

## The Inner-Textuality of Qohelet's Monologue

Most of the book of Ecclesiastes contains words attributed to Qohelet, which are framed in 1:2 and 12:8 by the nearly identical declarations, that “all is vanity”. In recent decades, the relationship between this material, the introductory 1:1, and the epilogue of 12:9-14 has been much discussed, with many scholars moving away from the earlier assumption that Qohelet's words have been supplemented by a later editor or editors, and it is now common to talk in terms of a “frame narrator”, created as another voice, but as part of the same, single composition.<sup>1</sup> Although they have not entirely disappeared, attempts to apportion the text as a whole to different redactors have also become much less common than they were a century ago, and many of the most important recent commentaries on Ecclesiastes treat it as, essentially, a unified work. That move is surely to be welcomed, not least because there was rarely any text-critical, linguistic or stylistic evidence that could be adduced for the re-attributions proposed by an earlier generation of commentators, who sought rather to re-build a text that was consistent with the message that each imputed to Qohelet. This methodologically problematic approach, not unknown elsewhere in biblical scholarship, resulted in a dismemberment and reconstruction of the book that was more akin to Dr Frankenstein's hobby than to scientific vivisection.<sup>2</sup>

It is only fair to say also, however, that what provoked much of this activity was a perception of tensions and of inconsistency within the book, and that this perception has long been shared even by those commentators who, for various different reasons, have been much less inclined to deny its unity. Indeed, the Talmud famously records the statement of Rabbi Judah, that “the sages sought to suppress the book of Qohelet on the grounds that its words are

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<sup>1</sup> The principal inspiration behind this change has surely been Fox 1977, although some of the writers who have subsequently picked up the idea of a “frame narrative” do not appear to have adopted Fox's point that the voice of the narrator is no more actually that of the author than is the voice of Qohelet.

<sup>2</sup> The most infamous example is probably Siegfried 1898. It should be observed, in all fairness, both that the scholars who undertook such reconstructions saw themselves as repairing the mutilations wrought by redactors (see especially Haupt 1894, 254), and that some of the most egregious examples were inspired by a misguided idea that the book had been composed originally in metric verse (e.g., Zapletal 1905, Haupt 1905).

inconsistent with each other”,<sup>3</sup> and goes on to cite examples of Qohelet’s apparently different attitudes to joy, that are reconciled only by giving each of his statements separate, specific referents. If we are to deny ourselves the easy option of attributing such tensions to the work of redactors, or to the presence of more than one voice in the text (another popular way to deal with the problem)<sup>4</sup> then we must acknowledge and engage with the problem that Qohelet’s words often stand in relationships with each other that are far from straightforward, and that this problem may have confronted readers of the book almost from the outset. These complexities, however, include not only the apparent contradictions, but also a number of correspondences which serve both to consolidate the material and, perhaps, to introduce qualifications or explanations. Qohelet is profoundly self-referential, and it is this aspect of his discourse that I shall try to examine here.

Of course, the easiest elements of this to describe are the repetitive characterizations of situations and phenomena as הבל,<sup>5</sup> and the repeated affirmations that one should take pleasure in what one does.<sup>6</sup> To a great extent these embody, on the one hand, Qohelet’s analysis of the situation in which humans find themselves and, on the other, his reaction to that situation. Qohelet understands, reluctantly, that the very nature of the world and the very fact of human death combine to prevent humans from drawing any actual profit from their lives, so that they are constantly striving to catch hold of something that cannot be caught – grasping, as it were, at air. In that strife itself, however, there is pleasure to be found, and it is this pleasure which makes life worth living, if we can only accept it in place of more permanent gains. By repeating these ideas, almost as refrains, Qohelet draws together many different materials that are disparate in form and subject, in effect creating out of them a sort of argument by accumulation (Weeks 2012, 145-7). In broad terms, this is supported by aspects of the structure or arrangement of his speech, which begins by painting his picture of the world in

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<sup>3</sup> מפני שדבריו סותרין זה את זה b. Šabb. 30b. It is less commonly noted that the passage goes on to claim that suppression of the book of Proverbs was sought on the same grounds.

<sup>4</sup> See Weeks 2012, 9-10.

