ECCLESIASTES
PART I: AUTHORSHIP

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AUTHORSHIP

Jewish tradition assumes that the Book of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) was penned by Solomon. One finds in chapter 15 of *Seder Olam Rabbah* that Solomon wrote three books, *Proverbs*, *Song of Songs*, and *Kohelet*, the last in his old age.[1] *Midrash Kohelet Rabbati* (chapter 1) reinforces the link between Kohelet and Solomon by positing that Kohelet was one of Solomon's names, although there is no biblical evidence to support this view.[2]

The first Jewish commentator to deny Solomonic authorship of the Book of Kohelet was Luzzatto.[3] In what is purportedly an introduction to a commentary on Kohelet written 36 years earlier but not published, Luzzatto argues that the book was written after the Babylonian exile by a man called Kohelet. The true author ascribed the book to Solomon to invest it with authority. The contemporary sages, who knew the author, substituted his name for that of Solomon, but left "son of David, king in Jerusalem" in order to shame the impostor.[4]

Modern scholars mostly view Kohelet 1:12-2:11 as a "royal fiction" or "royal parody," in which the author adopts the vestiges of Solomon. Seow convincingly demonstrates that the autobiographical language in Kohelet is typical of West Semitic and Akkadian royal inscriptions.[5] Imitating these inscriptions, Kohelet highlights his personal achievements as if he were a king. The pretense was meant to buffer his stature as a wise person of means who could have engaged in the experiments he describes. This approach does not explain why the pretense was not carried to its natural full course and why the rather enigmatic name Kohelet was used.[6]

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Modern scholarship admits the tension between allusions to Solomon and the obviously late date of composition. In Barton's view, "No one at all familiar with the course of religious thought in Israel, as scientific historical study has accurately portrayed it, could for a moment ascribe the work to Solomon."[7] Indeed, as already noted by Jahn, "Solomon could scarcely complain so bitterly concerning oppressions, the unrighteous acts of judges, and the elevation of fools and slaves to high honors, to the neglect of rich and the noble, unless he wished to write a satire on himself."[8]

In particular, extensive linguistic analysis of the Kohelet text denies its authorship to Solomon. The language of the book belongs to the latest stage of linguistic development attested in the Tanakh.[9] Older Hebrew forms and constructions occur in it, changed or confused, and late linguistic developments similar to those in the Mishnah are present. The text contains many Aramaic words and constructions as well as two Persian words (*pardes* in 2:5 and *pitgam* in 8:11).[10] Kohelet's language seems to reflect the transitional stage between late Biblical Hebrew and early Mishnaic Hebrew, and consequently the book is dated to the third century BCE.[11]

Already a century ago, Barton wrote "The fact that Solomon is not the author, but is introduced as a literary figure, has become such an axiom of the present-day interpretation of the book, that no extended argument is necessary to prove it."[12] This situation prevails to this day.

DATE

While opinion is unanimous that Kohelet's book was one of the latest in the Hebrew Bible, commentators are divided as to whether it was written in the Persian or Greek period.[13] There is now a consensus that the book should be assigned a Ptolemaic provenance (301-198 BCE).

My exegetical research on Kohelet supports the dating of the book to the Ptolemaic period. I find that many difficult verses in this book can be reasonably well interpreted assuming a Ptolemaic provenance. Understanding that Kohelet was apprehensive about the economic and administrative changes taking place in Judea, and the impact of Hellenism on the Jewish tradition, provides a useful framework for explaining his concern with spying,[14] risky investments,[15] divulging information,[16] and his insistence on the fear of God.[17]

Such dating would also be in accord with the sense of despondency and fear conveyed in the Book of Kohelet. Stuart rightly sensed that the author describes an atmosphere of ". . . general gloom that overspread all ranks and conditions in life. Wherever the writer turns his eyes, he sees little except vexation and disappointment and suffering. So deeply are all these things impressed on him, that even the joyous youth is cautioned by him not to rely, for a moment, on the endurance of any good. . . . he sees before him, on all sides, innumerable proofs of the frailty, the vanity, and uncertainty of human life and human endeavors; and also the utter impossibility of effecting any substantial change for the better."[18]

