

### **“Fear God and Keep his Commandments”: Could Qohelet Have Said This?**

The book of Ecclesiastes famously closes in 12:13-14 with an exhortation to “Fear God and keep his commandments” (את האלהים ירא ואת מצותיו שמור). This is justified by a slightly obscure remark that “this is every human”, or “this is everything for a human” (כי זה כל (האדם), and backed by a warning that God will “bring every achievement to judgment, over everything out of sight, whether good or bad” (כי את כל מעשה האלהים יבא במשפט על כל נעלם). Indeed, that exhortation, phrased in the language of traditional piety, has often been seen as crucial to the very survival of the book: it brings an awkward and challenging work to an acceptably conventional conclusion, and Jerome reports a Jewish view of Ecclesiastes, that “on the basis of this single section it merits the authority to be placed among the number of the divine scriptures”.<sup>1</sup> The Talmud also seems to assert the importance of the verse: Ecclesiastes was not set aside, because “Its beginning is words of Torah, and its end is words of Torah” (b. Sabb. 30b). We should probably not take such claims too seriously, and it is clear both that the book was widely read amongst pre-rabbinic Jews, and that its controversial aspects were recognized: Ben Sira, the Epistle of Enoch and the Wisdom of Solomon all seem to engage critically with its ideas, and it is ironic, perhaps, that it came to enjoy a measure of acceptance and respectability which none of those works subsequently possessed in mainstream Judaism. For all the concerns which it provoked, such a popular and influential work was probably destined for such acceptance long before the canon was an issue, and the rabbinic ways of incorporating even its most difficult verses suggest that it would have survived even without its epilogue.

All the same, there seems to be a recognition implicit in the early evaluations of these closing verses that they are different in character from the rest of the book, and that they are

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<sup>1</sup> “Aiunt Habraei ... hic liber oblitterandus uideretur ... ex hoc uno capitulo meruisse auctoritatem ut in diuinorum uoluminum numero poneretur”. See M. Adriaen, “S. Hieronymi Presbyteri Commentarius in Ecclesiasten”, in P. de Lagarde, G. Morin, M. Adriaen (eds.), *S. Hieronymi presbyteri opera: Pars I: Opera exegetica, 1; Hebraicae quaestiones in libro Geneseos; Liber interpretationis hebraicorum nominum; Commentarioli in Psalmos; Commentarius in Ecclesiasten* (Corpus Christianorum Series Latina, 72; Turnhout: Brepols, 1959), pp. 245-361, esp. 360.

acceptably conventional in a way that the book as a whole may not have been to some later readers. Indeed, the book itself isolates them from the bulk of its content, and it is not Qohelet, who speaks them, but some anonymous epilogist. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, almost all modern commentators have seen 12:13-14, therefore, as a secondary addition, most probably designed precisely to impute a certain orthodoxy to the book: if not wholly incompatible with the speech by Qohelet that has gone before, these verses are, at least, usually viewed as seriously out of step with it. Even Michael Fox, who has argued persuasively for the epilogue to be considered as part of the original composition, sees the last two verses, attributed to the editorial voice of the epilogist, as an attempt to make the book “more easily tolerated.”<sup>2</sup> Describing them as a “postscript”, he notes how “the familiar piety of the conclusion could outweigh the uncomfortable observations of the preceding twelve chapters.”<sup>3</sup> In short, it is common to view these verses not as a real attempt to summarize the message of Qohelet, but as a way of over-riding and packaging that message for orthodox consumption, which draws on language characteristic of Deuteronomy and subsequent piety rooted in the Torah.

That view is lent weight by the apparent absence of any other explicit references to the Torah in Ecclesiastes. It is probable, to be sure, that Qohelet’s advice in 5:3 (ET 5:4), “When you have vowed a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it”, is an allusion to Deut 23:22 (ET 23:21), but even there Qohelet omits the Deuteronomic reference to “YHWH your God”, and the basis of his advice lies in a direct appeal to self-interest, not to obligation under the Law.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> M.V. Fox, “Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet”, *HUCA* 48 (1977), pp. 83-106, esp. 103.

<sup>3</sup> M.V. Fox, *A Time To Tear Down And A Time To Build Up. A Rereading Of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans 1999), pp. 373-4.

<sup>4</sup> In view of the apparent absence of specifically Jewish references elsewhere in the monologue, beyond its references to Jerusalem, it is interesting to note that Qoheleth picks one of very few offences that might have been considered likely to provoke divine anger by almost everybody in the ancient world, even in those cultures where the gods were not perceived to concern themselves closely with human morality; see, e.g., J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 40-2; Jon D. Mikalson, *Athenian Popular Religion* (Chapel Hill: University of North

Until the closing verses, indeed, neither the book as a whole, nor Qohelet as its protagonist show any other obvious interest at all in the Jewish Torah, either as a whole or in its parts. Even if the book did not need such a link to the Torah in its epilogue, it is not difficult to see why 12:13-14 are generally set apart from Qohelet's own views, or why they might be considered an attempt to make those views seem more conventional.