<sup>5</sup> See 1:14; 2:1, 11 *bis*, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 4:4, 8, 16; 5: 9 (ET 5:10); 6:2, 9; 7:6; 8:10, 14.

<sup>6</sup> As we shall see below, it is not straightforward to define precisely which passages do commend pleasure directly in the book, but note 3:10-13, 22; 5:17-19 (ET 18-20); 8:15; 9:7-10.

the first chapter, moves on to an account of his personal struggles in the second, and then later closes with the movement from youth to death in the last chapter: there is, perhaps, no stronger evocation in ancient literature of death's brutality and finality than in the climax of Qohelet's words at 12:6-7. It is by no means improbable that many of his themes were quite conventional at the time of writing (Weeks 2012, 134-41), and not impossible that Qohelet has actually incorporated existing materials, but the specific and obvious repetitions bind them together as components of the broader point he is making. That is interesting, not least because such accumulation is uncommon – although not unparalleled– amongst comparable ancient Near Eastern texts.<sup>7</sup> The very obtrusiveness of his repetitions, however, tends to draw attention away from other elements that are no less interesting and important.

Although they are not so easy to describe, it is, I think, the so-called “contradictions” that provide a better starting-point for any examination of Qohelet's inner-textuality, and perhaps especially those that seem almost set up to attract attention – not least the statements about joy which were picked up by the Talmud. Whilst many of the contradictions attributed to Qohelet seem not to be direct contradictions, but perceived failures to associate ideas in the way that particular readers expect, these statements are, on the face of it, genuinely difficult to reconcile even without reference to other themes. The passages cited and contrasted in the rabbinic discussion are:

7:3 טוב כעס משחק, “Vexation is better than laughter”

2:2a לשחוק אמרתי מהולל, “I said of laughter ‘(it is) מהולל’...”

8:15 ושבחתי אני את השמחה, “I commended joy”

2:2b ולשמחה מה זה עשה, “... and of joy ‘what does it do?’”

From the subsequent interpretation, it is apparent that the difficult מהולל in 2:2 is regarded by the rabbinic commentators as something good (probably connected with “praise”),<sup>8</sup> so that

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<sup>7</sup> The best parallel is the Demotic instruction on Papyrus Insinger; cf. Weeks 2012, 145.

<sup>8</sup> מהולל is probably to be linked with the term הוללות, which is used a number of times in the book (1:17; 2:12; 7:25; 9:3; 10:13), and indicates madness, or better, perhaps, mindlessness. The Talmud,

the Talmud draws out two separate contradictions here, between Qohelet's disparagement and praise of laughter and between his commendation and condemnation of joy. Most modern commentators, of course, interpret 2:2a negatively, in parallel with the statement about joy in the second part of the verse, but all the same, it would be difficult to deny that there seems to be a contradiction between Qohelet's attitudes to joy in 8:15 and 2:2, and this contradiction is reinforced if we take account of, e.g., 7:4, which associates joy with folly, and 2:26, which sees it as something granted by God.

There seems to be a similar tension between some of Qohelet's statements about death. In terms rather similar to those of 8:15, he apparently declares in 4:2-3 that he commends or has commended (the meaning and form of the verb are problematic)<sup>9</sup> those who have already died over those who are still alive, but considers those not yet born at all to be better off than both. The second part of that claim is not inherently difficult: for Qohelet, the living of life involves a cost that cannot adequately be recouped, and so to remain unborn avoids a loss. In 7:1, furthermore, Qohelet apparently claims that, just as fame is better than fine lotion, so is the day of death better than the day of one's birth, so the commendation of death in 4:2 does not stand alone. In 9:4-5, however, Qohelet appears to say quite the opposite. Although the traditional understanding that Qohelet thinks "a living dog is better than a dead lion" may misrepresent the sense of the difficult Hebrew in 9:4,<sup>10</sup> and we should not presuppose that in

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however, has read it as equivalent to MT מְהַלֵּל in 2 Sam 22:4; Ps 18:4, where it is the pual participle from הָלַל, "praise", and means something like "praiseworthy".