Assuming that the individual who wrote the Book of Kohelet lived in the Greek period, what else can be said about him? It will be argued in this paper that Kohelet was neither a teacher nor a preacher of wisdom, as is commonly accepted. Moreover, the book before us is not the coherent creation of a single author, and it was not meant to instruct the young of Jerusalem's elite. Kohelet should be perceived as a wise Judean patrician in Jerusalem who discussed with his peers topics of interest to people of their stature. The Book of Kohelet may perhaps have evolved from the notes Kohelet prepared for these meetings and may encapsulate the conclusions that were reached there.

THE PERSON

Prima facie, from the text, these three characteristics can be deduced about the person called Kohelet in the Hebrew Bible. Kohelet was apparently a rich man, learned and wise, who lived in Jerusalem.

His students are nowhere mentioned and the book does not contain the term *beni* (my son), which a *hakham* would typically use to address his student.[19] The didactic tenor of various passages in the book can be understood as the advice he would have given to the parents of young men rather than instruction of students. Kohelet probably shared his thoughts with people of similar rank for whom the advice given to the younger generation was of interest and a topic of frequent discussion. Additionally, since the book lacks elementary logical sequencing, it cannot be regarded as instructional material.

Unfortunately, little is known about daily life in Judea during the Ptolemaic period.[20] Scholars usually extrapolate backwards the information available from the Seleucid period and the works of Josephus.[21] Such an extrapolation

suggests that daily life was rather glum. It can be assumed that most of the population in Judea engaged in agricultural activity. The only considerable urban area at that time was Jerusalem, where the high priest represented the Egyptian dynasty of Ptolemy I Soter (305-283 BCE). Judea was administered by a council of elders (*gerousia*, later called the Sanhedrin), which was headed by the high priest, leader of the Temple-based priesthood (*Antiquities* 12.3.3). The most influential members of this society were the priests. Political leadership and land ownership were in the hands of a small group of influential clans.

One may reasonably assume that Judea's land barons maintained a residence in Jerusalem, where they could socialize with their peers, be close to the center of power, and secure influence.[22] Kohelet's observation about the city (8:10) and Temple (4:17 - 5:1) strengthen the impression that he lived in Jerusalem. Full credence can thus be given to the assertion, in the heading of the book, that Kohelet lived in Jerusalem and was a powerful personality there (1:1). He was not a young man when he penned his work, as it takes years to accumulate power and gain stature. The book breathes the wisdom of the experienced, and the poem on aging (12:1-7) suggests that he had become aware of physical deterioration in his old age.

It is likely that Kohelet had a circle of intellectual acquaintances belonging to the Jerusalem aristocracy who were interested in discussing the issues contained in the Book of Kohelet, and he may have led a seminar or "philosophical circle."[23] Jastrow rightly held that "we must picture to ourselves Kohelet as a member of a *circle*, interested in the problems with which the book deals. He gives expression to certain views which he shares with others. What he wrote was spread within a limited range of readers, and if it attracted also the attention of those whose viewpoint was totally different, it was due to the circumstances that the circle to which Kohelet belonged and of which he was in a sense the mouthpiece had acquired sufficient prominence to arouse the opposition of the orthodox and pious."[24]

This circle may have been known as the *kohelet*, a type of *havurah* ("study group"), which was the name the book's author adopted as his *nom de plume*.[25] The personal tone of the book and the fact that it was actually set down in writing suggest that Kohelet played a leading role in this group, while the fact that its members could express unorthodox views[26] points to

the high level of their intellectual ability and social status.[27] There can be little doubt that the Book of Kohelet reflects the viewpoints of Jerusalem's elite.