We do have to be wary, however, of attributing to ancient readers and editors a narrowness of opinion for which the ultimate diversity of the Jewish canon offers little evidence: other works certainly won acceptance without such artifice. Perhaps more importantly, we need also to avoid patronizing those readers by assuming that they were more stupid than we are. Our acknowledgment that the ancient context was different from our own can all too easily become an excuse for ignoring what is common sense in every age, and if it is obvious to any modern reader that exhortations to Torah piety sit uncomfortably alongside other aspects of Qohelet's monologue, that fact was presumably no less obvious to any ancient reader. Indeed, it may have been especially evident to the pious readers at whom 12:13-14 are generally supposed to have been aimed. Ecclesiastes was probably not so very novel in the ancient context as we sometimes assume, but it was almost certainly challenging all the same.<sup>5</sup> If pious readers had found the preceding 239 verses disturbing and unorthodox, it seems unlikely either that their minds would really have been set at rest simply by a sudden reference to the Torah, slapped belatedly on to the end of the book like a smiley badge stuck to a bomb, or that whoever was responsible for those verses could have expected them to be.

It seems improbable, moreover, that the verses can be attributed to an editor who disagreed with the contents but wanted them to be accepted as orthodox (whatever that actually meant in early Judaism): why should anyone seek such acceptance for a work they disliked? If the verses are secondary and designed to commend the book, we are forced to assume, therefore, either that someone had actually somehow read it as an exhortation to Torah piety yet worried that others might not do so, or that someone added these verses in the knowledge that they misrepresented Qohelet's view, but wished to give a reason – or perhaps an excuse – for

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Carolina Press, 1983), pp. 31-8. Gods intervene to punish the breaking of oaths to or by themselves not just because it represents dishonesty or bad faith, but because they have been deliberately brought into the matter.

<sup>5</sup> See Stuart Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism* (LHBOTS 541; New York and London: T&T Clark, 2012), chapter 5.

the acceptance of the book by others. Both these possibilities raise a number of questions. If the verses were not added at all, of course, but belonged in Ecclesiastes from the outset, then there are other possibilities to consider, as we shall see later. Whatever the case, however, I think that 12:13-14, and their relationship with the rest of Ecclesiastes, deserve more investigation than they are usually given, and I hope to show that they raise some important issues for our interpretation of the book as a whole. In a book so full of problems, this may seem no more than a small loose thread – but it is one that's worth pulling.

It is difficult to look at that relationship, however, without first looking at some of the more fundamental elements of Qohelet's thought, and it is not generally easy to disentangle these from each other: if we are to look at how Qohelet might have regarded divine commandments or the Torah, then we must also look at how he regarded the relationship between humans and God, and that question itself has the potential to draw in a lot of other issues. Rather than deal with each as it arises, I shall begin more generally, therefore, by outlining what I take to be the key relevant characteristics and ideas of the book, before returning more specifically to the question in hand. From this initial discussion, I think it will become clear that the notion of God giving commands to humans is not itself problematic in the context of Qohelet's speech, and that he may even have touched on it himself. The concept of a revealed Torah, however, is much less easy to reconcile with his ideas.

To begin at the very beginning, then, it would be fair to say that wisdom literature in general concerns itself not with ends but with means: neither Job nor the various parts of Proverbs appear to find any difficulty in establishing what people actually want, which we might characterize very broadly as security and success, or prosperity and long life. It is knowing how to achieve these things which presents an issue, or dealing with the problem that they are not always achieved when they seemingly should be. Ecclesiastes is exceptional in this respect, because its protagonist wants something different – Qohelet talks of it as a “profit” (יתרון) – and gives little weight to security and success in themselves. For him the problem lies, moreover, not in knowing how to get what he wants, but in the apparent impossibility of achieving it. In response to his own question, “What profit is there for a person in any of his business, at which he works beneath the sun?” (1:2), Qohelet portrays a world characterized by false or absent endings. The sun sets only to rise again, the wind never finishes its blowing, and the rivers never succeed in filling the sea. Humans do, of course, reach an end all too swiftly, and accordingly struggle to comprehend the unending world around them.

