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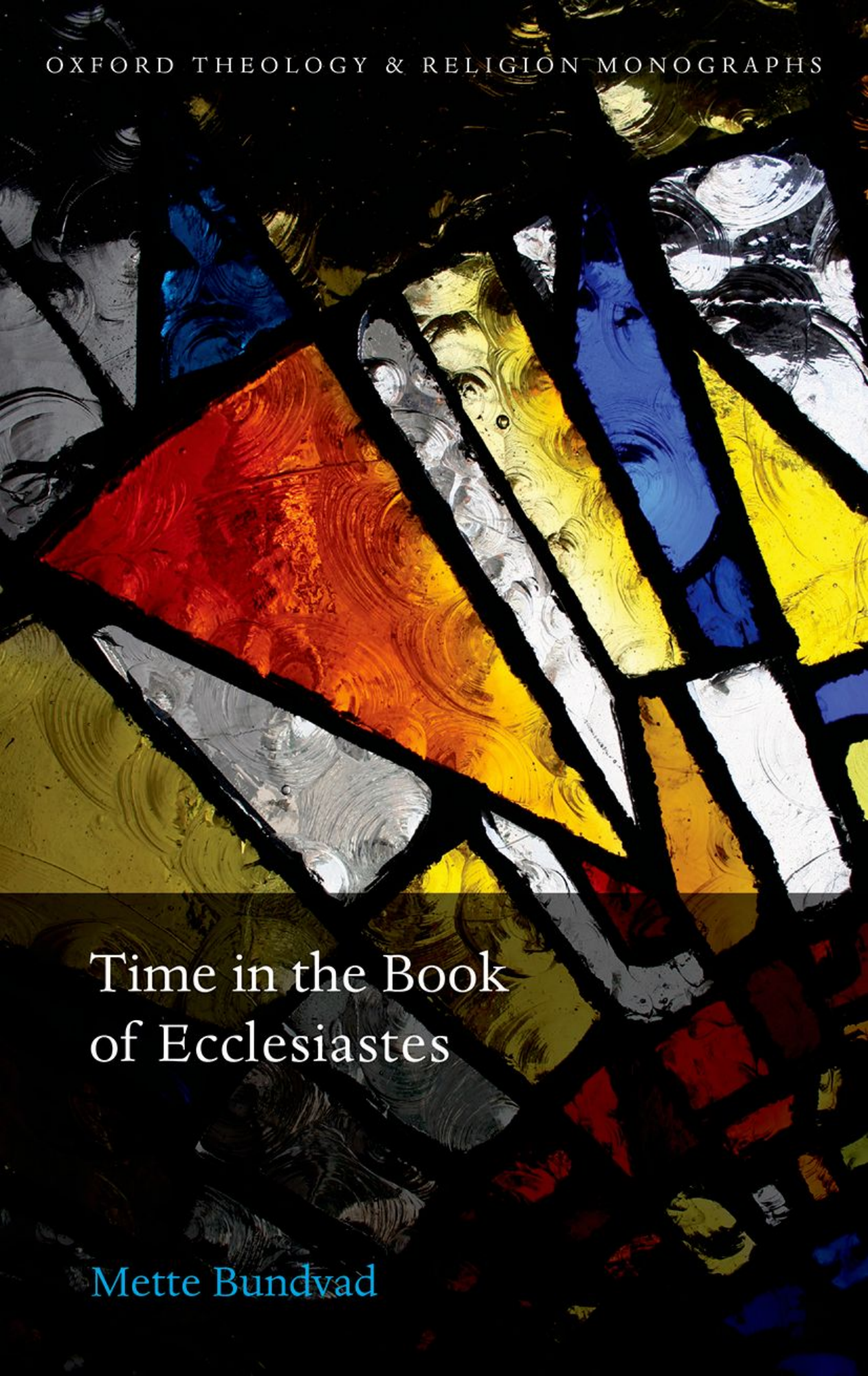

Time in the Book of Ecclesiastes

Mette Bundvad

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METTE BUNDVAD

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For my grandmothers
Marie and Alice
with love

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Contents

Introduction

Time is a main concern in the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, or, as it is also known, the book of Qohelet.[1] Uniquely within a Hebrew Bible context, Qohelet, the narrator of this book, engages at length with the theme of time, explicitly exploring the temporal situation of humanity. He does not aim to describe the temporal processes of the world as a neutral reality. Rather, a prominent feature of his depiction is the view that the temporal order is highly problematic for human attempts to fashion a meaningful existence.

