

Qoheleth as a Realist

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Abstract

On a three stage “ladder,” from humanism to scepticism to pessimism, Ecclesiastes has traditionally been regarded as the last of those three. Many recent studies, however, have challenged this assessment, replacing humanism with optimism and presenting a stark choice between the two extremes of optimism and pessimism. In this paper it is argued that a middle way can be found, using the language of “realism.” How to define “a realist” and what this means for understanding Qoheleth is explored. Examples of Qoheleth’s pragmatic advice, experiential starting point, and continual balancing of life’s options are aired, and key indicators of his realism are found. These are demonstrated first, in his use and placement of the three major poems in the book, second, in his choice of phrases around “knowledge,” and third, in his use of exemplifying stories that ground his more abstract musings in a concrete reality.

Keywords

realism – scepticism – pessimism – contradictions – optimism – Qoheleth

1 Introduction

There have been many attempts to describe the author of Ecclesiastes—Qoheleth—as belonging to a school of thought or set of ideas. He has been variously labelled by the scholars. John F. Priest famously opened the broader discussion in his 1968 article “Humanism, Skepticism, and Pessimism in

Israel.”¹ He argued that a two-fold definition of humanism is needed for an Old Testament/Hebrew Bible (OT/HB) context. He writes, “In the first place humanism is simply a fundamental perspective that focuses its interest upon man in his individual and collective life.”² He continues “Humanism ... also displays confidence in—or at least reliance on—man’s capacity to confront human life and cope with its problems.”³ This is where God comes into the picture, as this human capacity depends upon the need for reliance upon God “in all affairs from statecraft to sickness.”⁴ Seeing scepticism and pessimism as branches within a humanistic framework, Priest applies this expanded terminology to all the wisdom books, and beyond wisdom to other parts of the OT/HB. For him the author of Ecclesiastes is a negative humanist, sceptic, and pessimist, and he sees the author’s scepticism ending up as pessimism. He writes, “This purposefulness is lost for Koheleth because he sees no meaningful movement in history for the community and the individual’s moment in history is all too fleeting for any meaning to be discerned. It is at this point that we reach the real crux of his pessimism, the immutable fact of death which brings an end to all human aspiration, striving, and realization.”⁵

These kinds of classifications have been taken up in more recent times, Qoheleth being seen as formally a Sceptic (with a capital “S”), linking up with the Greek Sceptics by Leo Perdue⁶ and, more informally, as a sceptic with a small “s” by Stuart Weeks.⁷ Weeks sees Qoheleth’s scepticism as so widely shared in ancient literature as to be conventional. He writes, “where his [Qoheleth’s] views appear to be distinctive, they are not usually sceptical.”⁸

There is no doubt that scepticism is hard to define, as indicated in two articles by William Anderson, where he argues that scepticism’s relationship to irony should be our key concern and thus introduces another category of Qoheleth as “ironist.”⁹ Annette Schellenberg has helpfully argued that it is difficult to pin down a single definition of the term “sceptic,” making it preferable

1 Priest, “Humanism.”

2 Priest, “Humanism,” 312.

3 Priest, “Humanism,” 313. More recent scholars have framed Priest’s humanism as optimism, and optimism has been placed in opposition to scepticism/pessimism.

4 Priest, “Humanism,” 313.

5 Priest, “Humanism,” 325. Priest’s mention of scepticism and of pessimism was to pick up on the ideas of a few older scholars, e.g., Pfeiffer, “Peculiar Skepticism”; Klopfenstein, “Die Skepsis”; Danker, “Pessimism”; Forman, “Pessimism”.

6 Perdue, “Book of Qohelet,” 103–106.

7 Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*.

8 Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 4.

9 Anderson, “What is Scepticism?”; Anderson, “Ironical Correlations”; Fisch, “Qohelet: A Hebrew Ironist.”

to use an investigation of Qoheleth's ideas as an approach rather than trying to place him in a pre-determined mould.¹⁰ The pessimism aspect has been taken up by Mark Sneed, who sees the book of Ecclesiastes as both sceptical and pessimistic and argues that these are complementary categories.¹¹ He uses a socio-economic perspective to link these categories to a declassed scribal group of disenfranchised intellectuals.