It does not present the systematic thinking and technical terminology found in a standard philosophical treatise. However, this judgment rests only on the product at hand, which may only record the conclusions of wise individuals.[28] The cost and availability of writing material may also have accorded a secondary role to logic and the flow of argument, preserved perhaps in an oral tradition. The product at hand, offering deep insights in a terse language, must be the basis from which one has to infer the cognitive processes that preceded those insights. The issues that Kohelet addressed, the methodology that he used for investigating them and the profound nature of his conclusions all mark him as a practical philosopher and his work as being of a similar nature.

Finally, the book suggests that Kohelet, in addition to having an acute ability to observe human life, actions, and events, was a moral, practical and religious individual. He was no Epicurean (2:2-3, 10:17-18, but 11:9) or fatalist (7:29), but a God fearing Jewish realist (2:24, 3:11-13, 4:17-5:1, 6, 12:13-14). Living in a time of great personal and national challenges, Kohelet and his *kohelet* circle were very fearful of the dangers that the Ptolemaic regime posed both for them and for the nation.

NOTES

1. *Seder Olam Rabbah* is a second century CE chronology listing the dates of biblical events from the Creation to Alexander the Great's conquest of Persia. Tradition considers it to have been written around 160 CE by Yose ben Halafta (a student of R. Akiva). In the Talmud it is referred to simply as *Seder Olam* (TB *Shabbat* 88a, *Yevamot* 82b, *Nazir* 5a, *Megillah* 11b, *Avodah Zarah* 8b, *Niddah* 46b).

2. The verb *yakhel* (“assembled,” in I Kings 8:1) is hardly evidence for the name Kohelet.

3. S. D. Luzzatto, "Divrei Kohelet – Haqdamah," in Ignaz Blumenfeld, ed., *Ozar Nechmad: Briefe und Abbhandlungen jüdischer Literatur betreffend von den bekanntesten jüdischen Gelehrten,* vol. 3 (Vienna: Knöpflmacher, 1860) pp. 17-25. Luther was the first to question Solomon's authorship of the Book of Kohelet: cf. Martin Luther, *Sämmtliche Werke*, vol. 62 (Frankfurt/Erlangen: Heyder & Zimmer Verlag, 1844) p. 128.

4. Christian D. Ginsburg, *Coheleth* (London: Longman, 1861) pp. 27-99. Ginsburg provides a comprehensive overview of Jewish and Christian scholarship on the Book of Kohelet. The overview covers the period 217 BCE – 1860 CE. He also provides lengthy citations from the various Jewish commentators, illustrating their train of thought.

5. Choon-Leong Seow, "Qohelet's Autobiography," in *Fortunate are the Eyes that See; Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Seventieth Birthday* (Fs. D. N. Freedman), ed. A. Beck et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) p. 275.

6. Robert Gordis, *Koheleth, the Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes* (third ed.; New York: Schocken, 1968) p. 40. Gordis rightly notes: "Had it been the author's intention to palm his work off as the work of Solomon, he would not have used the enigmatic name 'Koheleth,' but would have used the name 'Solomon' directly, as happened time without number in the Pseudepigrapha, roughly contemporaneous with our book."

7. George A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1908) p. 58.

8. Johann Jahn, *Einleitung in die göttlichen Bücher des Alten Bundes*, vol 2 (Vienna: C. F. Wappler, 1793) p. 849.

9. Franz Delitzsch, *Hoheslied und Koheleth* (BKAT4; Leipzig: Dorffling & Franke, 1875) pp. 197-206. Delitzsch compiled a list of nearly 100 words and forms occurring in the Book of Kohelet which are characteristic of an era far later than that of Solomon. Some of the words or forms occur only in later books of the Hebrew Bible; others occur only in the Book of Kohelet and are in common use in Mishnaic Hebrew.

10. Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 52.