The discussion on time is central to the whole work. While this exposition does contain tensions, Qohelet nevertheless presents a reasonably consistent thesis regarding the reality of time and the human experience of this reality. Consequently, the theme of time provides the book of Qohelet—contradictory though it is—with a degree of coherence. Several passages, the content of which makes little sense when read on their own, become meaningful when interpreted in relation to the book's discourse on time. Similarly, approaching

[1] It is common practice to use the name or designation 'Qohelet' to refer both to the book itself and its first-person narrator. I have chosen to do so too. The main risk of this practice is its inherent ambiguity: when discussing 'Qohelet's' presentation of a subject, are we then referring to the book as a whole or are we commenting on the viewpoint of the book's narrator? This study is interested in the discussion of time in the book of Qohelet, most of which is presented through the insights and opinions of its narrator. There is no attempt made in the biblical book to create distance between the viewpoint of the narrator and the implicit author on the subject of time. I therefore consider it relatively unproblematic to retain the usual designation 'Qohelet' for both the narrator and the book as a whole. On the other hand, it is impossible to say very much at all about the actual author's conception of time. I do not assume the identity between narrator and author, and I do not attempt to recover what the author of Qohelet 'really' thought about time.

structural ambiguities and other compositional uncertainties from the perspective of time in the book often helps elucidate them.

Despite its centrality in this biblical work, Qohelet's interest in time is generally approached indirectly, and has not received an exhaustive analysis. Themes such as determinism, creation, and mortality in the book of Qohelet have gathered significant scholarly interest, and the resultant in-depth studies of these topics have also touched upon the theme of time. This corpus of academic work provides an excellent resource for the study of time-related issues in Qohelet, but time should also be singled out as a theme of study in its own right. Given the significance of the time-thematic in the book of Qohelet, a study which focuses on time specifically is needed to draw together the insights presented piecemeal in earlier research, as well as to investigate Qohelet's discussion of time as a whole.

This book explores the overall conception of time in the book of Qohelet—in terms of the human present, past, and future, as well as in terms of cosmic temporal realities. A particular focus is Qohelet's discussion of humanity's cognitive engagement with time. In the course of the analysis I present close readings of a series of passages in which the theme of time is especially prominent.

The book is structured as follows: Chapter 1 considers some pertinent issues regarding structure, composition, and date. The book of Qohelet is famously contradictory and beset by compositional problems. Deciding how to engage with these issues is a necessary first step for any analysis of the book. Chapter 2 discusses the state of scholarship regarding time in the Hebrew Bible. In particular, I examine the linguistically focused approaches which have been dominant in the field. Chapter 3 offers a close reading of the framing poems in Qohelet 1:4–11 and 12:1–7. These poems describe human existence and cosmic reality in temporal terms and establish in an explicit manner Qohelet's basic conception of time. An excursus considers the wind and sun imagery in the book, and how this imagery is used to describe the temporal reality of both world and human being.

Chapter 4 discusses Qohelet's perception of the present, focusing especially on the human attempt to understand current life-conditions. Human society as it is embedded in the temporal order is also explored. Chapter 5 investigates the connections between the present and the wider horizons of past and future. In particular, I consider how Qohelet engages with these temporal dimensions, given his repeated claim that they are inaccessible to the human mind. Chapter 6 focuses more

specifically on three narratives in the book which all purport to be stories about the past. I discuss what happens on a content level, as well as on the structural plane, when Qohelet attempts to tell stories about a past to which he argues that we have no access.

During the course of this study I hope to show that Qohelet's exploration of time and temporal experience provides an excellent lens through which one may engage with this literary work. Focusing on the discussion of time in the book of Qohelet enables the reader to consider how this book approaches the largest structures in human life which shape both our daily activity and our most basic conditions of life.

1

Structure and Composition: Can the Book of Qohelet Be Read?

