

THE POLITICS OF PESSIMISM
IN ECCLESIASTES

A Social-Science Perspective

by

Mark R. Sneed

Society of Biblical Literature
Atlanta

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INTRODUCTION

Biblical scholars must face reality. In terms of the canon, Qohelet is the “odd book in” as James Crenshaw describes.¹ The book is easily the strangest in the Bible.² It can aptly be described as a “frightening guest . . . in the canon.”³ Gerhard von Rad refers to “the farthest frontier of Jahwism where Ecclesiastes pitched his camp.”⁴ Similarly, C. L. Seow describes the book as being on “the margins of the canon.”⁵ Qohelet’s conception of God is especially troubling for most readers, past and present. Is Qohelet’s deity the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Qohelet never uses the appellation יהוה for God. Qohelet counsels caution: “Guard your steps when you go to the house of God; to draw near to listen is better than the sacrifice offered by fools. . . . Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for god is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few” (5:1–2).⁶ While this counsel mimics the prophets (1 Sam 15:22; Mic 6:6–8; Hos 6:6), what is missing is an intimate relationship with Yahweh. Job makes a similar statement about the transcendence of God (7:11), but the book simultaneously emphasizes God’s immanence (the theophany in chs. 38–41), something that never occurs in Qohelet.

After all of Qohelet’s searching and pondering what is profitable in life, he comes to the conclusion: “So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them

1. James L. Crenshaw, “Odd Book In: Ecclesiastes,” *BRev* 6, no. 5 (1990): 28.

2. See Elias Bickerman, who includes it in his list of strangest books of the Hebrew Bible (*Four Strange Books of the Bible: Jonah, Daniel, Koheleth, Esther* [New York: Schocken, 1967]). James L. Crenshaw, in fact, calls it “the Bible’s strangest book” (*Ecclesiastes* [OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987], 23).

3. Hans-Peter Müller, “Der unheimliche Gast: Zum Denken Kohelets,” *ZTK* 84 (1987): 440.

4. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (trans. D. M. G. Stalker; 2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 1:458.

5. C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 18C; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 4.

6. Unless otherwise indicated, all scriptural citations are from the NRSV (1989).

under the sun” (8:15). This represents Qohelet’s famous recurring *carpe diem* ethic found seven times in the book (2:24; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:7–10). The Hebrew word for “commend” (שָׁחַח) is usually used for praising God. Regarding this, Martin Rose states:

What is said here seems meager compared to the great confessions of Israel. But what would one further say of this God who had not saved either Judah or Israel from national disaster, who had allowed his temple at Jerusalem to be destroyed, who had delivered the king, his anointed, his messiah, to the hostile power of the Babylonians and who had sent his people into exile and slavery. Here emerges the theme of the “hidden God,” of “*deus absconditus*,” and even after the Babylonian exile, there is no resplendent revival, nor any powerful manifestation of this God.⁷ (my translation)

Similarly, in 1930 the famous Scandinavian scholar Johannes Pedersen said of Qohelet’s deity, “Very nearly God is a power hostile to humans. The God of ancient Israel, king, protector of his people outside, guardian of its moral forces inside, has become a far and indifferent despot” (my translation).⁸ Another Scandinavian scholar, Aarre Lauha, puts it quite succinctly, “Sein Gott ist nicht der Gott des israelitischen Glaubens.”⁹ Similarly, J. A. Loader refers to Qohelet’s deity as a “remote God.”¹⁰

Several scholars have noted that Qohelet’s God appears capricious and despotic in relation to humanity.¹¹ An illustration is found in 6:1–2: “There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy upon humankind: those to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that they lack nothing of all that they desire, yet God does not enable them to enjoy these things, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous ill.” In 3:11, Qohelet describes a creative act upon humankind: “He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds,

7. Martin Rose, “De la ‘crise de la sagesse’ à la ‘sagesse de la crise,’” *RTP* 131 (1999): 133.

8. Johannes Pedersen, “Scepticisme israélite,” *RHPR* 10 (1930): 360.

9. Aarre Lauha, *Kohelet* (BKAT 19; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 17; cf. R. B. Y. Scott, who states, “Such a God is not Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel” (*Proverbs. Ecclesiastes: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* [AB 18; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965], 191).

10. J. A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (BZAW 152; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979), 124.