They all die, and pass to a Sheol where they have no further part in the world (9:5-6); while they still occupy the world, however, they are themselves caught up in its broader processes. Accordingly, Qohelet comes to the dual realization, both that all he has accomplished in life will be left behind when he dies, and that the products of his work will cease to be his in any sense, but will become the property of others (see especially Ecc. 2). What he has gained in material terms, therefore, is not really his own: we leave the world with no more than when we entered it, and, since we have had to work while we are there, our lives potentially register not a profit but a loss (1:15). Furthermore, since it may be the undeserving who gain what the deserving created, material possessions cannot be understood straightforwardly as rewards which have been earned.<sup>6</sup>

It is a corollary of this worldview that the material benefits which are usually valued in wisdom literature have no real meaning for Qohelet. In 6:2-6, he describes the case of

a man to whom God has granted wealth, and possessions, and plenty, and whose appetite is deprived of nothing which it desires; but God has not given him the power to enjoy them, for someone quite unknown to him<sup>7</sup> will enjoy them. This is an illusion, and it is a serious source of pain. If a man fathers a hundred, and lives many years, and each day of his years is long, and his appetite is not sated by what is good, and then there is not even a final resting place for him, I say that a miscarried child is better off than him. For (though the one) came in illusion and went in darkness, and by darkness is his name going to be covered, (while the other) never even saw the sun, and was never conscious – tranquillity belongs to this one, rather than that one, even if he has lived for twice a thousand years and never seen what is good. Is not everybody going to just the one place?

Material prosperity is meaningless without enjoyment of it, particularly since it is not really ours: Qohelet has already outlined, in 5:12-16 (ET 5:13-17), the similarly painful case of a

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<sup>6</sup> I have elaborated in more detail this understanding of Qohelet's concerns in *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, chapter 2.

<sup>7</sup> Literally, "a foreign man", but on the hyperbolic usage here to mean "someone quite different" or "a complete stranger", see Stuart Weeks, *Instruction and Imagery in Proverbs 1-9* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 199, and cf. Prov. 27:2.

man who loses all his possessions, and will leave the world as he entered it – burdened with nothing but his resentment, and his grievance at losing what he had worked for. We cannot actually own what we earn, and we cannot determine the course of our lives. Since we have no effective ownership or control over what we put our efforts into gaining, therefore, then the possession of material goods is of no value in itself, and may actually leave us worse off than if we, like the miscarried child, had never really existed. Qohelet's answer to this, famously, is that we can only turn the situation to our advantage by enjoying our experience. This does not yield the profit that he really wants, but it offsets the pains of life, so that when we all die empty-handed, those who have taken pleasure in their lives are at least no poorer for having lived. Humans cannot make a gain from their lives, but they can avoid making a loss.

It is questionable, of course, whether or not Qohelet himself is really reconciled to gaining no more than the pleasure that he finds in his work. Although he recognizes that this is all the reward that will ever truly be his, and commends it to others as all that they can achieve, he remains critical throughout his monologue not of his own expectations, but of the world which fails to meet them. Famously, everything is הבל, “vanity” or, more literally, “hot air”, and that metaphor seems to encapsulate not so much the gap between reality and expectation, as the fundamentally misleading character of reality: what humans sense and try to take is an illusion, a vapour that touches without leaving an impression, and that cannot itself be grasped. It is a consequence of this illusory world, however, not only that humans can achieve no real profit, as all they seem to hold slips eventually between their fingers, but also that their understanding of their own actions is limited – and this brings us to a further strand of Qohelet's thought, which is vital for understanding his ideas about God, and about God's relationship with humans.

The list of times in chapter 3 remains one of the best known and best loved parts of Ecclesiastes, although it also introduces some of the most difficult and challenging statements in the book. Clearly, it is not about choosing the right, propitious time for action: even were some of the actions in the list not involuntary, it seems hard to believe that we are supposed to seize the opportune moment for hating someone, say, or for bursting into tears.<sup>8</sup> In the

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<sup>8</sup> On the idea of an ancient “science of times” see, e.g., James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes. A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987; London: SCM Press,

discussion which follows the list, Qohelet speaks of “the work which God has given to humans to work at”, and declares that “he has made everything proper in its time” (3:10-11), and it seems rather that he is talking about human actions in relation to the divine will: whatever we do, whether we perceive it as creative or uncreative, good or bad, forms a part of the processes which characterize the world, and which are, in some sense, the responsibility of God. Even if each action might be evaluated differently when considered in the abstract, no action can be other than proper when it happens as part of such a divinely-approved plan or process.

It is not clear that Qohelet believes human actions to be specifically pre-ordained – although he does seem to speak later, in 9:7, of God having already approved what each of us does – and he is not interested here in the problem that humans might be constrained in their choice of action. The point, rather, is that individuals have no choice but to partake in something much greater than themselves: just as their property proves not really to be their own, so, likewise, their actions are not really for themselves. The list concludes, accordingly, with a modified version of the question that Qohelet had asked at the beginning of his monologue: where 1:3 had asked what profit humans could gain for themselves from their work, 3:9 now seems to ask what profit arises from any worker in their work.<sup>9</sup> The world is effectively sealed, so that everyone and everything participates, but nothing new can be brought to the world by such participation, just as nothing can be removed from it: the patterns and movement that we see are like those of a kaleidoscope, formed always from the same coloured glass.