> Now a book lives as long as it is unfathomed. Once it is fathomed it dies at once. It is an amazing thing, how utterly different a book will be, if I read it again after five years. Some books gain immensely, they are a new thing. They are so astonishingly different, they make a man question his own identity.
>
> D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse*

In this study the book of Qohelet is treated as one composition with only a few later additions.[1] My assumption is that its exploration of time can be analysed as a whole, albeit a whole in which tensions and contradictions are embedded. Given this starting point, the contradictions found at the very core of the book must be addressed, necessitating a brief discussion of its structure and compositional history. First, I turn briefly to the question of the book's date.

1.1. THE QUESTION OF DATE

This study shares the majority view that the book of Qohelet is most likely to have been written in the third century BCE.[2] The *terminus ad*

[1] It is very likely that 1:1 and the epilogue in 12:9–14 have been added secondarily to the original book. The case for 7:27 being secondary is also strong, even if this assumption is not absolutely necessary. The switch to third-person narration sits uneasily in the context and is likely to fulfil a specific function within the book's narrative strategy, be a mistake, or indicate later redaction.

[2] Among the many scholars supporting this dating are T. Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), p. 19; H. Spieckermann, 'Suchen

quem can be established with a high degree of certainty as Ben Sira quotes Qohelet and fragments of the book have been discovered at Qumran. It is somewhat more difficult to pinpoint the earliest possible date of composition. The strongest arguments marshalled in support of a third-century dating are linguistic in nature. It is generally accepted that Qohelet's Hebrew contains features of syntax as well as form which are primarily known from late biblical Hebrew. The work also displays forms known from Mishnaic Hebrew. Furthermore, scholars appeal to the presence in the book's language of both Aramaisms and Persian words.[3]

In addition to the linguistic arguments, more theological-philosophical reasons for a third-century date have been suggested. These have focused in particular on the potential Greek/Hellenistic influence on the book of Qohelet, stressing both the book's form and its content. For example, Braun argues that Qohelet was familiar with the Greek philosophical tradition of his time, and that he was heavily influenced by it.[4] He points in particular to the sophists, the cynics, the cyrenaics, and the sceptical tradition as possible influences upon Qohelet.[5] Differently, Ranston argues that the early Greek wisdom literature, especially Theognis, was an important influence upon the intellectual context of Qohelet's author.[6] It is very difficult to prove the presence of specific philosophical influences on the book and it is telling that there is no agreement as to which Greek sources may have provided the inspiration for the author of Qohelet. Even if no direct influence from specific Greek sources can be detected, however, it remains valid to assume that the author of Qohelet was to some

und Finden: Kohelets kritische Reflexionen', *Biblica*, no. 79.3 (1998), p. 311; L. G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 193; M. V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), p. 151; R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), p. 20; and R. Gordis, *Koheleth, the Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 67.

[3] S. Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), presents a useful overview of these different features (see p. 36).

[4] R. Braun, *Kohelet und die frühhellenistische Popularphilosophie* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1973), p. 170.

[5] Braun, *Kohelet*, p. 168.

[6] Ranston does not think that the author of Qohelet had himself read much Greek literature however. See especially H. Ranston, *Ecclesiastes and the Early Greek Wisdom Literature* (London: Sharp, 1925), pp. 149–50.

extent influenced by the general, intellectual climate of his day. He may have dialogued, more or less explicitly, with popular, contemporary notions. However, we are then, once again, dependent on linguistic arguments in order to identify the period in which the book was written—and the intellectual climate with which it may have engaged.

A few scholars have argued against the mainstream consensus, prominently Fredericks who seeks to date Qohelet to the exilic period or earlier still.[7] He argues against the common scholarly interpretation of the book's language features, claiming that these are insufficient as criteria to establish a third-century date. He maintains that since the book of Qohelet is the only book of its kind in terms of genre, one must expect to find in its language 'a certain degree of singularity'.[8] This, he argues, can explain some features which are usually considered indicative of late biblical Hebrew. Given the unique character of the book, Fredericks finds it unsurprising, for example, that the author of Qohelet frequently uses the participle for the present tense, and that he often makes use of nouns with *-ôn* and *-ûth*-terminations.[9]