<sup>9</sup> Although the context demands a main verb, שָׁבַח is pointed as an infinitive absolute, a form rarely used that way. MT has been defended by many scholars, but the evidence of the versions points strongly to an original reading שִׁבְחָתִי, as at 8:15. Neither in Hebrew nor in Aramaic does the verb elsewhere come close to the sense "consider fortunate", and the most natural understanding of 4:2-3 is that Qohelet is claiming to have reacted to his observations in 4:1 by congratulating the dead for being dead, rather than the living for being alive, but to have saved his heartiest congratulations for those who had never been born at all, and so avoided having to see all the bad things that happen in the world.

<sup>10</sup> There are many difficulties in 9:4, which RSV renders "But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion." Among the significant problems for this traditional understanding are (1) Despite G ἐλπίζ, the idea that בְּטַחֲוֹן means "hope" as an emotion is hard to

9:5 Qohelet necessarily regards the knowledge of coming death as better than the ignorance of the dead, he certainly goes on to contrast the disconnection of the dead, and their inability to gain anything more from the world, with the ability of the living to find pleasure.

Elsewhere, furthermore, he encourages his readers to avoid death (7:15-18), and it certainly does not seem to be the case that he consistently believes it better for humans to be dead than alive.

To these apparent tensions within Qohelet's opinions about joy and about death we could certainly add the mixed feelings that he apparently displays toward wisdom, albeit with less direct contradiction, and many commentators have made their own lists of apparent inconsistencies. It should be said also, however, that most of the difficulties that surround all these "contradictions" can be resolved without too much exegetical ingenuity. When it comes to joy, for instance, it seems likely that Qohelet ultimately commends it not because he has changed his mind about its lack of utility, but because, after the experiences recounted in chapter 2, he no longer regards utility as the sole criterion for value. In the case of wisdom, there is a genuine ambivalence: it is both a useful tool and, especially when taken too far, a potential source of misery (Weeks 2012, 96-101). Even when it comes to death, the context of Qohelet's statements may be important: the initial verses of chapter 7 seem concerned principally to draw out ironically the miserable aspect of wisdom, rather than to speak about death itself, whilst in chapter 4 Qohelet is concerned with the futility that he sees in the lives of others, not with the importance of living one's life well, which becomes the theme of chapter 9. There are even ways to link these various ideas together: the misery that wisdom inspires by illuminating the helpless progress of every human towards death is also, perhaps,

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substantiate, and Jastrow cites only y. Ber. 13b, where 9:4 is being interpreted to mean that the possibility of avoiding damnation exists right up until it is too late for the wicked to repent; we might say that it is used, at least in that passage, as equivalent to the English "there is hope for him", but not for "he has hope". More commonly, the word means "confidence". (2) It is easier to construe אֵל with יַחְבֵּר (which it commonly follows) than to take it as expressing possession. (3) The לֹ on לְכַלֵּב has to be explained as an uncharacteristic and wholly pointless emphatic lamed unless we read (like Symmachus) "it is better for a live dog" instead of "a live dog is better", which also addresses the problematic position of הוּא but changes the sense. It seems very likely that the text is corrupt, and very possible that Qohelet is describing the complacency of the living, not offering his own view of the matter.

a potential stimulus to joy, when one appreciates the need to grasp life before death intervenes.

The important point here, however, is not that we can dissolve the tensions ourselves, but that Qohelet himself makes no explicit attempt to do so. The contradictions are not juxtaposed (and the author's purpose, therefore, is not apparently just to relativize the various points, as is probably the case in Prov 26:4-5); for evidence that they are real and obvious, however, we need only to observe the reactions of readers down the ages. If this is not mere clumsiness or inconsistency within the author's own mind, then it would seem to represent a sort of strategy that is, arguably, consistent with other aspects of the book: readers are not led down a smooth path that persuades them of Qohelet's views, but across a terrain littered with obstacles. Few readers would be likely to share Qohelet's views on every issue, and some are notoriously problematic, but his inconsistencies mean that readers are liable to stub their toes on different viewpoints even within his account of single, specific issues. In more general terms, the author's purpose need not concern us for the moment: what the "contradictions", and the perception of those contradictions, highlight is the way in which the book tends to scatter its discussion of given themes across many chapters, and yet apparently cross-references each appearance to the rest with sufficient clarity that readers make their own, mental juxtapositions.