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1988), p. 92. The usual construction in the list, with עת + ל + infinitive could certainly mean “a time at which one should do” something, but ל is sometimes omitted, and the list ends with עת in a simple construct relationship with nouns, making it more probable that the list is asserting possession throughout: each action has a time – rather as “every dog has his day”.

<sup>9</sup> When Qohelet speaks of the profit accruing to someone, he uses יתרון + ל + substantive, as in, e.g., 1:3; 2:22. Here and in 5:8 (ET 5:9), יתרון in a construct relationship with the following substantive apparently means the profit arising from someone or something.

We cannot be certain what Qohelet means when he claims, in 3:11, that God has “put ‘forever’ in their heart”, but the sense is probably that he has given humans a consciousness of, or an aspiration to perpetuity: they cannot know, however, the scope or entirety of God’s achievements (cf. also 8:17), and they are limited to taking pleasure and doing good in their lives, which is, according to 3:13, a “gift”, or, better, a “payment” from God.<sup>10</sup> Humans are workers on a grand and endless project, then, conscious, perhaps, that it exists, and potentially rewarded for their work, but without any ability to influence that project deliberately, or to take from it anything that they may keep. In Qohelet’s world, it is an issue not just that human ambitions may be thwarted by divine action, but that they are almost irrelevant, leading humans merely to act out their part in much greater designs. To borrow from Proverbs, we might say that:

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

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

From all this, it would seem to follow that if humans have no real ownership of their property or control over the ultimate outcome of their actions, then, likewise, they can have no real accountability for what they do. It may be surprising for us, therefore, to find that Qohelet insists on the reality of divine judgment, and, correspondingly, it would seem, on the need for humans to behave in the expectation that their actions will be judged. His understanding of judgment, however, is fundamentally shaped and constrained by his other ideas: it cannot be *post mortem*, because death is absolute, and it cannot be manifested simply in material well-being, because such well-being is not real.

These constraints have implications for human behaviour, especially when we add to them the fact that judgment seems not to follow instantly upon good or bad behaviour. After stating his belief that God will judge, in 3:17, Qohelet concedes that God reveals to humans no more than the fact of their deaths, with no indication that they are in any way different from

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<sup>10</sup> The sense of *מתת* is not limited to “gift” (cf. Sir 42:7).



animals,<sup>11</sup> and in 8:10-9:3 he again observes both that humans are misled by the apparent prosperity of the wicked, and that the wicked do indeed seem sometimes to get what the righteous deserve, or the righteous to suffer as the wicked should: it is a significant problem in the world, and it inspires humans to evil, that those who act well and those who act badly seem as undifferentiated in life as in death.

For Qohelet to insist on the reality of judgment in the face of all this, as he does at several points, he must clearly believe not only in the moral autonomy of humans, despite their implication in processes beyond themselves, but also in rewards and punishments that may potentially operate in some way outside the common expectations of health and prosperity for the righteous, death and disaster for the wicked. In 2:24-6, he speaks of God assigning wisdom, knowledge and joy to “the man who is pleasing to him”, and this might hint that the ability to find enjoyment is to some extent dependant upon behaviour. In 5:18-19 (ET 5:19-20) Qohelet describes possessions, combined with enjoyment of those possessions, as a gift or payment from God, and in 6:2 he similarly speaks of God withholding from someone the power to enjoy what he has. It is not entirely clear in these cases that reward and punishment are the underlying motivations, and Qohelet may be outlining no more than the fact that God assigns different roles and qualities to whomever he pleases. It is tempting to suppose, though, that Qohelet sees some possibility of invisible reward and punishment in the assignment or withholding of an ability to take pleasure in what one does.

Where he does speak of reward more explicitly, however, it is generally in rather vague terms of rescue: 7:18 affirms that the God-fearing will come through unscathed, whatever they do, and 8:12-13 that things will ultimately work out well for those who fear God, just because they fear him, whilst the wicked man will fail to prolong his life because he does not. In the very obscure context of 7:26, we are also assured that he who pleases God (or “whomever God pleases”) will escape a mysterious, dangerous woman, while the sinner will be taken by her. Though they may seem rather conventional in terms of the outcomes which they predict, these are interesting for their descriptions of the criterion applied in judgment: it seems

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<sup>11</sup> 3:18 is very difficult, but I understand the sense of the second part to be “God is going to separate them (humans) out, but what they are going to see for themselves is that they are cattle”; cf. Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, p. 82 n. 7.

principally to be the attitude of individuals which ensures divine favour or disfavour, and this is summed up especially in the idea of “fearing God”.

