Qohelet’s Implied Author and Implied Readers

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Abstract

Qohelet is not only an anthology of journalings or an exposition of an individual’s agonizings; it is also (perhaps more) a book of teaching and a piece of rhetoric. It aims to disturb the assumptions and thinking of people in the Second Temple period who think that they understand reality, think that work is all-important, don’t take death seriously, feel relaxed about their financial position, undervalue everyday things, think that the country’s structures are working satisfactorily, and take their relationship with God for granted. The postscript, however, whether by the same author or by someone else, does then reaffirm the truth of the Torah and the Prophets.

Keywords

Hebel, questioning, disillusionment, complacency, Megillot, pandemic

When my students report back on their reading of this ‘most unusual and exciting book of the Bible’,[[1]](#footnote-1) some of them comment that the author seems to be depressed (admittedly a number of them are psychology students). I first ask them to consider whether Qohelet’s gloomy attitude is quite a reasonable response to the gloomy facts that the book recognizes, and to consider whether the problem is that they themselves don’t want to face these facts. I may offer them the observation that ‘great joys and sharp griefs are the healthy reaction of men who expose themselves to life’;[[2]](#footnote-2) which Qohelet certainly did. Then I ask them whether they are being literalistic in assuming that Qohelet is voicing an actual personal view. An author who writes in the first person doesn’t necessarily identify with this first-person voice. And Qohelet has been seen as the alter ego of the actual author of the book[[3]](#footnote-3) – so from now on I will distinguish between the first person voice of the one who is called Qohelet (though it is hardly a name) and the author (whom I will let remain anonymous). The book might be understood as a kind of thought experiment, or it might be seen as analogous to the work of those Christian philosophers who write with one arm tied behind their back in order to suspend their Christian beliefs and write on the same level playing field as other philosophers.

It may be the author who speaks more directly in the book’s postscript, 12:9 – 14, which refers to Qohelet in the third person, though the possible understandings of this postscript are legion. Is it the work of whoever is also the author of the main body of the book but who writes here in the third person, thus maintaining some distance from Qohelet’s voice? Thucydides begins his *History of the Peloponnesian War* by saying that ‘Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the history of the war’, but after a couple of sentences he is using the first person. And the most prolific commentator on this book is one of several who refers to himself in the third person.[[4]](#footnote-4) Or is the postscript written by someone other than the main author? Or is it two postscripts written by two other different people? Or is it two postscripts of which the first was written by the author (it is affirming of Qohelet) and the second by an editor or a kind of curator (who is more equivocal)?

The last is my working hypothesis and I shall here assume it, but there is a feature of the postscripts that helps to undermine the importance of the question and to make it possible to sidestep it. The first postscript describes Qohelet not only as someone smart but also as someone who taught the people knowledge. Together the postscripts imply that teaching was not something that Qohelet did on the other days of the week when he was not engaged in writing this book, but something he was doing in this book itself. The book is a piece of teaching.

Scholars writing on Qohelet can make or encourage the same assumption as the students with whom I opened, that the book is essentially a kind of transcript of the author’s thinking and reaction. They may write in a way that implies this assumption even though they also note that the pseudo-autobiography which dominates the first two chapters follows the model of royal autobiographies from elsewhere in the Middle East, which might be ghosted by a member of the king’s staff. While much of the book can give the impression of being the deposit of someone’s journaling, it can also give the impression of being designed to be read by people, and it includes some exhortations to its readers. It is a work designed to teach and to make people think.

‘Whether he is examining the question of human profit from every possible angle, eliciting another instance of *hbl* long after he has made his point, or simply going back to issues that he has already covered, Qoheleth comes across as a man who cannot move on.’ Self-reference is thus used to show the audience ‘how trapped Qoheleth 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.’[[5]](#footnote-5) Qohelet can indeed come across that way, but this impression is an aspect of the book’s communication. It is how the book invites readers to picture Qohelet; the book may or may not be an account of the author’s actual thinking and feelings. The book is not just an author trying to think some things through. It is rhetoric,[[6]](#footnote-6) not in the sense of an artificial construction or something designed to manipulate, but as something designed to communicate, move, and convince.