We can see something similar in some quite different passages. In 9:13-16, for example, Qohelet tells the story of the wise man who saves his city,<sup>11</sup> apparently to make not just the point that wisdom may be powerful – the aim stated in the first verse – but also the point that the wise may not receive the recognition that they would seem to deserve. The next few verses also treat wisdom in this way: giving, as it were, with one hand, and taking with the other. The way in which he tells the story, however, invites us to read it in the context of some earlier passages, not least 4:13-14, where we have already encountered a king contrasted with a *ילד מסכן וחכם*, "a youth, poor (or common) and wise": the wise man who stands before the king in 9:15 is *איש מסכן חכם*, "a man, poor (or common) and wise"; the

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<sup>11</sup> We need not go into the vexed question of whether he actually saved the city, or merely might have saved it if anybody had remembered him – although I think that the context strongly suggests the former.

word **מִסְכֵּן** appears nowhere else in the book (or, for that matter, in the Bible).<sup>12</sup> The point of the saying in chapter 4 was that such a poor, wise youth is better than an old king, because he has so much more potential to improve his own situation, so the allusion in chapter 9 serves, perhaps, both to emphasize the failure of the wise man to secure such improvement, and to qualify the earlier saying; the context established by the previous verses is that people do not always receive what they deserve or know what is coming, and 9:11, indeed, has already mentioned that the wise may lack food or wealth.<sup>13</sup> Qohelet also takes the opportunity to pick up his much earlier points, from 1:11, that humans have no memory of the past, and from 2:16, that a wise man will be forgotten just like a fool. It is interesting to observe, in fact, that 9:15 uses a very unusual expression – **וְאָדָם לֹא זָכַר**, literally, “and a human does not recall” – to describe how the wise man is forgotten, which, even allowing for broader uses of **אָדָם** in late literature, makes this forgetfulness seem universal.<sup>14</sup> Through clear verbal allusions to a number of things that he has said earlier, Qohelet uses his story to draw into a new context some of the claims and issues that have already been laid out on the table: in doing so, he asserts continuity within his discourse, but also forces some qualification and re-evaluation of those claims.

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<sup>12</sup> Gordis 1968, 243, does try to find it in Isa 40:20. where he thinks that **מִסְכֵּן** has been wrongly vocalized, but the strongest evidence for its existence in earlier Hebrew is the use of **מִסְכֵּנָה** in Deut 8:9 (cf. McNeile 1904, 66). It may well have been derived from Akkadian, directly or indirectly, but we should be wary of assuming therefore that it conveys only the Akkadian implications of social, rather than economic status, as does Seow (1997, 183).

<sup>13</sup> The link between 4:13 and 9:13-16 is explored briefly in Rudman 1997, 72-3, who believes that both passages convey a message about the ultimate powerlessness of the poor.

<sup>14</sup> Although, of course, any reader who is sufficiently alert might wonder how it is that, in the face of such an erasure from history, Qohelet himself recalls this wise man, and it is the recollection of his earlier statements about memory that make it difficult to assume he is just acting blithely here as an omniscient narrator (so, e.g. Seow 1997, 310; Fox 1999, 299). This is the most fundamental objection, I think, to ideas that the story is supposed to reflect some familiar historical event (as most recently Barbour 2012, 123-35): the very familiarity would undermine the point that Qohelet is trying to make.

Elsewhere, Qohelet often seems quite clearly to be alluding to what he has said already, but more obviously to be changing the meaning. After famously establishing in 3:1, for instance, that *לכל זמן ועת לכל הפנ תחת השמים*, “(there is) for everything an occasion, and a time for every matter beneath heaven”, he goes on to evoke this vocabulary shortly afterwards in 3:17, and then again later in 8:6. In both cases, the *עת לכל הפנ*, “a time for every matter”, is now associated strongly with judgment, which is certainly not what it meant in 3:1-8. It seems apparent that Qohelet wants us to understand his statements about the inevitability of judgment in connection with his quasi-deterministic statements in 3:1-8, despite the fact that these two aspects of his thought are amongst the most difficult in the book to reconcile.<sup>15</sup> It is not clear, however, why he wants to make this association. Is it an act of rhetorical bravado, attempting to conceal the problem, or an invitation to notice it? 3:17, indeed, could even be read as an extraordinary attempt to prove the reality of judgment syllogistically on the basis of 3:1, if we read the *כי* as explanatory: “God will act as judge, since (there is) a time for every matter – and about everything which is achieved there.” In other words, if everything has its time, then judgment must have its time. This verse has been a popular candidate amongst commentators for excision, along with other references to divine judgment in the book, but if we are to allow that Qohelet tries to maintain the reality of judgment within a world where human actions serve divine purposes, then 3:17 and 8:6 clearly play some important role in his attempt to align them.