In fact, 7:18 concludes a section that began in 7:15 by noting that the righteous might die through their righteousness and the wicked survive longer through their wickedness. This led Qohelet to suggest that we should be neither too righteous and wise, nor too wicked and foolish, and that idea has naturally not passed without criticism by subsequent readers. His point here, though, is both logical and important: righteous actions can be dangerous, and divine responses are rarely instant. If it is our aim to survive, rather than to exhibit righteousness for its own sake, then we might well avoid, say, climbing trees to rescue cats. Should we die from doing something righteous, then we have annulled any benefit that we might gain from that righteousness, just as surely as if we had killed ourselves by incurring divine punishment. If God judges people in the round and over time, not by their actions as they happen, then the safest course is one that is guided by a desire to please God, but that also avoids putting righteousness before one’s own life. Divine favour is important, and divine disfavour may be disastrous, as when one breaks a vow (5:5, ET 5:6), but it is important to please God without dying in the attempt.

Qohelet’s ideas about human behaviour, then, have to be understood within the framework of his more general ideas about the place of humans in the world, and their inability to exercise genuine control or ownership. We might ourselves, perhaps, be more alert than Qohelet to some of the logical and philosophical issues raised by the deterministic aspects of those ideas: it is not simple to detach human motives and responsibilities from the roles and situations which are apparently assigned to humans by God. Qohelet himself does proclaim, however, both his own confidence in divine judgment, and a corresponding belief that there are ways in which humans can please or displease God, with consequences for their own lives. To be sure, these affirmations are not without problems for him, because they seem to run counter to common human experience in a world where appearances may not correspond to realities, and where prosperity may not be a reward in its own right. Qohelet also places the need to please God within a broader concern to survive and minimize one’s losses from life, so that piety is a means of self-preservation, to which it must sometimes take second place, and is not an end in itself. We may say, all the same, that Qohelet presumes both that there is a standard against which God measures human behaviour, distinct from the hidden role of that behaviour in his broader purposes, and that humans can have some understanding of that standard themselves. It is possible and desirable to fear God, even when it is not possible to

see clearly the outcomes of doing so, and to that extent, Qohelet's world demands a response that is conventional, and at least compatible with common ideas of human obedience to the divine. If we return briefly to consider the closing verses 12:13-14, therefore, we can fairly acknowledge that their emphasis on fear and obedience of God, linked to an assertion of divine judgement, seems quite compatible with Qohelet's views on such matters, even if there are tensions in the monologue between those views and his other beliefs.

To speak of divine "commandments" as does 12:13, however, is to go at least one step further. Although Qohelet affirms divine judgment unambiguously, albeit with rather complicated consequences, there are other problems that surround his ideas about revelation of the divine will. In particular, Qohelet places clear limitations on human knowledge both of God's activity and of the future, limitations which he attributes directly to deliberate divine purposes (3:10-15; 7:13-14; 8:17), and in 11:5 he declares that, "you will not know what God does, he who will do everything." These statements do not preclude the possibility of direct divine communication with humans, but they at least place severe limitations on what such communication might impart, or even on its reliability. It is fundamental to Qohelet's thought that human knowledge is tightly constrained, and the scope for accurate divine revelation is accordingly very slight. Indeed, although 3:14 is rather difficult, the verse seems to suggest that God somehow achieves human fear of him not through revelation of his will or through speaking to humans, but through his creation and management of a world that is impervious to human action or understanding.

Despite all that, we might well ask whether there might not be space for something more limited within the confines of what humans can actually see, according to Qohelet. If human behaviour may be judged on a basis separate from its role in broader divine purposes, then perhaps there are also further aspects to the relationship between God and humans at a level on which these purposes do not impinge. To put that more simply, we should consider the possibility that God might communicate with humans anyway, even though he conceals from them what he is really up to. Some such communication is implicit, perhaps, in the warning against breaking a vow, which can evoke divine anger according to 5:5 (ET 5:6), and it is interesting to speculate that the relationship between God and humans might be modelled in Qohelet's account of behaviour towards a king, in 8:2-5, which is used to introduce more general comments about coping with human ignorance and impotence, and in which judgement by the king becomes the starting-point for observations on divine judgement:

Watch<sup>12</sup> the mouth of a king, and do not be hasty in a solemn undertaking. Leave him, do not hang around at a bad word: for everything he wants, he will do, since a king's word is power, and who will say to him, "What are you doing?" One who keeps a command will know no bad word and time of judgment. The heart of a wise man knows: that for every matter there is a time and judgment, that a person's wrongdoing counts heavily against him, that he cannot know what is going to happen, that when it happens – who will explain it to him? There is no person has power over the wind, to restrain the wind. And there is no control over the day of death. And there is no remission in battle. And wickedness will not save its owner. I saw all this when I applied my heart to every deed which is done beneath the sun, which one person has power over another for harming him. (8.2-9)

At the point of transition, when Qohelet moves on from the king to more general issues in verse 5, the term "command" or "commandment" (מצוה) is used on the only occasion in the book outside the epilogue, and it can be construed with what follows: as a wise man knows, we face judgement in a world where we have no real control – but to obey a command is to avoid condemnation. At the very least, it seems that we are supposed to extrapolate from the way we should behave before a king to the way we should behave in the world, and Qohelet seems to suggest that obedience is safer than self-reliance. This passage leads on, of course, to his description of humans misled by the invisibility of judgment against the wicked, and his assurance that there is safety to be found in fear of God.

