

BOOK REVIEW

Kohelet: A Map to Eden – An Intertextual Journey (Maggid Books, 2023), by David Curwin. 254 pp. Reviewed by Reuven Chaim Klein.

This work is a highly enjoyable and refreshingly original exploration of the Book of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes). David Curwin employs a non-linear approach in his commentary to that book that delves deep into select passages from different parts of Kohelet to provide the reader with a broader and more profound perspective on this notoriously enigmatic biblical text.

One of the book's unique features is its application of a modern midrash methodology developed by Rabbi David Fohrman of Aleph Beta. This methodology focuses primarily on the literal reading of biblical verses, drawing thematic connections between different biblical passages through the appearance of shared keywords. In other words, Curwin is wont to highlight the appearance of certain keywords in two different biblical passages to see common themes related to both contexts. This is loosely similar to the hermeneutical device known in the Talmud as *gezeira shavah*. While Curwin occasionally references classical rabbinic sources, medieval Jewish commentators, and modern biblical scholarship, he mainly adheres to the literal interpretation of the verses themselves in giving readers a fresh perspective on Kohelet, although he does sparingly draw from those other sources.

The book begins by setting the stage with an outline of King Solomon's life and achievements, leading up to his spiritual downfall. This makes sense because the Book of Kohelet is traditionally ascribed to none other than King Solomon. In this opening section, Kohelet is seen through the lens of the author's methodology, with different parts of the text mirroring various points in King Solomon's life. For example, after King Solomon realized the folly of trusting one's own judgement instead of hewing closely to God's Divine commands, he retrospectively admitted that a human being cannot add to or subtract from God's doings (Eccl. 3:14). The wording of that particular verse mimics the language of the Pentateuch's prohibitions against adding or taking away from the commandments given in the Torah (Deut. 13:1). These sorts of nuanced approaches add much depth and richness to our understanding of Kohelet's timeless messages.

The second section of the book offers a similar exploration, this time charting the story of Adam, who began at the pinnacle of creation, but dramatically fell from grace after eating from the Tree of Knowledge. The author convincingly argues that Kohelet contains references to Adam's lofty place in the Garden of Eden and his idyllic life there, his subsequent sin, and the punishments he suffered thereafter. For instance, Curwin interprets the

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repeated use of the word *hevel* (“breathiness” or “vanity”) in Kohelet as the utterances of Adam as a mourning father lamenting the loss of his son Abel (*Hevel* in Hebrew). In these self-reflective bouts of remorse, Adam attributed the tragic murder of his son Hevel to his own sins, essentially making the argument that had he not eaten from the Forbidden Fruit, Kayin would never have killed Hevel. This line of interpretation thus adds another layer of complexity to the text of Kohelet by also connecting it to the Biblical narratives of Adam and Abel.

As Curwin frames the story of the Tree of Knowledge, Adam's sin was that he ate from the Tree of Knowledge with intention to become like God – in other words, he sought to become the final arbiter of good and evil, instead of simply following the more objective metric of God's command and carrying out what God has already decided. Solomon too did not just want to serve as a judge to carry out the Law as it was given by God, but he wanted to use his own intellect to decide what is considered acceptable. This led him to breaking the law and going beyond what was allowed for a king to do. Thus, the book's central argument revolves around the idea that both Adam and King Solomon sought to use their own intellect and reason to decide what is right and wrong, disregarding God's objective commandments in favor of their own judgment.

This same paradigm, the author contends, played a role in the story of the Ten Spies sent by Moses to scout the Promised Land. Instead of conducting an objective fact-finding expedition, the spies altered the scope of their mission to allow them to subjectively decide for themselves whether the land was truly “good” as God had promised. The book continues to discuss how the commandments given immediately after the story of the Ten Spies – the commandment of wine libations and wearing *tzitzit* – were meant as correctives to offset the spies' mistaken worldview. As mentioned earlier, these profound connections between Kohelet and other parts of the Bible are always buttressed by identifying keywords in the texts that appear in parallel biblical passages. Finding such parallels allows the author to draw thematic comparisons that shed light on the hidden wisdom within Kohelet.

The reader will find this book to be a quick and engaging read, thanks to its short chapters and straightforward presentation. Much of the book simply quotes the text of Kohelet in English and Hebrew alongside the relevant parallel texts being analyzed. The footnotes are especially concise and succinct, as they are primarily used for source citations. Appendices, including a discussion on why Kohelet is traditionally read on the holiday of Sukkot, are also included in the book and provide additional, somewhat tangential, insights.

The end of the book contains a helpful index of the biblical sources discussed. This is particularly useful for finding the author's interpretations of specific verses in Kohelet because, as mentioned above, his work is non-linear in nature, so the passages are explicated out of order and sorted by thematic relevance.

All in all, Curwin's book takes Kohelet – which has often been looked at as a closed enigmatic book riddled with internal contradictions – and offers a fresh perspective that

helps the reader begin to make sense of the hidden messages and lessons King Solomon has wisely embedded within it. Through his innovative methodology and careful analysis, the author brings to light these deep lessons, making them accessible and understandable to contemporary readers. This book indeed is a valuable resource for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of Kohelet and make sense of its profound insights.

On a personal note, I have been an avid fan of David Curwin's language blog Balashon since I was a teenager. I often look to that blog and its archives for inspiration in penning my weekly *What's in a Word?* column, and appreciate the author's hard work in uncovering the hidden gems of the Hebrew language. I have also read some of his other articles in *Tradition* and *Hakirah*, and was very honored to have received a complimentary review copy of his work on Kohelet. I sincerely hope that Mr. Curwin is planning on writing similar books on other obscure books of the Bible, such as Proverbs and Job.



עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

October	Ezekiel	1 – 28
November	Ezekiel	29 – 48
	Hosea	1 – 8
December	Hosea	9 – 14
	Joel	1 – 4
	Amos	1 – 9
	Obadiah	1
	Jonah	1 – 4
	Micah	1 – 4
January	Micah	5 – 7
	Nahum	1 – 3
	Habakkuk	1 – 3
	Zephaniah	1 – 3
	Haggai	1 – 2
	Zechariah	1 – 14
February	Malachi	1 – 3
	Psalms	1 – 25