11. Duncan MacDonald describes Qohelet’s God as “a capricious deity of no moral sense” (*The Hebrew Literary Genius: An Interpretation Being an Introduction to the Reading of the Old Testament* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1933], 213). Cf. Bickerman, who states that Qohelet’s “God was as arbitrary and fickle as Luck” (*Strange Books*, 149).

yet they cannot find out what God had done from the beginning to the end.” Concerning this verse, Crenshaw says:

Whatever it is that God has placed in man’s mind will do him no good, for God . . . has made him incapable of discovering it. Here we are approaching the demonic: this text is not far from others in the ancient Near East describing a god’s jealousy lest human creatures achieve a status or power that threatens the deity, or from those accounts of a divine test with a stacked deck of cards.¹²

He summarizes Qohelet’s conception of the deity by saying, “How perilously close he comes to depicting God as the force behind all things! Indeed, Qoheleth speaks as if God were indifferent power before which we must cower in fear, and often equates God’s will with whatever happens.”¹³

Some scholars have attempted to anesthetize Qohelet’s heterodoxy, but to no avail.¹⁴ It does not take a rocket scientist to perceive the book’s heterodox character. The ancient rabbis were on to this and “sought to suppress the Book of Koheleth because they discovered therein words which savour of heresy” (*Qoh. Rab.* 1:3). The recurring *carpe diem* ethic in the book, which commends the enjoyment of life and making merry, was so troubling for the rabbis with their ascetic fixation on Torah-keeping that they allegorized it: “All the references to eating and drinking in this Book signify Torah and good deeds” (*Qoh. Rab.* 2:24; cf. the Targum [*Tg. Eccl.* 2:24]).¹⁵ The book was canonized but almost ended up in the *genizah* (“storage”), where sacred books

12. James L. Crenshaw, “The Eternal Gospel (Eccl. 3:11),” in *Essays in Old Testament Ethics* (ed. James L. Crenshaw and John T. Willis; New York: Ktav, 1974), 43–44. As Joseph Blenkinsopp notes, “In his commentary Qoheleth accepts that there is a right time for every action, but denies to the human agent the knowledge requisite to act on it” (“Ecclesiastes 3.1–15: Another Interpretation,” *JSOT* 66 [1995]: 61).

13. James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 137.

14. E.g., Franz Delitzsch labels the book “The Song of the Fear of God” (“Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes,” in *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* [ed. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch; trans. M. G. Easton; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950], 6:183); cf. Stephan de Jong, “God in the Book of Qohelet: A Reappraisal of Qohelet’s Place in Old Testament Theology,” *VT* 47 (1997): 154–67; Tilmann Zimmer, *Zwischen Tod und Lebensglück: Eine Untersuchung zur Anthropologie Kohelets* (BZAW 286; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), 25–32, 109–111. A similar attempt is represented by C. L. Seow and his students, who characterize Qohelet as a realist as opposed to a pessimist (*Ecclesiastes*, e.g., ix, 54–69, 344, 370; Douglas B. Miller, “What the Preacher Forgot: The Rhetoric of Ecclesiastes,” *CBQ* 62 [2000]: 220–21).

15. “There is nothing worthwhile for a man except that he eat and drink and enjoy himself *before the people, to obey the commandments of the Lord and to walk in straight paths before Him so that He will do good to him for his labor*” (*Tg. Eccl.* 2:24).

were kept that were not deemed fit for use in the synagogue.¹⁶ The School of Hillel accepted the book as holy, while the School of Shammai rejected it (*m. 'Ed.* 5:3). The former accepted it mainly because it was believed to have been authored by Solomon but also because of the pious gloss that summarizes the book in 12:13: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone.”¹⁷ This gloss, no doubt, was intended to soften the book’s seeming heterodoxy. This effect is indicated in the Talmud, when the sages ultimately accepted the book because “its end is religious teaching” (*b. Šabb.* 30b). Of course, modern fundamentalists and evangelicals largely ignore the book except for this pious gloss and the book’s usefulness at funerals (e.g., 3:1–2). Their suspicions about the rest of the book are accurate, and biblical scholars would do well simply to acknowledge this.