Returning to the exhortation in the epilogue, then, we may reasonably say not only that it is true to Qohelet's own statements in its emphasis on judgment and on the need to fear God, even if it has nothing to say about his more characteristic concerns with pleasure and self-preservation, but that even its idea of God giving commandments might be considered compatible with what Qohelet says. Indeed, if we place any weight on the warnings about the king in chapter 8, there may even be some indirect reference to such commandments in the

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<sup>12</sup> The awkward initial אִנִּי in the Masoretic text seems to be early, but is probably not original, and I prefer the reading of the Greek here. If we do include it, then emendation of the following verb is probably necessary, but there is no significant change to the overall sense.

monologue. God conceals what he does, according to Qohelet, but he does not necessarily conceal himself. So, if all the exhortation in 12:13-14 meant was that we should do what God tells us, then it might well be a very selective interpretation of Qohelet's message, but it would probably not be a wholly inaccurate one. As his monologue draws to its dramatically gloomy close, indeed, Qohelet increasingly tempers his calls to joy with reminders of coming death and judgement (11:7-9), so just possibly there is even a trajectory towards this severe exhortation in the last part of the book as a whole. The problem, though, is not so much its selectivity, or any real contradiction to what has gone before, but the disjuncture between the literal meaning of 12:13-14, which is compatible with Qohelet's words, and the way in which it surely intends itself to be understood, which is probably not. To fear and obey God is to act in a way that characterizes almost any ancient piety, but the specific formulation here, "keep his commandments", is so quintessentially Deuteronomic (see, for instance Deut 4:40; 7:9; 13:5; 26:18) that it could hardly but have been read by early Jewish readers as a reference to the Torah, and the author of the verses must surely have been aware of these connotations. Although Qohelet might allow the possibility of divine communication and commands, it is very doubtful that his thought has any place for the concept of a Torah, or its many implications.

Of course, we should be careful not to assume that there was any single understanding of Torah in the late period when Ecclesiastes was written, and we should certainly not impute to the concept all the national, historical and covenantal ideas that are associated with it in deuteronomic literature. In principle, moreover, the Torah was apparently quite compatible with the concerns and conventions of wisdom literature, and I have argued elsewhere that, in Proverbs 1-9 at least, it was supposed to be identified with the instruction that gave rise to wisdom, and so to the understanding of the divine will which that work associates with fear of God.<sup>13</sup> Since the study of the Torah came to be seen in terms of forming character or intellect, indeed, it was perfectly possible to integrate it into a literature which saw wisdom in similar terms of personal formation, and even to give it a certain universal aspect. The problem in Ecclesiastes is not that it has no obvious place for more specifically deuteronomic concepts, but that its views of wisdom and character differ significantly from those found in Proverbs or Ben Sira, leaving little space for the ideas about Torah found in such other books.

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<sup>13</sup> Weeks, *Instruction and Imagery*.

In the first place, the impenetrability of Qohelet's world sets an obvious limit on human knowledge, and it is difficult to conceive of him presenting wisdom as a route to intimate knowledge of God. Indeed, amidst the many difficulties in 7:23-29, where he sets out to find wisdom and folly, encountering a dangerous woman but no good one, it is tempting to suppose with some other scholars that Qohelet is referring to the imagery of Proverbs 1-9, and perhaps specifically rejecting that work's characterization of wisdom.<sup>14</sup> Proverbs 1-9 also sees the ability to escape the dangerous woman as a consequence of wisdom, honed by instruction, while Qohelet is careful to observe, in 7:26, that it is God himself who determines which of her victims escape or succumb to her traps. Whether or not there is a deliberate reference here to Proverbs, and so a conscious contradiction of its ideas, Qohelet clearly presents a quite different view of human ability: we do not acquire the wisdom to resist dangerous temptation, but have rather to rely on God's intentions toward us.