11. Diethelm Michel, *Kohelet* (EdF 258; Darmstadt, 1988) pp. 112-115. However, Fredericks challenged the linguistic analysis on which the dating to the Ptolemaic period rested, suggesting an eighth or seventh century BCE date. He does not find late biblical or Mishnaic Hebrew in Kohelet. Cf. D. C. Fredericks, *Qohelet's Language: Re-evaluating its Nature and Date* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1988) pp. 59-60, 102-103, 105, 256-257. Similarly, Anderson says: "The literary intent and message of *Qoheleth* is more appropriate for, and lends itself much more naturally to, a Jewish audience who still has an independent royal court with a wisdom circle – and not one under occupation. Wisdom and *Qoheleth* have the literary purpose and intention to teach practical lessons in life – and in this case it was for a Jewish royal court." Cf. William H. U. Anderson, "The Problematics of the Sitz im Leben of Koheleth." *Old Testament Essays*, 12 (1999) pp. 233-248. However, Hurvitz considers "the view that that Qoheleth's language should be classified as classical/pre-exilic Hebrew is a challenging thesis . . . It cannot be satisfactorily substantiated, however, on the basis of the philological analysis presented by Fredericks." Cf. A. Hurvitz, "Book review of Fredericks, D.C., 1988, *Qohelet's language: Re-evaluating its Nature and Date*," *Hebrew Studies* , 31 (1990) p. 154.

12. Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 58.

13. For instance, Ernst W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: Smith, English & Co., 1869) p. 6, dates Kohelet to the Persian period; C .H. H. Wright, *The Book of Koheleth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1888) p. 136, locates Kohelet some time between 444 and 328 BCE; Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Yale University, 2008) p. 21, dates Kohelet between the second half of the fifth and first half of the fourth century BCE, etc. On the other hand, Gordis (*Koheleth*, p. 67) dates the book to the Greek period, ca. 250 BCE. Crenshaw narrows the timeframe to 250-225 BCE: cf. James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1987) p. 50. In Lohfink's opinion, Kohelet may have been written between 190 and 180 BCE, just before the Macabbean revolt: cf. N. Lohfink, *Kohelet* (NEB; Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1993) pp. 7-9.

14. Jack Pastor, *Land and Economy in Ancient Palestine* (New York: Rutlidge, 1997) p. 36. The Ptolemaic regime established in Judea an extensive network of spies and informers, which was intended to control the population and facilitate tax collection. Pastor notes that spying and informing was a lucrative occupation in those days. I suggest that 4:17-5:2, 8:5-7, 11-14, 10:20-11:1 and 12:12-14 reflect Kohelet's fear of informers and spies and its consequent potentialities.

15. Stephan De Jong, "Qohelet and the Ambitious Spirit of the Ptolemaic Period," *Journal of the Study of the Old Testament*, 61 (1994) p. 90. De Jong observes that "The spirit that blew through the Ptolemaic Empire was one of superiority and optimism. A strong creative urge and a competitive mentality characterized the Ptolemaic aristocrats… The same spirit had reached the Ptolemaic dominion of Judea. In the third century, alongside of the ruling priestly class, a new elite appeared that was open to Hellenistic thoughts and customs." In his view, it is to this audience, imbued with ambitions for power, competitiveness, and material success, that many of Kohelet's warnings are directed. This might be the background for 5:8-10 and 12-16.

16. Aron Pinker, "Intrusion of Ptolemaic Reality on Cultic Practices in Qohelet 4:17 and the Unit to which it belongs," in *Journal of Hebrew Scripture* (2009), vol. 9, art. 21.

17. Although our knowledge of the Ptolemaic period is rather meager and the exact path of Hellenization in Judea during the Ptolemaic period is not clear, it is reasonable to assume that individuals of Kohelet's stature feared the influence of Hellenism on Judaism. They must have seen that the adoption of some Greek cultural elements implied a religious apostasy. This would be a natural reason for Kohelet's insistence on fear of God.