Harking back to categories from the ancient world such as Sceptic, further suggestions emerge of Qoheleth as a Stoic and/or as an Epicurean. So Charles Whitley believed Qoheleth's thought to be influenced by both Stoicism and Epicureanism but falling short of a precise label of either "School."¹² John Gammie joined the debate, preferring Stoic categories and their antithesis.¹³ More recently, Dominic Rudman has linked the book of Ecclesiastes to ideas of determinism found in Stoic philosophy, stressing ideas of a single force (God or fate) determining events in the world and so relieving the individual of personal responsibility for their actions.¹⁴ However, even more popular amongst scholars has been a more general appeal to Greek philosophical thought,¹⁵ recognizing that no one philosophical system fits Qoheleth's thought perfectly.¹⁶ Thus an alternative appeal to Greek "genres" has emerged, with Norbert Lohfink comparing Qoheleth's famous "contradictions" to the genre of diatribe, for example.¹⁷

There have also been some more modern labels for Qoheleth—that of nihilist,¹⁸ of existentialist¹⁹ or of minimalist²⁰ and even of hedonist,²¹ or

10 Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis als Problem*, 45–50.

11 Sneed, *Politics of Pessimism*, 4–11.

12 Whitley, *Koheleth*, 182–183.

13 Gammie, "Stoicism and Anti-Stoicism." Stoic ideas include affirmation of God within a "cosmic nature" which includes humans and affirms a life-pattern ending in death. Anti-stoic ideas include the idea that one's own name might endure after death (although Qoheleth is not confident of this himself).

14 Rudman, *Determinism*.

15 Ranston (*Ecclesiastes and the Early Greek Wisdom Literature*, 13–62, 149–150) argued that Ecclesiastes is dependent on early Greek philosophy, including the work of Theognis, although he recognized that no one system fits the book entirely.

16 Braun (*Kohelet*) did a full study of Hellenistic philosophical links in 1973.

17 Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 6–8.

18 Sekine, "Qohelet als Nihilist."

19 James, "Ecclesiastes."

20 Perry, "Kohelet's Minimalist Theology."

21 The hedonist view places the joy passages in the context of a pessimistic, despairing *carpe diem* world view, so Anderson, "Ironical Correlations." Also, recently, Sneed ("Qohelet as Divine Hedonist") labels Qoheleth as a "divine hedonist," seeking hedonistic pleasure through the *carpe diem* ethic, but at the same time aligning this ethic with God's decrees.

workaholic.²² And now I appear to be adding another suggestion to the list—Qoheleth as a “realist.” I am not the first to use this term, but the few scholars who have used the word do so very much in passing when trying to characterize the middle path that Qoheleth takes between pessimism and optimism. Thus R. Norman Whybray writes, “Whether he was a pessimist or an optimist, therefore, will remain a matter of opinion; what is certain is that he was a realist.”²³

Likewise, in his evaluation of Qoheleth’ socio-economic context, Choon-Leong Seow uses the word, assessing Qoheleth’s evaluation of society, rather than any philosophical sense.²⁴ He writes, “Thus, Qoheleth was neither a pessimist nor an optimist. He was a realist addressing a society that is both optimistic and pessimistic; a realist who knew that life consisted of both the good and the bad.”²⁵ The term realist has also come up in scholarship when scholars are specifically looking at the meaning of חבל and whether it is a negative term.²⁶ The appellation “realist” tempers this negativity, but “realist” has not been defined more specifically in relation to philosophical terminology²⁷ or applied more widely for the nature of the book as I propose to do.²⁸

22 Johnston, “Confessions of a Workaholic.”

23 Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 28. Cf. Whybray, *Good Life in the Old Testament*, 206, where he adds “the key to his [Qoheleth’s] realistic attitude to life is to be found in his *doctrine of God*.” Whybray is referring to the tension in the book between an incomprehensible creator God and yet one who is to be ultimately feared. He also comments, as an aside, that Qoheleth’s realism leads him to pragmatism over dealings with the rich and powerful—i.e., it is best to show obedience (ibid., 206).

24 Seow, “Socioeconomic Context.” Similarly Farmer (*Who Knows What Is Good*, 168) remarks in reference to Eccl 5:8–9: “Qohelet is a realist who has observed the way hierarchical systems often work to the disadvantage of the poor.”

25 Seow, “Socioeconomic Context,” 191. Strangely, however, Seow does not take this idea up in his later Anchor Bible commentary on *Ecclesiastes*, so it is clearly only a passing remark.