[7] D. C. Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language: Re-Evaluating Its Nature and Date* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), pp. 262–3. Seow too argues in favour of an earlier date for the book of Qohelet, connecting it to the monetary revolution in the late Achaemenid period. In addition to linguistic arguments, he appeals to aspects of the book's content, in particular its 'curious preoccupation with economic matters, which suggests that Qoheleth was addressing a particular environment' (C. L. Seow, 'Theology When Everything Is Out of Control', *Interpretation*, no. 55.3 (2001), p. 239). Seow cites a number of verses which fit this historical situation (for instance 5:11, 13–14, 10:5–7, 19). However, the examples of societal and political situations cited by Seow remain general in character and may equally well reflect the political and economic situation of a later period. For Seow's linguistic argument, see further C. L. Seow, 'Linguistic Evidence and the Dating of Qoheleth', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, no. 115.4 (1996), pp. 643–66. For more on the socio-historical situation of the author as Seow understands it, see C. L. Seow, 'The Social World of Ecclesiastes', in *Scribes, Sages, and Seers: The Sage in the Eastern Mediterranean World*, edited by L. G. Perdue (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck/Ruprecht, 2008), pp. 189–217.

[8] Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language*, p. 28.

[9] He finds it equally unproblematic that the use of the *waw-consecutive* in the book is very sparse. Fredericks argues that since Qohelet is a quasi-philosophical book, rather than a standard Hebrew Bible narrative, the *waw-consecutive*'s absence is not all that surprising (*Qoheleth's Language*, pp. 29–30). However, even if one does not read the whole of Qohelet as a narrative text, it undeniably contains narrative sections—prominently the royal fiction in 1:12ff.—and here too the *waw-consecutive* is lacking.

Furthermore, Fredericks notes the presence in Qohelet of Hebrew language elements often considered to be dialect features of North Israelite language.[10] This is not a peripheral point, he argues: 'grammatical and lexical parallels with North Israelite take on even greater relevance . . . since all but one of them . . . have been associated with LBH or MH in previous studies'.[11] Thus, some of Qohelet's language traits which we see as indicative of a late date could in reality be dialect features of an earlier period.

Finally, Fredericks argues that the book of Qohelet contains a vernacular element. Since some of the features which he considers North Israelite occur outside of North Israelite texts as well, he suggests that they 'might better be explained as vernacular Hebrew'.[12] His hypothesis is that Mishnaic Hebrew may have been used as a vernacular alongside Aramaic. Should this be the case, he finds it plausible that this vernacular would 'resemble a vernacular of an earlier age rather than the literary form of BH'.[13] Thus, what looks like features of Mishnaic Hebrew in Qohelet may actually indicate, rather, that the author makes use of the vernacular of his time, some features of which were later retained in spoken and written Mishnaic Hebrew.[14] While this is a possible hypothesis, dating the book of Qohelet on the basis of a vernacular to which we have extremely limited access is problematic.[15] Without sufficient, extant sources it is almost impossible to disprove the presence of such vernacular elements in the book of Qohelet. Equally, however, until an exhaustive

[10] See Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language*, pp. 32–3, for a full list of these features, and pp. 34–5 for their occurrence in the book of Qohelet.

[11] Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language*, p. 35.

[12] Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language*, p. 42.

[13] Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language*, p. 44.

[14] Somewhat similarly, Alter argues in the preface to his Pentateuch translation that 'rabbinic Hebrew was built upon an ancient vernacular that for the most part had been excluded from the literary language used for the canonical texts' (R. Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: a Translation with Commentary* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2004), p. xxx). However, he notes on the same page that there is 'no way of plotting a clear chronology of the evolution of rabbinic Hebrew from an older vernacular, no way of determining how far back in the biblical period various elements of rabbinic language may go'. And he states further that 'Whatever conclusions we may draw about the stylistic level of biblical Hebrew are a little precarious because we of course have no record of the ancient spoken language' (p. xxviii).

[15] Additionally, spoken language tends to be more, not less, innovative than the contemporary written language. Of course, spoken language may contain archaisms, but this is not usually one of the features that *distinguish* it from written language.

socio-linguistics of biblical Hebrew has been written, Fredericks's assumptions regarding the Hebrew vernacular and Qohelet's possible use of it remain unproven.[16]

Fredericks thoroughly investigates all instances of supposedly late language in Qohelet individually, but he fails to engage with the cumulative evidence of Qohelet's language usage in a convincing manner.[17] Even if individual words and instances of syntax can be connected to earlier stages of Hebrew, an earlier date remains less likely if it requires a number of different explanations to account for the many examples of what appear to be features of late biblical Hebrew.

