (‘Words of the Wise’) it is a canonical comment which binds together with Ec., and provides a Deuteronomic reading of, Pr. 1-9. Interestingly, Ec. 11:9 addresses a ‘young man’ about God’s judgment of him for all he does (cf. 12:14). This verse, which forms the centre of 11:1-12:7, suggests the existence of young men among the pupils of Qohelet.

bearing on whether or not the epilogue and the body of the book speak with one voice.

2. 'The epilogue gets the book wrong!' (R. Murphy)

For Murphy, 12:13 is a facile 'oversimplification of the book's message',⁵⁵ and on 12:14 he says,

It is somewhat ironic that the word for every "deed" is **מעשה**, which is used in the book to indicate the inscrutable divine action, or events that transpire in this dreary human life. Now the "work" or "deed" (human) is here associated too easily to divine judgment. Hence v14 gives a different tilt to the phraseology of 11:9. The viewpoint of the epilogist... goes beyond the perspective of Qoheleth.⁵⁶

Murphy is right to an extent, in that the idea that judgment is to be made on the basis of the law is not present in 11:9; but a closer examination of the way **מעשה** ('work/deed') and **משפט** ('justice') are used in the body of the book suggests that the association of **מעשה** with divine judgment in 12:14 is a serious and valid interpretation of the book's message.

There are three levels of observation made in the book about **מעשה**, and the same three levels also characterise the use of **משפט**. The following table summarises them:

	Observations made about מעשה ('deed/work'):	Observations made about משפט ('justice'):
(1)	Works done under the sun are vanity and evil (1:14; 2:11, 17; 4:3f; 9:10)	Wickedness exists in the place of justice (3:16)
(2)	Be happy in your work, God approves of righteous works (3:17,22; 5:5; 9:7)	Do the right thing, for there's a proper time for justice (8:5f)
(3)	The work which God has done cannot be found out or straightened by humans (3:11; 7:13; 8:17; 11:5)	God <i>will</i> bring all things to judgment (3:17 [משפט , 'judge']; 11:9)

In other words, there is the level (1) of appearances, the way things look to the observer. On this level is vanity and evil.

⁵⁵Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, lxv.

⁵⁶Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 126.

Then there is the level (2) of activity, the way we should live. On this level is the call to enjoyment and right behaviour. And there is the level (3) of God's activity (= *מַעֲשֵׂה*), which is beyond our understanding but nevertheless ultimately just (= *מִשְׁפָּט*). Murphy's objection in effect is that the epilogue has conflated two contradictory ideas in level (3); but when the parallels between levels (1) and (2) of each word are seen, the possibility that there is a relationship between the two level (3)'s becomes strong. What is more, the fact that the epilogue confirms such a relationship is not reason to dismiss the epilogue, but rather to follow the epilogue's lead in our reading of level (3) in the book. Therefore 12:14 is a summary statement of level (3) which forms the reason for living on level (2) despite the bleak appearance of level (1). That is, although the work we do may be *הַבָּל* ('vanity'), and profit us nothing, it is still worth doing well and enjoying, because God will judge it all.

3. 'The epilogist is protecting Qohelet!' (M. Fox)

For Fox, 'there is no ideological conflict between Qohelet's teachings and the epilogue. Both express the author's views, but with different tones and emphases.'⁵⁷ What is this difference in emphasis? It is the idea of 'orthodox legal piety' expressed in 12:13-14, an idea which Qohelet 'does not contradict [...]; he (like Proverbs) just does not advocate it explicitly. The epilogist, however, does so—in part to establish his own ethos, which he uses on behalf of the persona.'⁵⁸ That is, the epilogist is protecting Qohelet (and sages in general) by putting his dangerous words in a safe place: secondary to the essence of wisdom ('fear God and keep his commands'). This allows orthodox readers to tolerate Qohelet's words by ensuring that they will not undermine basic religious belief.

There is certainly an element of truth in this. It is true that Qohelet speaks very much more of vanity than of fearing God, and that the 'orthodox legal piety' of 12:13 is not spoken of in this way earlier. It is true that we have a difference of emphasis in the epilogue. But (as Fox has admitted) this does

⁵⁷Fox, *Qohelet*, 315-16.

⁵⁸Fox, *Qohelet*, 319.

not entail a difference of substance, and it does not force a judgment about the relative *significance* of 'vanity' ideas and 'fear' ideas in the body of Ecclesiastes. Indeed, in his earlier discussion of vanity (pp. 31-48), Fox actually suggests that the fear of God is a goal of the book.

But our main objection to Fox's 'two-tier' reading (Qohelet's teachings over against 'orthodox legal piety') is that it divorces 12:8 from 12:13, a divorce which is unnecessary.⁵⁹ When we read the observation 'All is vanity' together with the imperative 'Fear God', we do not end up with orthodox legal piety, but with a radical synthesis of despair and hope. Yes, the epilogist is observing Qohelet 'from a certain distance'⁶⁰—we have in 12:9-14 an analysis of Qohelet, a synthesis of his teachings, an assessment of his significance. But no, the epilogist is not 'distancing himself' from Qohelet's views, or reframing them, or adding an orthodox safety-net. He simply tells us what Qohelet was saying, as a careful (and 'epilogical') reading of Ecclesiastes shows.

That the epilogue's synthesis is no novelty can be seen by the way in which the use of יִרָא ('fear') in Ecclesiastes enriches the concept of הַבָּל ('vanity'), combining with it to create a composite view of reality which is a mirror to the epilogue's message. Thus the ignorance entailed by הַבָּל shapes our attitude toward God into one of fear tempered by enjoyment of his gifts (ch. 3). On the other hand this fear of God involves the realisation that lack of knowledge does not mean lack of accountability—the concept of הַבָּל does not exclude the expectation of judgment (ch. 4). Moreover, the idea of הַבָּל involves the unreliability of the retribution principle, which in turn prevents fear of God being motivated by hope of

⁵⁹Kaiser ('Qohelet') has similar problems with the epilogue. He sees the 'fear of God' in the body of Ec. as standing in the sapiential tradition, 'where the expectation of divine justice implies that it must lead to a religious and moral perfection of life' (p. 90), but because of his compartmentalised reading of 12:8; 12:9-11 and 12:12-14, concludes, 'Although [12:13-14] accords with iv 17 (v 1), it is clearly one-sided, with its single-minded concentration on legal piety excluding more complicated thought' (p. 91).

⁶⁰Fox, 'Frame-Narrative', 106.

reward (ch. 7). On the other hand the idea of הַבֵּל does not exclude the fact of a just God: indeed it is the very fact that we expect God to be just that makes the absence of retribution הַבֵּל (ch. 8). In other words, it is a corollary of the fact of הַבֵּל that we believe in God's justice.

Thus there is a complex inter-definition of the terms הַבֵּל and יָרָא which paints for the reader a picture he or she will recognise from their study of the frame narrative, and particularly from the dynamic which exists between 12:8-12 (the pain of the search for wisdom is not resolved by understanding life under the sun, since this is something we fail to do) and 12:13-14 (the wise way to live is in obedient fear of the one who knows and judges all).

The frame-narrative is quite clear about what Ecclesiastes means, and if we are to read the canonical book as a coherent piece of literature we are obliged at the least to explore the degree to which the epilogist's instructions can be followed. This article has done no more than take a few soundings, but so far the water has been clear. Further explorations would seem justified; as Qohelet said,

In the morning sow your seed, and at evening do not let your hands be idle; for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.'