18. Moses Stuart, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1851) p. 71.

19. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 28. Crenshaw writes: "In the process of baring his soul Kohelet runs the risk that someone will question his authority to dare such observations. Others can easily dismiss the opinions of an individual as eccentric or palpably false. To counter this sort of response, an editor invests Kohelet with the authority of the wisest sage of all, King Solomon, and identifies him as a professional teacher who spoke reliable and pleasing words to his students (*bᵉnî*, my son = my student)."

20. Lester L. Grabbe, "The Jews and Hellenization: Hengel and his Critics," in *Second Temple Studies III: Studies in Politics, Class, and Material Culture,* eds. Philip R. Davies and John M. Halligan (JSOT Sup 340; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) p. 54. There is only very fragmentary and sporadic information about the Jews in Palestine and the Diaspora in the period before 175 BCE.

21. Oded Lipschitz, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem: Judah Under Babylonian Rule* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005) p. 146.

22. Gordis, *Koheleth,* p. 28. Gordis writes: "Fundamentally, Wisdom was the product of the upper classes in society, most of the members of which gravitated toward the capital, Jerusalem. Some were engaged in large-scale foreign trade, or were tax-farmers, like the Tobiades. Many were supported by the income of their country estates, which were tilled either by slaves, or by tenant farmers who might have once owned the very fields they now worked as tenants."

23. The existence of such intellectual circles is attested in a later period. We find in TB *Shabbat* 151b and 152b that the Emperor asked R. Joshua ben Hananiah why he did not frequent the house of Abidan, where learned discussions and disputations on religious questions were held.

24. Marcus A. Jastrow, Jr., *A Gentle Cynic, Being a Translation of the Book of Koheleth* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1919) p. 103.

25. Ginsburg (*Coheleth*, 1) notes: "That it [Kohelet] is not a proper name, but an appellative, is evident from its having the article in xii. 8, and especially from its being construed with a feminine verb in vii. 27." Cf. Jastrow, *Cynic*, pp. 62-71. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (TDOT XII, 548) notes that "scholars were increasingly attracted to the literature of early Judaism for synonyms of *qahal*. Among such candidates are: *sod*, *'etsah*, *yahad*, *havurah* and Aramaic *kenishta*". The name *soferet*, which is similar in structure to *kohelet*, occurs in Ezra 2:55 and Neh. 7:57. If Kohelet has been derived from the verb *k-h-l*, it should mean "she that comes together," and would properly apply to a group (*havurah*) of peers. See also Nachman Krochmal's discussion of the authorship of Kohelet, and the meaning of the title "Kohelet" in his *Guide to the Perplexed of the Time*, ed. Simon Rawidowicz, second edition (Waltham: Ararat Press, 1961) p.146.

26. Jastrow, *Cynic*, p. 29. Jastrow writes: "Koheleth is in reality, as we shall see, a most unorthodox production. Its teachings run counter to the conventional beliefs of the times in which it was composed. It offended the pious by its bold skepticism and displeased those who believed in a Creator, who stamped his handiwork with the verdict 'And behold it was good,' by its undisguised, albeit gentle cynicism."

27. Hartmut Gese, "The Crisis of Wisdom in Koheleth," in *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (Issues in Religion and Theology 4; J. L. Crenshaw [ed.]; Philadelphia/London: Fortress/SPCK, 1983) pp. 141-53. Gese identified Kohelet with a crisis of wisdom in Israel. However, if our understanding of the scope of Kohelet's activity is correct, speaking of a "crisis" would appear to be considerably exaggerated.

28. William A. Irwin, "The Hebrews," in *The Intellectual Adventures of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East*, eds. H. Frankfort, H. A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson, Thorkild Jacobson and William A. Irwin (Chicago: Chicago University Press) pp. 234 and 241. Irwin (p. 243) notes that "the Hebrew thinkers, unlike the Greek, commonly left not so much a record of their processes of thought as of their conclusions."