26 E.g., Ogden (*Qoheleth*, 26) writes, “Thus from a structural standpoint, it is clear that Qoheleth’s focus is upon an affirmative rather than a negative view of human life. Qoheleth comes to us as a realist, but one who never loses sight of the fact that life is God-given and for our benefit.”

27 MacDonald (*Hebrew Philosophical Genius*, 87) speaks of Qoheleth as having the philosophy of a realist who renders every חבל as transitory: “His philosophy was the philosophy of a realist, of a man who, for himself, had looked steadily at life in all its manifestations and who brought over nothing from the past save the one devastating certainty that behind the passing phenomena of life there was an eternal and personal Absolute, an unknowable Will and purpose.” But he does not define what Qoheleth is doing according to philosophical categories.

28 In fact, Fredericks (*Coping with Transience*, 31) considers the impact of this book upon the realist, rather than making any authorial claims when he writes, “the book consoles

One might ask whether another label is either warranted or helpful. I am not suggesting that there is not truth in many of these aforementioned categories for understanding this complex book, nor am I seeking to discover another exclusive category. However, in this paper I will argue that realism is an objective category of thought that can be analysed as separate to (although in close relationship with) Qoheleth's more subjective analyses, and that consideration of the category sheds fresh light on a less-noticed aspect of Qoheleth's enigmatic book.

2 Definitions of "Realist"/"Realism"

In general parlance, realism is a way of describing the independent and objective existence of something apart from the subjectivity of experience. Realism maintains that physical things exist independently of the human mind.²⁹ Its opposite is idealism, i.e., the notion that physical objects only exist within the human mind as thoughts or ideas.³⁰ I argue in this paper that realism is a more appropriate category for Qoheleth's book because although the book represents Qoheleth's thoughts, he is drawing on an observation of reality which exists in the world around him and which he evaluates and "sees," as he often emphasizes (Eccl 1:8, 10, 14; 2:3, 13, 24; 3:10, 16, etc.).³¹ Thus, Jaco Gericke writes

rather than disturbs the realist. It simultaneously reminds one of his transience in this intimidating world with its pressing and tragic problems, as well as comforts with the fact that evil itself is temporary in its impact on life."

29 Miller, "Realism." Beyond this definition, Plato's theory of forms, often thought to be where the theory of reality originates, asserts that things exist beyond objects, i.e., concepts such as the just or the beautiful have their own higher existence. Indeed, reality is more real in these universal ideas than in the observable objectified world.

30 Taking the nuances of this definition further, subjective idealism (solipsism) is the belief that only one's own mind is certain to exist—or ideas in the mind of God (Berkeley)—but objective idealism maintains that physical objects do in fact exist even if they are reflected as ideas in the human mind (Hegel) and this is closer to the sense in which I am using the term "realist" to refer to Qoheleth. It can be argued that one needs both realism and idealism to sum up the total of reality—i.e., realism can ignore aspects of reality that are not immediately observable whilst idealism may be more comprehensive of what reality is and yet can lead to fanciful ideas and abstract speculation that has little bearing on reality.

31 This is not to say that other wisdom writers also express their experienced reality, but Qoheleth does so in more philosophical vein, reflecting on the very process of his gaining of knowledge and to a greater extent than other wisdom books such as Proverbs (e.g., the observation of the ant in Prov 6:6–9). I disagree with the view of Samet ("Qoheleth's Idiolect") that abstract, contemplative issues such as the purpose of life, essence of

of Qoheleth: "From a metaphysical perspective we may note that Qoheleth's assumptions were not anti-realist. He assumed that sentences such as 'x is good' attributed property to an object. He did not hold that evaluations merely express the speaker's feelings and attitudes. Qoheleth did not assume that his claim that something was good was merely his own approval thereof as though opposing viewpoints could have equal merit."³² As I shall show, Qoheleth frequently stresses the personal aspects of his experiential acquisition of knowledge and hence an epistemological realism best characterizes his approach.