THE BOOK’S SKEPTICISM

Another facet of the book’s disturbing nature is its skepticism about traditional doctrines. While Qohelet is skeptical about a number of things, the most shocking is his questioning of the doctrine of retribution, a fundamental principle underlying the Hebrew faith and especially the wisdom literature. This is the teaching that God punishes or rewards persons depending on their behavior.¹⁸ A pious, righteous lifestyle will be rewarded with success and pros-

16. On the canonization of Qohelet, see R. B. Salters, “Qoheleth and the Canon,” *ExpTim* 86 (1975): 339–42.

17. In this book I assume, as do most current Qohelet experts, that the book is largely the words of Qohelet except for a frame provided by an epilogist (1:1–2 [or 1:1–11]; 7:27 [brief remark]; 12:8–12). Qohelet 12:13–14 is assumed to be the words of a pious glossator distinct from the epilogist. See Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down & A Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 364; Stuart Weeks, *An Introduction to the Study of Wisdom Literature* (T&T Clark Approaches to Biblical Studies; London: T&T Clark, 2010), 71–72; contra Crenshaw, who sees several glosses in the body of the book (2:26a; 3:17a; 8:12–13; 11:9b and possibly others) (*Ecclesiastes*, 48).

18. The Germans have a slightly different conceptualization of this that they call the *Tun–Ergehen–Zusammenhang* (act–consequence nexus), which assumes an almost deistic notion. God has established a natural process whereby good behavior is rewarded in life and bad behavior results in demise. But God is not viewed as directly intervening in the process. See Klaus Koch, “Is There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?” in *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (ed. James L. Crenshaw; IRT 4; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 57–87. Some scholars question the notion of a doctrine of retribution in Proverbs, at least in any rigid sense: Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Wealth and Poverty: System and Contradiction in Proverbs,” *HS* 33 (1992): 25–36; Peter T. H. Hatton, *Contradiction in the Book of Proverbs: The Deep Waters of Counsel* (SOTSMS; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 83–116.

perity, whereas wickedness will result in catastrophe and an early death. This was essentially the principle of cause and effect for the ancients and a form of rationality. This doctrine served as the basis for a sense of order in the universe, so that how one fares in life is not entirely haphazard (cf. Zophar's argument in Job 20). God, the ultimate source of the notion of order in the cosmos, is viewed as intricately involved in the connection between how one lives and how one fares. The doctrine served to reduce somewhat the mysteries of the cosmos and life and to make reality more predictable. This same doctrine is found also in the wisdom literature of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Qohelet questions its traditional formulation: "In my vain life I have seen everything; there are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing" (7:15; cf. 3:16; 8:10, 14). Qohelet's observations create a profound tension for the wisdom corpus because the doctrine was so fundamental for the tradition. Qohelet's closest cousin, the book of Job (e.g. ch. 21), also questions the legitimacy of the doctrine but ends with an orthodox, not heterodox, stance (40:35; 42). J. A. Loader characterizes the different responses of Job and Qohelet to the problem of retribution: "Job answers the problem with a *warm and passionate turning to God and rest in a personal communion with him*. On the other hand Qoheleth coldly answers that the only thing to be done is to accept that anything can happen to man. *There is no rest or communion with God—only a tense acceptance of man's helplessness.*"¹⁹ Of course, skepticism of this doctrine is found also in ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature. But Qohelet's skepticism within a pious religious canon creates more tension than a skepticism that is found among scribal belles lettres, where it might be expected.

Beyond this doctrine, he seems to radically question the connection between behavior and fortune: "Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all" (9:11). One is made to wonder whether he sees any connection at all.

Again, Crenshaw has appropriately referred to the depiction of God in 3:11 as coming close to the demonic.²⁰ Most scholars believe that the reference to God creating everything "good" in its time is an allusion to the P creation account.²¹ Thus, the verse forms a contrast between the positive account of the creation in P and Qohelet's more negative assessment of humanity's conflicted

19. J. A. Loader, "Different Reactions of Job and Qoheleth to the Doctrine of Retribution," in *Studies in Wisdom Literature* (ed. W. C. van Wyk; Old Testament Studies: OTWSA 15, 16; Hercules, South Africa: N. H. W. Press, 1981), 47.

20. Crenshaw, "Eternal Gospel," 43–44.

21. See Lauha, *Kohelet*, 68.

state of desiring to know God's view of eternity and yet never grasping it. Of course, Qohelet's negative characterization of humanity's role in the created order (1:13; 2:22–23; 3:10, 18) certainly clashes with its role in P's account (and also the Psalms, e.g., Ps 8).