So far, we have observed a number of ways in which Qohelet uses allusions not to consolidate but to change or qualify what he is saying, and it is important to bear this in mind when we look at two groups of very similar statements: the first, Qohelet’s question about profit, posed in 1:3 and evoked in 3:9 and 5:15; the second, his sayings about human good in 2:24; 3:12, 22; 8:15. In each of these series, there are small changes of wording. So, in the first:

1:3      מה יתרון לאדם בכל עמלו

3:9      מה יתרון העושה באשר הוא עמל

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<sup>15</sup> I have examined the question in a forthcoming article, where I argue that, to some extent at least, Qohelet’s assertions about judgment are forced upon him by his context.



5:15 ומה יתרון לו שיעמל לרוח

From 1:3 and 5:15 it seems clear that profit accrues *to* (ל) someone, and from 1:3 and 3:9 that it is acquired *by* (ב) doing something; of course, we may allow some syntactical leeway, but since Qohelet is clearly quoting himself, the absence of ל is strange in 3:9 if יתרון העושה is supposed to mean “the profit *to* the worker”, and the absence of ב in 5:15 suggests that the profit is not acquired *by* working for the wind. In each case, incidentally, the Greek, which is generally faithful in such matters, supports MT, and there are no strong text-critical grounds for emendation: indeed, we would usually expect texts to grow closer through assimilation in such cases, not to diverge. When we see from 5:8, furthermore, that Qohelet elsewhere probably uses יתרון in a construct relationship to indicate the profit *from* something,<sup>16</sup> then it seems likely, despite the overwhelming tendency of commentators to ignore the change, that 3:9 is asking a new question, not about what humans can gain, but about what can be gained from them, given the situation described in 3:1-15. His answer is still, of course, “nothing”. In 5:15, on the other hand, the point is clearly that an individual who leaves the world just as he arrived can have gained nothing, but the failure is probably not “from” working for the wind: as is more generally acknowledged, the force of ו + the *yiqtol* here is probably “that he should work”, or perhaps, “that he should have worked”. Correspondingly, his failure to make any gain is not just a consequence of the particular work that he chose to do, and Qohelet is not simply repeating his question, but relating different issues to the same theme by varying the wording of it.

Something similar seems to be true in the second series:

2:24 אין טוב באדם שיאכל

3:12 אין טוב במ כי אם לשמוח

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<sup>16</sup> Of course, 5:18 is a notorious crux, but it is noteworthy that all of the ancient versions take the expression here to imply profit *from* the land. The popular idea that the verse is talking about a king being an advantage *to* a land is impossible for many reasons, not the least of them being that יתרון does not mean “advantage”.

3:22 אין טוב מאשר ישמח האדם

8:15 אין טוב לאדם תחת השמש כי אם לאכול

After the initial *אין טוב*, “there is no good”, these statements contain some common elements: three of the four refer directly to “the human”, *האדם*, and the suffix on *בם* in 3:12 probably refers back to the *בני אדם* of 3:10;<sup>17</sup> in 2:24 and 8:15, there are references to eating and drinking, whilst 3:12 and 3:22 both refer to rejoicing or taking pleasure (*שמח*). There is no doubt that they can legitimately be called a group, even if they relate to other statements as well (cf. 2:3; 5:17; 6:12). However, there are also differences: 3:12 and 8:15, for example, have “there is no good except”, whilst 3:22 has “there is no good greater than that”. Most strikingly, 2:24 and 3:12 have “there is no good *in* (humans)”, 8:15 has “there is no good *for* (humans)”, and 3:22 has “there is nothing better than that (humans)”. These differences are probably original, despite efforts to emend the text, and despite the fact that they give 2:24 and 3:12, in particular, a significantly different sense. This sense is reinforced for 2:24-25, in fact, by Qohelet’s further observation that the ability to eat is in some way associated with divine action (and so not with some goodness inherent *in* each human), and 3:12 by a comparable statement in 3:13, that “every person who eats and drinks and takes pleasure in his business - this is a dispensation from God.” Again, Qohelet uses similar expressions to group a series of verses with each other, and to make it clear that they all correspond to the same theme: again, though, the wording is varied so that, in this case, his own conclusions about the best that humans can achieve for themselves are tied strongly to his perception that even this relies on, and may be constrained by, divine permission rather than objective individual worth.