Furthermore, Qohelet explicitly rejects, in 8:17, any claim by the wise to know what is really going on in the world: "even if the wise man says that he is going to know, he will not be able to find out." Wisdom is important to Qohelet, but it does not form a bridge to the divine, and his attitudes toward it, indeed, are rather mixed. We see this early on, in 1:18, when Qohelet declares that "in much wisdom is much exasperation, and whoever gains in knowledge gains in pain," and that point is picked up at greater length during his examination of his own situation in 2:12-16. Here his description is ironic: wisdom is like light, illuminating the path of the wise man, while the fool walks in darkness – and perhaps, again, there is an allusion here to the imagery in Prov 4:18-19 – but wisdom does not allow the wise man to change his path, so that he will end up as dead and forgotten as the fool. When applied to human life, wisdom offers insight without control, and clarity when it might be less painful for us to remain in the dark. There may be further irony along the same lines in 7:1-13, where a series of sayings seems to begin with commendations of wisdom – but each supposed commendation portrays the life of the wise as gloomy and sorrowful, in contrast to the partying, laughter and singing of fools. Qohelet acknowledges the importance of wisdom as a

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<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Ingrid Riesener, "Frauenfeindschaft im Alten Testament? Zum Verständnis von Qoh 7,25-29", in Anja A Diesel, Reinhard G. Lehmann, Eckart Otto, Andreas Wagner (eds.), *"Jedes Ding hat seine Zeit ...". Studien zur israelitischen und altorientalischen Weisheit. Diethelm Michel zum 65. Geburtstag* (BZAW 241; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), pp. 193-207, esp. p. 197; see Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, p. 100.

tool for analysis and accomplishment in life, but the chief insight which it offers is into its own limitations, and into the ultimate powerlessness of all humans. As 8:1 probably suggests, “A person’s wisdom will light up their face, but their confidence will be dimmed.”<sup>15</sup>

To be sure, Qohelet certainly prefers wisdom to folly, which is outright dangerous, but it is not clear that every person must be either wise or foolish, and, as we have already seen, his attitudes are shot through with a certain pragmatism. So, for instance, the sayings in 11:1-6 encourage action in the face of ignorance: it is sensible to take precautions and to hedge one’s bets when outcomes are so uncertain, but one should not waste time trying to understand or to second-guess the future: “Whoever keeps watch on the wind will never sow, and whoever keeps an eye on the clouds will never reap” (11:4). Ultimately, all humans are subject to forces for which they cannot prepare themselves, so that it is not always the wise who get to eat, any more than it is the fastest who always win their race (9:11). Even if one is prepared to tolerate the pain conferred by wisdom, then, and to accept its limitations, it may be better just to carry on with life than to seek the uncertain benefits which it can bring. Of course, if wisdom is simply assigned by God to some individuals, as 2:26 suggests, then most humans may have little choice.

We should be clear then, that there is little or nothing in Qohelet’s monologue to suggest an enthusiasm for wisdom of the sort found in Proverbs or Ben Sira, and it is difficult to see how his attitudes could be reconciled to any idea of a wisdom nurtured by instruction in Torah, or of a humanity empowered by that wisdom. Although we may observe that he has little obvious interest at all in instruction, or in the way that individuals acquire wisdom, this absence does not really even open a gap into which we might insert the concept of Torah, because whatever makes humans wise for Qohelet, it is something which confers no significant knowledge of the divine will, and which offers insight only into limited aspects of the world. Even the more basic idea of a teaching passed on across the generations would seem hard to align, furthermore, with his belief that everyone and everything is ultimately

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<sup>15</sup> וְעַז פָּנָיו יִשְׁנָא, literally “and the strength of his face will be changed”, but the verb (שנה) is used of tarnishing in Lam 4:1, which provides a good counterpart to the preceding תֵּאֵיר, while the uses of עַז פָּנִים in Deut 28:50; Prov 21:29; Dan 8:23 suggest that it refers to behaving without consideration (here, perhaps, over-consideration).

forgotten (1:11), and with his general reliance on his own analysis, which disdains any explicit appeal to established sources of authoritative teaching.

It would appear to be possible, then, to reconcile a general belief in divine commandments with the ideas of Qohelet, but much harder to find a place in his thought for a concept of Torah either comparable to that found in some other wisdom literature, or more simply as an accurate and authoritative revelation of the divine will transmitted from the past. In the light of that, we might suggest that, since the references to divine commandments in 12:13-14 are not incompatible with what Qohelet says, the misrepresentation of his speech in these verses lies more in their selectivity, and in their use of language which evokes ideas alien to his thought. Even if we were to suppose, however, that the epilogist never intended to evoke such piety, the exhortation would remain awkward: it might literally say no more than Qohelet said himself about divine judgement and commandments, but it clearly also says far less about the issues which more actively concerned him. The closing lines of Ecclesiastes probably do not contradict Qohelet, but it is unlikely that Qohelet himself would have represented his message in quite these terms or that even the most nonchalant reader of the monologue might have assumed that he would do so.