Instead of upholding traditional wisdom's teachings and assumptions, Qohelet appears to be critical of them throughout the book:

Then I said to myself, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also; why then have I been so very wise?" And I said to myself that this also is vanity. For there is no enduring remembrance of the wise or of fools, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How can the wise die just like fools? (2:15–16)

When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how one's eyes see sleep neither day nor night, then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out. (8:16–17)

The degree of Qohelet's skepticism about the assumptions of traditional wisdom has caused German scholars to refer to it as a crisis of the wisdom movement, which is often seen to correlate with traumatic events.²² Hans-Peter Müller speaks of a "Neige" or decline of traditional wisdom represented by Qohelet.²³

Though skepticism exists in other places in the canon of the Hebrew Bible (the dialogue in Job, Agur [Prov 30:4], the laments in the Psalter, Lamentations, the prophets, etc.), it is not as systematic, comprehensive, acute, and final as in Qohelet.²⁴ Von Rad cites some other instances of skepticism

22. Frank Crüsemann, "The Unchangeable World: The 'Crisis of Wisdom' in Koheleth," in *God of the Lowly: Socio-Historical Interpretations of the Bible* (ed. Willy Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann; trans. M. J. O'Connell; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984), 57–77; Hartmut Gese, "Die Krisis der Weisheit bei Kohelet," in *Les sagesses du Proche-Orient ancien* (Bibliothèque des centres d'études supérieures spécialisées; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), 139–51; Martin A. Klopfenstein, "Die Skepsis des Kohelet," *TZ* 28 (1972): 102; Hans Heinrich Schmid, *Wesen und Geschichte der Weisheit: Eine Untersuchung zur altorientalischen und israelitischen Weisheitsliteratur* (BZAW 101; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1966), 173; Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period* (trans. John Bowden; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974; repr., Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 1:115; Aarre Lauha, "Die Krise des religiösen Glaubens bei Kohelet," in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (ed. M. Noth and D. Winton Thomas; VTSup 3; Leiden: Brill, 1955), 183–91.

23. Müller, "Der unheimliche Gast," 441; idem, "Neige der althebräischen 'Weisheit': Zum Denken Qohäläts," *ZAW* 90 (1978): 238–63.

24. J. Jonathan Schraub describes the book of Job as "the book of unmitigated heresy," but his interpretation of Job's final statement in 42:6 as protestation is untenable ("For the

about understanding God's ways (Job 28, Prov 30:1–4, and Ps 90), but then concludes, "However, only with the Book of Ecclesiastes did this skepticism emerge broadly based and with a hitherto unheard of radicality and weight."²⁵ Compare the words of Martin Shields:

The supposed tradition of skepticism or expressions of doubt elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible are not nearly as incessant or unremitting as the words of Qoheleth. . . . The simple truth is that, in spite of the existence of some expressions of doubt elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, there is none that matches Qoheleth's words for a sustained denial of faith and doubt in the goodness of God.²⁶

THE BOOK'S PESSIMISM

While pessimism is not necessarily a correlative of skepticism, in Qoheleth they seem to be closely connected, as if two sides of the same coin. For example, in the passage cited above (2:15–16), Qoheleth's questioning of the value of traditional wisdom leads him to a pessimistic conclusion. Though he views wisdom as more valuable than folly, death essentially vitiates its superiority, and because of this Qoheleth says he hates life (2:17). The inclusion that frames the book ("Vanity of vanities . . . all is vanity") (1:2; 12:8) reinforces this. The concept of nothingness or uselessness dominates the book. The word for "vanity" (הֶבֶל) is onomatopoeic and literally means "breath" or "wind," connoting more abstractly the notion of emptiness or nothingness and also fleetingness.²⁷ It often signifies the futility of human effort (e.g., 2:11) and its conjunction with the frequently occurring "chasing after the wind" (seven times) further demonstrates this sense of futility, certainly a characteristic of pessimism. It is also the dominant motif of the book (seventy-three times) and its final conclusion.²⁸ The pessimistic declaration that everything is empty or futile or fleeting is directed more broadly at any human effort or toil or striving, and not just at the aspiration of the wisdom tradition, which seeks to grasp the order of the cosmos and essentially master it. It is devastatingly deconstructive of human ambition of any kind.