Aware that the term "realist" is multi-nuanced, I am trying in this article to keep to a basic philosophical sense of the term as I seek to define it.³³ In metaphysical terms, realism is usually termed "naïve realism" or "common-sense realism" and used of physical objects or of fixed points in the universe such as the sun and the moon.³⁴ Realism is also used of objective truth as opposed to subjective opinion.³⁵ Objective truth can apply to conceptual truths that all humans would agree on, such as past, present, and future within a framework of time or the perception of the self in opposition to the other. The realist in turn finds truth in a correspondence between cognitive representations and reality. So, the realist is aware of and accepts the physical universe as it is in the belief that objects have a real existence beyond simply our perception of them. In realism one can thus gain knowledge of the world around us through

death and the problem of free will is what makes Qoheleth's work "new." She argues that Qoheleth generalizes instead of concretizing as demonstrated in the emphasis on "everything"—i.e., generalizing concrete phenomena into an encompassing statement on totality. She also argues that the emphasis on the speaker's "mind" makes external reality secondary. I argue on the other hand that Qoheleth does "concretize" in his exemplifying and that external reality is primary for him. Samet documents a wider thought-world in the ANE and Greek thought on which Qoheleth is drawing, but this discussion is outside the scope of this paper.

32 Gericke, "Axiological Assumptions," 516.

33 The concept of realism has a history that is far too long and complex to go into in this paper.

34 Qoheleth mentions the sun many times in the course of his investigation and the moon only once in conjunction with the sun (Eccl 12:2). Cf. Gericke ("Axiological Assumptions," 516), who writes, "Qohelet was a value realist in as much as he assumed that evaluative statements purport to represent facts about the world." References to the sun include its being on its course (Eccl 1:5) and its being hidden to the stillborn (6:5) but far more common is the phrase "under the sun" which he employs to refer to the human location, with one reference to "those who see the sun" (7:11) having the same meaning.

35 Miller, "Realism."

the senses of touching and seeing. And yet a realist thinker also trusts human perception of shared observations and events.³⁶

3 Qoheleth's Realism

Turning back to Ecclesiastes, I argue here that Qoheleth's acquisition of knowledge is best classified as epistemological realism, i.e., the belief that we can gain knowledge about the world around us through our senses and that people can agree on the same reality through experience. One might object Qoheleth in his presentation of differing viewpoints, notably where he appears to cite one view and then modify it with his own interpretation,³⁷ is doing the opposite of the realist. Many think that in that device he is showing sceptical tendencies that question that there is any truth beyond one's own experience. "Contradictions" have long been found in his thought,³⁸ or if not actual contradiction at least "polar tensions"³⁹ that hold together opposite ideas, or a "dialogical" approach, where two consistent but opposing viewpoints are found throughout the book.⁴⁰ The very fact that scholars can characterize the book of Ecclesiastes as pessimistic on the one hand and joyous on the other,⁴¹ or somewhere in between the two, is testimony to the complexity of its contents and their presentation. Qoheleth's style is complex too: he appears to go down one road and then double back a different way in the manner in which he keeps

36 This can spill over into moral categories to form "moral realism," a term that can be applied to the existence of absolute qualities such as truth, goodness, beauty, evil, and so on, that we would all recognize but that becomes subjective when applied in individual cases. Its accompanying idea is that ethical sentences express propositions that refer to objective features of the world, but this is not an avenue I wish to go down here as, for me, morality is a more subjective affair.

37 This occurs notably when Qoheleth seems to be quoting proverbs; see Gordis, "Quotations in Wisdom Literature." For wider discussion of contradiction in the book, see Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*.

38 This finding of contradictions in Qoheleth's thought goes right back to the Rabbis. See Dell, "Ecclesiastes as Wisdom," 5–6. The contradictions have sometimes also been compared to Greek philosophical patterns and further afield; e.g., Horton Jr. "Qoheleth's Concept of Opposites."

39 Loader, *Polar Structures*.

40 Perry, *Dialogues with Kohelet*, 10–12 and passim.

41 See in particular Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," and Lee, *Vitality of Enjoyment*. The latter overplays this aspect, thus destroying the balance of Ecclesiastes' sentiments in my view.

returning to familiar topics and phrases.⁴² But is this technique simply a subjective and meandering airing of different viewpoints,⁴³ or is there a deeper set of truths that ground Qoheleth's thought in realism?