1.2. CONTRADICTION AND BROKEN STRUCTURE

The contradictory, unresolved nature of the book of Qohelet has both irked and fascinated its academic readers. Much ink has been spilled debating whether it is even conceivable that a third-century author would have been able to write a work so dominated by contradiction. The most frequent judgment in the first half of the twentieth century was that this was unlikely. Seeking to explain the character of the book as we now have it, researchers therefore argued that Qohelet must have gone through a fairly extensive process of redaction. McNeile's discussion of Qohelet's compositional scheme is a good example of such redaction-critical work.[18] Initially, McNeile assumed, a representative for traditional wisdom added proverbial

[16] A convincing apology for the need of a socio-linguistics for Biblical Hebrew is presented by W. M. Schniedewind, 'Prolegomena for the Sociolinguistics of Classical Hebrew', *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, no. 5.6 (http://www.jhsonline.org/cocoon/JHS/a036.html, 2004), paragraphs 1–7.

[17] Similarly, Schoors states that 'When one isolated linguistic feature does not allow us to ascribe a later date to Qoh's language, because that would be begging the question, such a feature can have some importance, when taken together with other ones in a general picture' (A. Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words: A Study in the Language of Qoheleth. Part 1. Grammar* (Leuven: Peeters, 1992), p. 15). Schoors also notes, however, that Fredericks's analysis 'has been carried out with great accuracy' and he admits that 'the situation of those defending a post-exilic date of Qoh's language has now become more complicated'.

[18] This scheme is a simplification of Siegfried's which operates with no less than six different layers of redaction, see D. C. Siegfried, *Prediger und Hoheslied übersetzt und erklärt,* Handkommentar zum Alten Testament, edited by D. W. Nowack (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1898), pp. 6–12.

material to the original book. While some proverbs were supplied in order to correct problematic tenets of Qohelet's thought, others appear to have been inserted at random. This first redactor also authored the epilogue in 12:11ff.[19] A second redactor, a *hasid*, attempted to bring the book into line with mainstream religious views, adding material centred on the duty of fearing God, as well as on God's judgment upon those who fail to do so.[20] Finally, a third redactor added 1:1 and possibly the first part of the epilogue, 12:9–10.[21]

If this reconstruction is correct, one may well feel that the redactors have not been very successful. In many passages they have failed to create a flawless whole—the book has quite manifestly not been transformed into an orthodox piece of work.[22] Instead, irreconcilable tensions have been introduced in the material, threatening to consume the message of both author and redactor(s). Equally well, though, one could argue that occasionally the text seems to fit together too effortlessly. As Barton states about Qohelet 11:9–12:14, 'it is hard to feel much confidence that one really is reconstructing an earlier stage in the history of a text, when the finished product reads so smoothly'.[23] Furthermore, it is problematic for McNeile's hypothesis that the original author's sceptical reflections are frequently given the final word.[24] One may also ask, as Fox does, why the redactor would at all wish to preserve such problematic statements as, for instance, 8:9–10 and 8:14, or indeed the original book itself.[25]

[19] A. H. McNeile, *An Introduction to Ecclesiastes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904), pp. 22–3.

[20] McNeile, *An Introduction*, p. 24.

[21] See also the useful overview of McNeile's reconstruction in J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study. Revised and Enlarged* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p 64.

[22] A further and very useful caution is given by Newsom, who argues that accounts of compositional history to some extent remain *heuristic fictions*, rather than unproblematic, historical reconstructions. More than anything else, they offer ways of reading the book which, if successful, solve problems that plague other reading models (C. A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 16).

[23] Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, p. 73.

[24] So Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, pp. 24–5. McNeile may have noticed this potential complication himself when he comments that the *hasid*-redactor has added his correctives directly to Qohelet's own remarks, at times even separating different clauses of an argument in the process (*An Introduction*, p. 24).

[25] See Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, p. 25. Against this objection, it is entirely possible to argue that such a pattern of redaction would not be unique to Qohelet within the biblical tradition.