When I write a commentary, it is often for two sorts of reasons. I write because I value the opportunity to think through the issues raises by the book in question. And I write in the hope that the commentary may be useful for other people who want to understand the book. Where my editors and publishers do not think I am fulfilling the second aim, bits of the commentary may end up on the cutting room floor.

I wouldn’t be surprised if many of the scriptural authors had an equivalent double aim. Maybe some knew what they wanted to say before they started and wrote simply in order to get their point home. Luke opens his Gospel and Acts by speaking as if it is the case for him, though perhaps we should not take him too literally. Job and Romans read as if they may have issued from the double aim. Other authors may have written simply for themselves (Song of Songs, some psalms?), though the fact that other people got hold of their work and it became sufficiently known and appreciated to find a place in the Scriptures may make this hypothesis less plausible. The beginning of the postscript to Qohelet’s work, at least, suggests that its author does not see the main body of the work as journaling or reflection that is undertaken simply for the writer’s benefit. It is a body of teaching.

As another thought experiment, let us thus suppose that the material in the book was not turned into a work of teaching by the writer of the postscript, but was indeed written to be a work of teaching. Qohelet no doubt was working out how to think about the questions he discusses, and maybe he did need to see a therapist, afterwards if not beforehand. But he was writing for other people, not just for himself. Who, then, were the implied readers of his work, the readers he might have had in mind?

Qohelet’s language makes clear that it comes from the Second Temple period; the scholarly consensus places it about 300, though there is no concrete basis for the consensus. Whatever its precise date, its religious and intellectual context includes works such as the Torah, the Prophets, the Psalms, and Proverbs, which have some background in the First Temple period but reached the form in which we have them during the Persian or Hellenistic era. Its religious and intellectual context also includes works with an unambiguous Second Temple background such as Chronicles with its account of God’s involvement with Judah in earlier times that is designed to encourage Judah in its own day. Visionaries such as the ones whose work eventually appears in Enoch were also thinking adventurously in this era.

Chronicles implies an audience that needs encouragement, and Qohelet has also been seen as ‘a book to be read in times of profound disillusionment’;[[7]](#footnote-7) its audience was then ‘disillusioned Israelites’ in danger of succumbing to skepticism.[[8]](#footnote-8) Yet the effect of Qohelet from which I began may suggest that it ‘seems aimed more at unsettling readers than comforting them.’[[9]](#footnote-9) It rather implies that the Judahite community for which it writes is not disillusioned enough. The book has the aim and the effect of disrupting complacency.[[10]](#footnote-10)

If we work back from what it says, then this community is people who

* think that they understand what life and the world are about and/or that if they think deeply, they can understand them
* in that connection but also more generally, think that working hard is all-important and that if they do work hard, they can do something meaningful in life
* don’t think much about the fact that they are going to die and/or are attracted to the idea that death will be the gateway to new life
* feel relaxed about their financial position and are able to live well and enjoy their lives, or wish they were people who are in that position
* don’t place very high value on the everyday things of life such as ordinary food and drink, and relationships
* think that the country’s political, economic, and judicial structures work in a reasonably efficient and fair way
* take their relationship with God for granted in ways encouraged by works such as Chronicles, as well as Enoch, Proverbs, and Psalms.

To people who read Chronicles as the contemporary version of Israel’s story from creation to the fall of Jerusalem, then, Qohelet says ‘Beware of your enthusiasm for the temple.’ To people who appreciate the prayers of the Psalms, Qohelet says ‘Be realistic: God does not always act in our lives in the way the Psalms describe and promise.’ To people attracted to the apocalypses, Qohelet says ‘Remember that these visions may be just the products of people with fertile imaginations.’ To people who appreciate the assurances of Proverbs, Qohelet says ‘Don’t think that its generalizations work 100% of the time.’