4 Realism in Qoheleth's Use of Poems

I argue in this paper that a key indicator of Qoheleth's realism is his use and placement of the poems that occur in the book (1:4–7; 3:1–8; 12:1–7). Many scholars have seen them as an interruption to the flow of Qoheleth's thought, possibly with an independent existence of some kind before being incorporated in this text or as a poetic respite to Qoheleth's more usual prose comments.⁴⁴ However, it is my view that these poems have an important grounding function in illustrating Qoheleth's attempt to present an objective view of the world. They all concern time, both cosmic and human. After his opening חבל statement⁴⁵ and the question about human profit (יתרון), the first poem begins in Eccl 1:4–7. Qoheleth states bald facts “a generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever” (1:4).⁴⁶ All life on earth persists, but only in the cycle of the generations rather than on the level of an individual life. Although we tend to see this as a reference to human life, it is actually broader than that and includes all life.⁴⁷ The next verses illustrate the point that the earth remains as a fixed point, again referring to cycles: the sun rises and sets, the wind blows in set directions and on known circuits, and the streams fill the sea in a continuous cyclical pattern. This is cyclical time within the context of fixed physical points in the world (sun, wind, and sea). It is only after these three verses that Qoheleth gives a value judgement that “all things are

42 An example is Qoheleth's attitude to “wisdom” (introduced as a theme in 1:13), to which he returns many times, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively; see the discussion in Dell, “A Wise Man Reflecting on Wisdom.”

43 As Lohfink writes of Qoheleth's thought-processes: “all interpreters who attempt to find a single linear line of thought become helplessly tangled in this subtler universe of discourse” (*Qoheleth*, 7).

44 See the discussion in Michel, *Qoheleth*, 9–45.

45 That Qoheleth uses חבל 38 times is no coincidence and underpins his assessment of reality and the themes that he airs, regarding “profit” and death's equalizing role for example, to which he frequently returns are indicators of his key concerns and pre-occupations.

46 Crenshaw (*Ecclesiastes*, 62) argues that the word דור can designate both human generations or natural phenomena and that Qoheleth may be playing upon both these dimensions of meaning, following on from his question about human meaning in 1:3 and leading into his depiction of the natural world in 1:5–7.

47 See Dell, “Cycle of Life in Ecclesiastes” for more detail on this poem.

wearisome" (1:8) and then expresses the view that there is nothing new (1:9). Whilst this might be a true observation too, it is also contestable, and so the grounding in physical objectivity of the main portion of the poem starts to unravel in a more personal viewpoint, characterized by world-weary observation. Verse 9 brings us back in more realist fashion to time, in this case past and future on the continuum of time: "what has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done"; the past is the past and the future is the future and that is unchangeable.⁴⁸ The idea of 1:10–11 that neither things nor the people of the past, nor those of the future, go on being remembered also imparts realism, in that fading remembrance of events, objects, and of people are provable facts.⁴⁹ But the idea is contextualized in the weary frame of reference that indicates opinion and observation of a subjective idea. A more positive appraisal might see the issue rather differently. Whilst his subjective opinions swirl around the text, then, Qoheleth is trying to steer a more objective course through the storm of opinion by the use of such grounding observations.

The issue of time re-emerges in the second poem, in Eccl 3:1–8. Here again we are in the realm of observable fact, and a sense of realism is apparent. Time is closely related to the idea of cycles, not of nature in chapter 1, but of human life.⁵⁰ Although Qoheleth might have chosen other examples, it is clear that his poem is a watching brief on the kinds of activity he is viewing in everyday life. As Jennie Barbour writes, "the main reason Qoheleth knows that there is a time for weeping or planting is that he sees weeping and planting happen."⁵¹ The opposites that Qoheleth mentions characterize life. And interestingly, similarly as in the first poem (1:3), he juxtaposes his question about "profit" (יתרון) to the end of it (3:9), thus leading us briefly back into his more subjective musings (3:9–10).⁵² The poem itself, though, is a realistic evaluation of the times given to humans by God to live their lives and of the richness of activities in life. The only parameters are life and death themselves, which stand at the

48 Barbour (*Story of Israel*, 48–53) argues that Qoheleth is drawing upon history here, distancing himself from prophetic hopes within history (using phraseology from Deutero-Isaiah) and relating such observations to a lack of remembrance.

49 Fox (*A Time to Tear Down*, 164) considers these verses a prose addendum, an objection from another voice to conclusions drawn previously. However, this idea is an unnecessary breaking up of the flow of the passage, which is not contradictory in my view.

50 Barbour (*Story of Israel*, 54) states that Qoheleth moves here from "nothing happens" to "everything happens."

51 Barbour, *Story of Israel*, 75. She finds "real experience" behind Qoheleth's language with which I agree, although I think it is more of an attempt to record objective facts than to portray subjective, actual experience of viewing these activities in person.