Our understanding of Qohelet's genre, as well as which literary traits we consider permissible within the genre boundaries, inevitably influences our evaluation of redaction-critical approaches such as McNeile's. As Barton writes,

> we are confronted with the question how this work should be read, and hence with the question of genre . . . Scholars who take the work to be substantially unified do not see any great problem in a book that contains both radical questioning of traditional religious values and more or less unquestioning acceptance of them.[26]

Barton notes the presence of such contradiction, though to a lesser extent, in the book of Proverbs.[27] One may add that the book of Job—though aided in its presentation of differing voices and opinions by its character as a dialogic text—demonstrates a similar tolerance of contradiction. A useful extra-biblical example of a text with an undeniably contradictory character is the Babylonian *Dialogue of Pessimism*[28] which repeatedly presents opposite viewpoints only to affirm them both. The *Dialogue* too engages critically with traditional wisdom, albeit with conclusions different from the book of Qohelet.[29] Finally, while not dominated as explicitly by tensions as either Qohelet or the *Dialogue of Pessimism*, it is worth noting that the author of the *Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh*[30] effortlessly brings together reflections on death and ephemerality with an invitation to enjoy life as it has been given to human beings, as well as with exhortations to submit to the will of the gods.[31] On a more general level, Newsom

[26] Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, pp. 64–5.

[27] For an in-depth discussion of the contradictions in the book of Proverbs, see P. T. H. Hatton, *Contradiction in the Book of Proverbs: The Deep Waters of Counsel* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

[28] See translation and commentary in W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 139–49, as well as the newer translation by B. R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda: CDL Press, 2005), pp. 923–6.

[29] Greenstein compares the two works explicitly, focusing on their use of irony and humour (E. L. Greenstein, 'Sages with a Sense of Humour: The Babylonian Dialogue between the Master and His Servant and the Book of Qoheleth', in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel*, edited by R. P. R. Murray (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), pp. 55–65).

[30] See A. R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), for translation and commentary.

[31] See also W. P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2000), pp. 2–7.

stresses in connection with her analysis of Job the limitations to our understanding of ancient texts, including their exploitation of genre expectations and use of intertextuality. Knowing only part of the literary corpus and not sharing the same cultural background as the ancient reader we cannot fully 'appreciate how a particular text may be commenting upon or inflecting the generic repertoire'.[32]

If Qohelet is to be read as a literary whole, one must consider how best to approach its contradictions. Newer readings often deem them integral to the book's composition.[33] One benefit of this approach is its recognition that the book's contradictions and inconsistencies are built deeply into its literary fabric. For example, individual pieces of imagery are used contrastingly in different sections (such as, for instance, צל in 6:12 and 7:12). Numerous pericopes are consistent when read on their own, but prove incompatible with the argument in other sections of the book.[34]

The strategy of some interpreters has been to suggest that the contradictions in the book are not as stark as would initially appear. For instance, Greenstein engages with Qohelet's contradictory statements about the value of wisdom by arguing that although Qohelet attacks wisdom harshly and demonstrates that its teachings form a corpus of largely contradictory advice, he still assigns it a relative, practical value.[35] This type of approach to the book's contradictions attempts to reconcile them through a harmonization of the material.[36] Unfortunately, however, the textual evidence does not

[32] Newsom, *The Book of Job*, p. 15. See pp. 14–15 for a fuller discussion.

[33] For instance, B. L. Berger, 'Qohelet and the Exigencies of the Absurd', *Biblical Interpretation*, no. 9.2 (2001), pp. 141–79, and Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*. Schellenberg argues that attributing the book's contradictions to its original author offers the most plausible model for reconstructing its compositional development (A. Schellenberg, *Kohelet* (Zürich: TVZ, 2013), p. 15). This model can explain the presence of contradiction in the book and, perhaps more importantly, allows us to read the contradictions as a purposeful part of the work.

[34] Such as verses 2:1 and 2:10, 8:5–6 and 9:1–2. The book also abounds in internally inconsistent passages, for instance, the eminently contradictory verses 8:10–14.

[35] Greenstein, 'Sages with a Sense of Humour', p. 64.

[36] Worth mentioning in this context is also Hertzberg, who argues that Qohelet structures his arguments in *Zwar-Aber Aussagen*, presenting viewpoints which appear to be true and then modifying them in what we may mistake for contradictory statements (H. W. Hertzberg, *Der Prediger (Qohelet)* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1932), p. 7). Loader's thesis that the book is ordered through a presentation of polar opposites similarly exemplifies this type of research. See J. A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979).