We have seen reasons, then, to doubt that the closing lines are simply a secondary attempt to make the book acceptable, but also to doubt that they can have been intended (either by the author or by some subsequent redactor) to summarize Qohelet's monologue faithfully. In that case, perhaps we should pay more attention to the fact that 12:13-14 are not actually attributed to Qohelet, and should look at them, finally, in the context of the epilogue itself, where they stand not as part of Qohelet's monologue, but nonetheless as a part of the book. The epilogue, indeed, contains much else that might pique our curiosity. When it begins, in 12:9-10, it apparently affirms Qohelet's integrity, but seems to describe the rest of his career, as a teacher and collector of sayings, in terms that positively tame him: he was wise, taught the people knowledge, arranged sayings, and tried to combine truth with pithiness in his writing. After the vehemence of the monologue, which has just ended with vivid descriptions of death and a repetition of Qohelet's despairing claim that all is vanity, this is so very jejune that it becomes almost bizarre. It is as though the *Communist Manifesto*, after its warning that rulers would tremble, and its call for the workers of the world to unite, then finished by remarking that Marx also wrote bad love poetry and Engels dabbled in satirical verse. The second section in 12:11-12, is very different in tone, and perhaps does more justice to the evident desire of the monologue to provoke discomfort. It tells us that the words of the wise



are like nails in a stick, wielded by a shepherd – the more authors we read, therefore, the more nailed sticks there are to tear us. The message is not so much, though, “If there is only one book you read, make it this one!”, as “Now you’ve experienced this book, spare yourself the further pain of reading any others!” – which is neither the warmest of commendations, nor an affirmation of Qohelet’s own claims to be exceptional. Like a hypnotist snapping his fingers to awaken his subjects, the epilogue brings us back to earth with a bump, and disengages us from the rhetoric of the monologue: Qohelet is no longer a man driven by his wisdom and experiences to make some radical claims about reality, but a skilled writer and collector, playing with words and ideas in a tradition designed to discomfort its readers.

Of course, the very last verses, which concern us here, do not make that same point, and have nothing to do with books or writing. They do, however, begin with an unexpected coup: Qohelet’s speech may have dominated the book, but it is another voice that now declares brusquely “An end of the matter: all has been heard”, and which offers its own conclusion. As we have seen, that conclusion is compatible with Qohelet’s views, and we may also note that it uses a number of terms and expressions used by Qohelet himself.<sup>16</sup> It also, however, strips out what was distinctive in Qohelet’s message, and if the preceding verses undermine any claim by Qohelet to be special as a person, these verses now make his advice itself look rather ordinary. The epilogue wrests control of Ecclesiastes from its main protagonist, and imposes its own ideas about how that protagonist should be viewed; it does so, moreover, with a certain consistency, never attacking what Qohelet has said, but never acknowledging its distinctiveness.

At the beginning of this paper, I suggested that it is difficult to see all this as a secondary attempt to make the book seem more orthodox and it would be hard to view the first parts of the epilogue in such terms: they do nothing to promote Qohelet’s orthodoxy. Clearly, it is more economical to suppose that whatever is going on in 12:9-12 also underpins the

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<sup>16</sup> We may observe, for instance, that **את האלהים ירא** in 12:13 appears also in 5:6 with the same word-order, and **כל האדם** also in 3:13; 5:18 and 7:2 – that expression is surprisingly unusual elsewhere in biblical Hebrew. From 12:14, the sequence **את כל מעשה האלהים** is to be found also in 8:17 (although to be construed differently there), while **במשפט** is used with the hiphil of **בוא** and a direct object in 11:9 also.

conclusion in 12:13-14, than that each is to be explained separately, and so the concern of these last verses should be understood as part of a broader concern that runs through the epilogue. I have suggested elsewhere that, in fact, the author of the book is trying to distance the book as a whole from Qohelet's monologue, and inviting his readers to approach his central character with a certain critical detachment.<sup>17</sup> Qohelet is a complicated figure, set apart from others by his profound materialism, his consequent demands for profit and ownership, and his conviction that he has somehow been swindled. It may never have been the intention of the book that we should accept without question all that he says, and the contents of the epilogue may correspondingly have been directed inward rather than outward –intended not to make the book more palatable to conservative readers, but to react against the monologue, or at least to set it in perspective. Be that as it may, we can readily enough answer the question posed by this paper: could Qohelet himself have said what is said by the epilogue in 12:13-14? Yes, he could indeed: although it is unlikely that he would have used these terms or summarized his message in this way, the verses say nothing with which he would strictly have disagreed. It may be their very function, however, not to provide an accurate epitome of his message, or even a deliberate misrepresentation, but to provoke us into asking just such questions about what we have read. When Qohelet has been stripped of his story, a warning issued against painful books like this, and then finally an impatient voice cries "Enough!", and tells us to take from the book no more than we knew already, we might well conclude that nobody is trying to make us like Ecclesiastes better, but that someone may want us to think about it more.

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<sup>17</sup> Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, pp. 170-9.