52 Many commentators want to move these verses as they see them as interrupting the flow of thought here, but this is unnecessary in my view.

head of the poem (3:2).⁵³ Within those boundaries all manner of activities ensue within the measured time of a lifespan. But the poem refers to more than an individual lifespan; it is about the life of each individual within the cycles of the generations that ebb and flow across the fixity of the physical world and about the range of human activities that occur.

Although briefly after the poem Qoheleth seems to offer personal opinions, in 3:11 he pulls us back to the objectivity of the poem when he notes that everything is suitable for its time, that a sense of past and future is a fact of human conceptual knowledge, and that knowledge of the totality of God's works is limited. This is not a criticism of God, it is a fact of life: humans will never know the fullness of what God knows. Conceptually, there is no human being either who would not also proclaim that it is best for humans to be happy and enjoy themselves throughout their lives (3:12). Happiness and enjoyment are realities of a conceptual nature. Within a conceptual worldview such as Qoheleth's, God is seen as the giver of happiness and enjoyment. God's involvement is perceived as an observable fact, which Qoheleth says that he "knows" (יָדַע), that God's work is a fixed entity such that "nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it" (3:14). However, the accompanying idea that the reason for it is to encourage "awe" in humans might be seen to be more of an opinion. Echoing 1:9, in 3:15, Qoheleth repeats the fact "that which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is," but here he qualifies it by the observation that "God seeks out what has gone by," which is arguably more of an opinion than a knowable fact because no human being can fully speak for God.

Thus, the poem on time, itself an objective and realist portrayal of the way life works, has spawned further realist perceptions, but with a hint of subjective opinion starting to work its way in. From 3:17, views on whether God judges the righteous and wicked as a part of the "time" scheme also start to move in the direction of seeming to want to know and convey more about God than observable fact would allow. Linking back to the concept of an appointed time, as in the main poem (3:1–8), is an attempt to pin down the justice issue which is actually more complex than an appeal to facts permits. Qoheleth's opinion on human and animal fates is similar: whilst a physical fact is at the core of his observation that all die and all share the life-breath (3:19a, 20), he strays into the realm of opinion when he gets on to the idea of God testing

53 For Whybray ("Qoheleth as a Theologian," 258–259) there is a distinction between the determination of the times of birth and death by God in the opening verse of this poem (although with the proviso that God may change his mind) and the rest of the events of life as described in the poem which happen at the time at which they happen and are not predestined in any way.

(3:18) or whether one of the species has an advantage over the other (3:19b). In the course of this discussion, however, Qoheleth says “I know” (3:12, 14) of matters about which he is sure, and he also describes things he “has seen” (3:10) or “saw” (3:16, 22) as his definitive experiential knowledge. Things about which he “said in his heart” (3:17) are also mentioned in this vein.⁵⁴ When he is more uncertain, he asks “Who knows?,” as in 3:21 in the question about directions of human or animal spirits (cf. 2:19; 6:12; 8:1).

The third poem in 12:1–7 is more complex to analyse. Often it is seen as a mirror of the opening poem (1:4–11).⁵⁵ If its subject matter is about old age, with a preamble on youth before it (11:9–10), then it can be added to this list of realist poetic interludes.⁵⁶ With the advice to enjoy one’s youth and follow one’s heart, banishing pain and anxiety, the preamble has a subjective character, especially when Qoheleth qualifies it with a חבל remark which refers both to the state of youth in an individual life and for humanity as a whole (11:10). Similarly, the opening verse of the poem proper that seems to contrast the unpleasurable days of old age with an appreciation of youth (12:1) has the feel of advice to the young with the hindsight of age. Thus, with the mention of the sun and clouds darkening and returning with rain, 12:2 echoes both, the elements in 1:5–7 and the “days of darkness” of 11:8.⁵⁷ Furthermore, despite its highly metaphorical language, this poem does present a realistic appraisal of the inevitability of old age: its main body is about the gradual decay of the body and the habits and reality of the lives of older people, which demonstrates a realistic view of the changing nature of an individual life over time as ageing occurs. The final verse (12:7), which states the death of the individual and expresses the view that “the

54 This links up with ideas about Qoheleth’s epistemology; see Dell, “A Pendulum.”

55 See Bundvad, *Time*, 61–64, who views these two poems as important framing poems in the book with their temporal references as the key to the mirroring. Further Zimmer, *Zwischen Tod und Lebensglück*, 138, who found 11 lexical points of contact between the two as well as thematic links.