In these various examples, then, of the poor, wise man, of the “time for every matter”, and of the statements about profit and good, we can see that Qohelet likes to create verbal associations between certain of his observations and statements, but not simply because he

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<sup>17</sup> *Contra* BHQ, which takes it to refer to what God has made, considered collectively. There is singular/plural variation in the context, but the suffix on *בלבם* in the previous verse certainly refers to humans, and it is difficult to see why the writer would have confused matters by giving the suffix here a different referent.

wants them to be understood as re-affirmations of the same idea. If, in a more general way, the “contradictions” serve to draw attention to the tensions within his discourse, these more precise verbal correspondences might be said to highlight, not through repetition so much as through variation, some of the correspondences and nuances in that discourse which might otherwise be missed. When we set these examples, though, alongside the accumulated statements about הבל or joy, or such other features as the rhetorical “Who can take someone to see/inform someone/explain the future?” questions of 3:22; 6:12; 8:7; and 10:4, which have their own variations but no obvious shift in sense, then it becomes apparent that repetition and self-reference in the monologue do not represent some single, simple technique. We cannot say that Qohelet is always introducing new ideas by such means, any more than we can say that he is always trying to consolidate points that he has already made.

Perhaps the most important point about this aspect of Qohelet’s speech, then, is not that he uses such allusions in particular to mark congruence, correspondence or dissonance in his thought, but that he uses them so much, for so many purposes. The obvious and explicit repetitions in the book, such as the mottoes of 1:2 and 12:8, the times of 3:2-8, or the almost formulaic condemnations as הבל are simply the most obvious manifestations of something much more widespread. Qohelet can seem sometimes like a dog with a bone, tossing around and gnawing at his favourite ideas or expressions, but never quite able to leave them alone. This consolidates his speech, distinguishes it from the looser constructions of much other didactic literature, and presents what has always been the strongest evidence against theories of dialogue or interpolation within the discourse. Rather than just thinking in source- or redaction-critical terms, however, I wonder, finally, if we should not take more seriously the effect that they have on our perception of Qohelet himself.

Of course, the history of the book’s interpretation has persuaded most readers to think in terms of a regal figure, either a proud Solomon in his prime, or a humbled, penitent king of Judah. Those who have paid less regard to that supposed *persona* have often seen someone more intellectual, philosophical or academic – an “old professor”, to borrow from the title of Eichhorn 1963. If we permit ourselves to believe, however, that the author of the book may be creating for us a real character, with his own experiences, and his own ways of thinking and talking, then we should not be so ready to pull stereotypes off the rack. Qohelet talks in a register of Hebrew that is probably colloquial or dialectal (Weeks 2012, 39-42), and he mixes clever sayings and turns of phrase with passages that seem clumsy or barely coherent; he

draws extensively on his own experience, regards himself as incomparably intelligent, and never once relies explicitly on the views of others. He has made himself rich, furthermore, and reckons human life using the vocabulary of the balance-sheet, barely able to let go of his desire for some material return from it. What he says, and the way he talks, offer us a vivid portrayal of Qohelet as a man, and it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that his constant repetition and self-allusion are, at least in part, aspects of this portrayal. Whether he is examining the question of human profit from every possible angle, eliciting another instance of הבל long after he has made his point, or simply going back to issues that he has already covered, Qohelet comes across as a man who cannot move on. Self-reference in Qohelet's monologue may well have a role in the composition of the book, and an important part to play in the ways that the author encourages his audience to think about what Qohelet is saying. It is surely also used, however, to show this audience just how trapped Qohelet has become within his own discourse and frame of reference, unable to move beyond the assumptions, questions and themes that obsess him, and around which he continues to circle without ever seeming to find the joy that he commends to others.

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