Sin We Have Committed by Theological Rationalizations: Rescuing Job from Normative Religion," *Sound* 86, nos. 3–4 [Fall/Winter 2003]: 431–62.

25. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:454.

26. Martin A. Shields, *The End of Wisdom: A Reappraisal of the Historical and Canonical Function of Ecclesiastes* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 5.

27. On its onomatopoeic character, see K. Seybold, "הֶבֶל *hebel*," *TDOT* 3:314.

28. For an intriguing explanation of its function as a symbol that unites the book, see Douglas B. Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qoheleth's Work* (Academia Biblica 2; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002).

Many scholars assume that Qohelet's pessimism actually springs from his skepticism.²⁹ Crenshaw, who labels Qohelet both skeptic and pessimist, puts it this way:

Once skeptics lose all hope of achieving the desired transformation, pessimism sets in, spawning sheer indifference to cherished convictions. Pessimists believe chaos has the upper hand and will retain control forever; they lack both a surge for transcendence and faith in human potential. Since they own no vision which acts as a corrective to the status quo, pessimists can muster no base upon which to stand and from which to criticize God and the world. The inevitable result is a sense of being overwhelmed by an oppressive reality.³⁰

But whatever the relationship of pessimism to skepticism, they are obviously connected.

A major component of Qohelet's pessimism relates to his brooding over death. Qohelet appears obsessed with this topic (2:14–16; 3:2, 18–21; 4:2–3; 7:1–4; 9:2–6; 12:5–7).³¹ Again, Job treats this topic (7:6–10; 14:1–17; 17:13–16) but does not devote the attention to it that Qohelet does. As Qohelet discusses death, he becomes quite poignant about its seeming injustice and gloomy prospects. About the wise and righteous, he says:

Everything that confronts them is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an oath. This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone. . . . But whoever is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished; never again will they have any share in all that happens under the sun. (9:1b–6)

29. John F. Priest says, "Koheleth's skepticism is complete because he has lost all sense of any inner dynamic to history which might transcend the apparent present contradiction of the principles enunciated by religion and wisdom. This loss of the possibility of any meaning in history is what turns his skepticism into pessimism" ("Humanism, Skepticism, and Pessimism in Israel," *JAAR* 36 [1968]: 324). Cf. William H. U. Anderson, "Philosophical Considerations in a Genre Analysis of Qoheleth," *VT* 48 (1998): 295–97; Charles F. Forman, "The Pessimism of Ecclesiastes," *JSS* 3 (1958): 336–43.

30. James L. Crenshaw, "The Birth of Skepticism in Ancient Israel," in *The Divine Helmsman: Studies in God's Control of Human Events* (ed. James L. Crenshaw and Samuel Sandmel; New York: Ktav, 1980), 1–2.

31. The best discussion of Qohelet's view of death is Shannon Burkes's *Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period* (SBLDS 170; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999).

Though some have argued that the recurrent *carpe diem* ethic found throughout the book is its real message and, thus, that the book is not ultimately pessimistic, this seems rather apologetic.³² The dark, somber melancholic mood of the book cannot be eclipsed by the brief and faint light expressed by this motif. Though he states it in the extreme, Crenshaw rightly detects the dark side to Qoheleth's ethic:

Qoheleth's positive counsel has little cause for exhilaration. The advice invariably occurs within contexts which emphasize life's vanity and attendant inequities, as well as those which stress God's control over human ability to enjoy life. Qoheleth's concept of divine gift is an expression for human limitation rather than an extolling of a generous God. The sources of pleasure—woman, wine, food, clothes, ointment, toil, and youth—are empty like life itself. In the end none accompanies the dead to Sheol.³³

While pessimism is found in other places in the canon of the Hebrew Bible (Job 3, Lamentations, the laments in the Psalter, etc.), again, it is not as systematic, comprehensive, acute, and final as in Qoheleth. The book, aside from its frame narrative (1:1–2; 12:8–12) and pious gloss (12:13–14), is consistently pessimistic. As John F. Priest has said, “The skepticism of Koheleth ends, however much some commentators cry to the contrary, as pessimism pure and simple.”³⁴

With this being the case, it is no wonder that Hebrew Bible theologians do not quite know what to do with the book; it is often ignored.³⁵ It is not con-