56 This is the most likely theme of the poem, even if aspects of the depiction of old age are quite metaphorical. The use of everyday objects in the description (even if intended to be interpreted metaphorically or even allegorically) is an indication of Qoheleth’s realism. Other suggestions for the theme of the passage include “a dilapidated house” (Sawyer, “Ruined House in Eccl 12”), a “funeral” (Fox, “Ageing and Death,” 55–57), a city lament (Barbour, *Story of Israel*, 138–157) and the eschaton (Seow, “Qoheleth’s Eschatological Poem”). An allegorical reading was also common from early times amongst rabbinic sources, whereby each item is interpreted as a part of the human body, with the whole poem being taken as a description of bodily ageing (b. Šabb. 131b–132a; Qoheleth Rabbah). Crenshaw (*Ecclesiastes*, 182) rightly, in my view, identifies the text as a mixture of “symbolic language and literal expressions.” The items described though are everyday and realistic.

57 Also linking up with the “days of trouble” in 12:1.

dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath of life returns to God who gave it” echoes the same realistic view that Qoheleth demonstrated in chapter 3. Therefore, the poems are one way in which Qoheleth grounds his observations in fact and shows realism rather than any form of scepticism, pessimism, or other types of questioning.

5 Realism in the Use of Phrases about Knowledge

As pointed out above, Qoheleth tends to use “I know that ...” and also “I saw/ have seen” when he is sure of a fact. He also uses “I said in my heart” (3:17–18) when he has a strong feeling of certainty, in this case about God’s action in the world, even though predicating God’s mind can start to become opinion rather than fact. In 8:12 Qoheleth knows that “it will be well with those who fear God,” something we might feel was a choice and hence subjective. Yet, within the wider worldview of the book where “fear God and keep his commandments” is the Epilogue’s summary of Qoheleth’s advice (12:13), this is an objective observation. The admonition to fear God is rather different though to Qoheleth’s attempt to “know” wisdom, which is something he is striving to learn without always being successful in the attempt.⁵⁸ He states a fact in 9:5a again using “to know”: “The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing.” The point that the dead will have no more reward/wages is a bald, realistic fact, but for Qoheleth also the idea that any memory of them will be lost is a given (9:5a); and it is certainly a truth in general terms, even though in specific cases individual remembrance is possible, too.

Interestingly, when Qoheleth says “Who knows?” (2:19; 3:21; 6:8, 10, 12, etc.), he is weighing up different options in a more uncertain tone, with the use of rhetorical questions, but when he says, “no one knows,” he is actually stressing a fact and is back to his realism. For example, in 10:14 he states, “No one knows what is to happen and who can tell anyone what the future holds?” This is said in the specific context of fools babbling on as if they know what is going to happen, but it is also a general realistic truth. If we knew the future for certain, we would not be within the conceptual framework of a human being. Similarly, Qoheleth speaks realistically about not knowing what the future holds in terms of possible disasters (11:2), or how the life-breath comes into the child and that the work of God is not in the realm of human knowledge (11:5). Not knowing whether one seed will grow and one will die is also a fact (11:6),

⁵⁸ On the issue of Qoheleth’s ambivalence towards the wisdom quest, see Dell, “A Wise Man Reflecting on Wisdom.”

although Qoheleth comments on it in the context of admonishing work over idleness.

6 Realism Grounded in Example Stories

But Qoheleth's realism cannot be summarized simply in the use of phrases about knowing or not knowing, rather it represents an attempt to ground his thought in known shared reality rather than its being open to the vagaries of contrasting opinion. One can imagine that all he hears is conversations and contrasting views and he is trying to steer a more pragmatic path through them. Although he speaks from personal experience, he grounds this experience in shared presuppositions about human life and God's role in it. Although he shows an openness to different viewpoints by stating a factual scenario which can be variously interpreted, he then relativizes it with bald observation imbued with realism. Thus, Qoheleth exemplifies in order to ground his points rather than simply to tell us an interesting story. And where an example extends over two or more verses, he is using a longer life lesson which he follows with realist observations.