It would be an exaggeration to say that Qohelet is simply a work of demolition, though its focus lies there. In a way, the first postscript grants the point in its vivid and telling comparison of Qohelet with goads or spurs, or with nails driven into wood, or with tent pegs driven into the ground. Being on the receiving end of goads, spurs, nails, or tent pegs is painful. Qohelet himself qualifies the negative aspect to his work by repeatedly encouraging his readers to take their everyday life (food, drink, work, relationships) as something God-given and to be enjoyed, rather than undervalued in the manner of a workaholic.[[11]](#footnote-11) The second postscript mitigates the negative impression one could get from the work by exhorting its readers not only to ‘be in awe of God’ (as Qohelet himself has often urged) but also to ‘keep his orders’ (which Qohelet has not said, though it is not in conflict with things he has said). ‘The biblical idiom of fearing God and keeping his commandments could only have been heard in the broadest context of the Jewish faith which included the Mosaic legislation.’[[12]](#footnote-12) Further, the exhortation adds the motivation, ‘because God will make every deed come to judgment, with everything that has hidden, whether good or bad.’ This declaration could make readers also think of the Prophets, though it is the kind of consideration that Qohelet has ruled out by operating on the basis of what we can see under the sun. But in effect, the second postscript sets Qohelet into the framework of the Torah and the Prophets.

Within the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, this book came to be associated in due course with Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, and Esther, ‘The [Five] Scrolls.’ Such a collocation is instructive. Each of the five focuses on one concern that is marginal to the mainstream faith of the Torah and the Prophets. Each of them (I assume) deals with a concern that is really important to the author and one whose significance may not be recognized in the author’s context. In each case (I assume) the author was not saying that this work constituted the whole truth or should replace the convictions expressed in the Torah and the Prophets, but that the theme it expounded was important alongside them. Each of the five did come to be accepted by the Second Temple community in a way that suggests a recognition that their authors were right. Two of the other four make connections with the Torah and the Prophets before they come to an end – Ruth by the link it makes with the David story, Esther by the link it makes with Israel’s festal calendar. Perhaps Lamentations implicitly does so by the way it ends, and perhaps Song of Songs does so with its reference to a flame of Yah (8:6). And the second postscript makes this link for Qohelet. Perhaps Qohelet’s work once existed in a form that began with 1:2 and ended with 12:8 or 12:11, though even then it is an open question whether Qohelet was setting his teaching forward as the whole truth. The important thrust of it is to confront its readers with the points of needed dis-illusion listed above. The first postscript then notes that those points are worth pondering (not least by people of faith in the twenty-first century, and not least in the midst of a pandemic). And the second postscript notes that they do eventually need to be set in the context of the Torah and the Prophets, or for Christians the context of the Gospels and the Epistles.

1. Douglas B. Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, Believers Church Bible Commentary 23 (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2010), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Austin Farrer, *A Celebration of Faith* (reprinted London: Hodder, 1972), 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes,* Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 19; Gary D. Salyer discusses at length an assumption of this kind in *Vain Rhetoric: Private Insight and Public Debate in Ecclesiastes*,Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement 327 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 167 – 238. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Anton Schoors, ‘Introduction’, in Schoors, ed., *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom,* Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 136 (Leuven: Leuven University, 1998), 1 – 13 (1). Cf. Madipone Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), ‘What Now of the Proverbial Sage and Qoheleth?’ *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 153 (2015) 110 – 27 (113); and Daniel C. Fredericks in Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes & the Song of Songs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Nottingham: Apollos, 2010), 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Stuart Weeks, ‘The Inner-textuality of Qoheleth’s Monologue’, in Katharine J. Dell and Will Kynes, ed., *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually,* Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 587 (London: T & T Clark, 2014), 142 – 53 (152); *hebel* is the word for ‘mere breath’ (e.g., 1:2), as Robert Alter translates it in *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2010), e.g., 346. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Douglas B. Miller, ‘What the Preacher Forgot: The Rhetoric of Ecclesiastes’, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62 (2000) 215 – 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Elsa Tamez, ‘Ecclesiastes: A Reading from the Periphery’, *Interpretation* 55 (2001) 250 – 59 (250). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Craig G. Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutical Theory*, Analecta Biblica 139 (Rome: Pontifico Istituto Biblico, 1998), 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Peter Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. James S. Reitman, ‘The Structure and Unity of Ecclesiastes’, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (1997) 297 – 319 (297). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. Robert K. Johnston, ‘“Confessions of a Workaholic”: A Reappraisal of Qoheleth’, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 38 (1976) 14 – 28. The phrase in quotation marks is the title of a book by Wayne Oates (New York: World, 1971). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 586. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)