32. R. N. Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” *JSOT* 23 (1982): 87–98; idem, *Ecclesiastes* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 24–28; Robert Gordis, *Koheleth—The Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes* (3rd ed.; New York: Schocken, 1968), 124; Graham Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Readings: A New Biblical Commentary; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 14–15, 21–22. Some scholars argue that Qoheleth's pessimistic thoughts are used in irony as a foil for his theme of joy: Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), 176–95; Timothy Polk, “The Wisdom of Irony: A Study of *Hebel* and Its Relation to Joy and the Fear of God in Ecclesiastes,” *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 6 (1976): 3–17; Roland E. Murphy, “The ‘Pensée’ of Coheleth,” *CBQ* 17 (1955): 304–14. William H. U. Anderson, to the contrary, considers the possibility that the *carpe diem* ethic is in fact ironic and not really Qoheleth's solution to the problem (“Philosophical Considerations,” 294; idem, “Ironic Correlations and Scepticism in the Joy Statements of Qoheleth?” *JSOT* 14 [2000]: 68–100).

33. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 144.

34. Priest, “Humanism, Skepticism, and Pessimism,” 323–24.

35. For example, in a very thick anthology on Old Testament theology, references to Qoheleth were found on only one page (Ben C. Ollenburger, Elmer A. Martens, and Gerhard F. Hasel, eds., *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology: A Reader in Twentieth-Century Old Testament Theology, 1930–1990* [Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 1; Winona

sidered normative for Hebrew Bible theology. It merely occupies the negative and secondary role of corrective for traditional wisdom or the demonstration of wisdom's liabilities.³⁶ From this perspective, the book itself offers no positive message or contribution of its own.

Thus, Qohelet really is a "frightening guest" in the canon of the Hebrew Bible. How could a book so skeptical and pessimistic have become part of the Hebrew Bible? How could any Jew have accepted the book as divinely inspired? Why was the book ever preserved in the first place? What possible function did it have in the original community for which it was written? What possible function does the book have now in the canon of the Hebrew Bible? What made the author pessimistic and skeptical? How does one ultimately explain the dissonance the book creates within the canon?

These questions are all related and eventually lead to and revolve around the most critical and pressing issue in understanding the book: its canonicity. Shields provides a cogent and concise description of this problem:

Although Qoheleth's words exhibit a predominantly negative assessment of life, an assessment due largely to the inevitability of death, and although he sometimes appears to contradict himself, it is not these aspects of the book that are puzzling. It is, after all, not difficult to produce a text that has any or all of these features. What is most perplexing about Ecclesiastes is that a text of this sort is incorporated within a collection of writings that speak of a God who reveals and redeems, who chooses people and cares for them—themes not only absent from Qoheleth's words but frequently irreconcilable with them.³⁷

In spite of this, the majority of modern commentators spend very little time addressing the problem of Ecclesiastes' inclusion in the Bible, and when they do, the reasons offered are largely unconvincing. I will offer an interpretation of Ecclesiastes that both acknowledges the unorthodox nature of Qohelet's words and manages to account for its acceptance among the canonical books of the Hebrew Bible.

Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1992], 540). In Bernhard W. Anderson's *Contours of Old Testament Theology* ([Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999], 282–84), it gets only three pages.

36. Brevard Childs says, "Indeed Koheleth's sayings do not have an independent status, but function as a critical corrective, much as the book of James serves in the New Testament as an essential corrective to misunderstanding the Pauline letters" (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979], 588). Walther Zimmerli argues that Qohelet's value is in its assessment of the wisdom tradition as incomplete and insufficient ("The Place and Limit of the [*sic*] Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology," *SJT* 17 [1964]: 157–58).

37. Shields, *End of Wisdom*, 1.

Shields is absolutely right in his assessment. Explaining away Qohelet's heterodoxy is the wrong, though popular, solution. Rather, embracing the book's heterodoxy, while simultaneously seeking the reasons why the book was still included in the canon is the only legitimate way to resolve this issue. Although Shields is to be applauded for his ability to discern succinctly the real issue and the way to resolve it, his own solution is faulty.³⁸ In this book, the issue will be tackled from a sociological perspective, which will be truly illuminating. But before this can be done, a review of the various explanations for the pessimistic and skeptical character of the book must be presented.

38. Shields counterintuitively argues that the frame narrator preserved Qohelet's words in order to provide a young audience an example of the bankruptcy of the wisdom tradition. While this is a possibility, it does not explain why one would go to the trouble to do that when a direct confrontation would have been more effective.