Thus in Eccl 4:13–16a, the story of the poor wise youth extends over four verses and is used to state that such a character is preferable to a foolish king who no longer listens to others.⁵⁹ Whilst this is clearly a value judgement (“better than ...”) on different archetypal character types from different social drawers, this successful rags to riches story (accompanied by the power of wisdom rightly used) is promoted by Qoheleth as a real scenario. Here is a born leader—a king—whose life has been a worthwhile one. Yet Qoheleth cannot resist bringing in at the end of the example the realist point that even he is unlikely to be remembered: “those who come later will not rejoice in him” (4:16); and he adds a חבל postscript which, although in itself subjective, also undermines and qualifies his verdict.

Ecclesiastes 5:13–15 also qualifies as a separate example story. This story is about rich people amassing wealth for its own sake and for no good purpose

59 This is a difficult passage for recreating a story—it is not clear whether there is one youth or two. Barbour (*Story of Israel*, 85) summarizes the plot thus, “We can say that the tale is one of a fraught royal succession where youth and wisdom displace age and folly, expected lines of legitimacy seem to be interrupted, humble beginnings inverted, and the recurring displacement of any king's rule is underlined by the fickleness of the crowd and their posterity and perhaps also by a second pretender to stand in the place of the first.”

and then indeed losing it.⁶⁰ They lost it even though they have dependent children who might have relied on that inheritance. Here, though, in realist vein, Qoheleth uses the example as a fact of life, in this case not to moralize against doing such a thing but to simply remark of the fact that one enters the world naked and can take nothing away with one. This is the reality of human life, that whatever the attempt to amass money or possessions, whether for good or ill, death is the great leveller of all such toils. People can argue over the rights and wrongs of such a situation, but the observable facts remain the same.

Ecclesiastes 6:3–5 is another example. Again, Qoheleth is making the point that life is for enjoying, and he exemplifies it with a man who begets many children and lives to a ripe old age. What is the point, he asks, if this man does not enjoy life's good things and if he has no burial? This story is linked to the “name being remembered” idea found elsewhere in Qoheleth (1:11; 9:15; see below), which is linked to dread of not having a proper and dignified burial.⁶¹ In this case, a stillborn child is better off than that man of the example story if he did not enjoy life, since it both knows nothing and has not ever known anything. So the stillborn is untroubled and “finds rest” (6:5). Qoheleth is stating a realistic observation: human beings need to enjoy their lives, and one who has never been has no experience of it. Even though Qoheleth's choice of example is curious, and it has a feel of world-weariness to it, it is still a fact that achieving a ripe old age cannot be worthwhile without a bit of enjoyment along the way.

Ecclesiastes 9:14–16 is also one such vignette: the story of a poor wise man who saved a small city against which the odds were stacked when a great king came against it and besieged it.⁶² In realist vein, Qoheleth is back to his point about remembrance: no one remembered that poor man, presumably because he was poor and seemingly insignificant despite his wisdom (9:16), but also possibly because remembering seems to be in short supply from human beings anyway according to Qoheleth's worldview (1:11). His point is that people are not remembered, and his use of an example is at least to say that this point is borne out by his experience of real life.

60 Because of its theme, this story has been compared to the “royal fiction” of 1:12–2:26; e.g., Fox (“What Happens in Qoheleth 4:13–16?”) compares the theme of succession and inheritance in 2:19 and 4:8.

61 In the vignette of 6:3–5, the noun “rest” נחת might be ironically related to both, the long-lived man who did not enjoy a dignified burial and the stillborn child who has never seen the sun, as suggested by the LXX variation (6:5b): “there is *no more rest* to this one than another.”

62 The might of a king versus the wisdom of a poor man, who nonetheless triumphed, is a main theme here, though it is re-contextualized by the theme of lack of remembrance.

In using these examples, Qoheleth draws attention to what the realities of human life actually are, as he often explicates in the comments that follow the stories themselves. Thus, as a part of the interweaving of themes and expressing of opinions that characterize his work, Qoheleth pauses at significant moments to consider an example, a technique which grounds his more abstract musings in reality. Although the answer to these situations is not always clear-cut, his openness in presenting a human situation and then standing back from it with a bold remark is a suggestion of realism—this is how life is, he is saying, now try to make sense of it!

7 Summary

My suggestion then is that Qoheleth's realism is primarily indicated by his poems that seek to ground his thought in some objective conceptual analysis about the workings of the world and of human beings within it. This realism is also witnessed by his attempt to use concrete examples as he weaves his webs of opinions around them, conveying real life situations that, although open to differing opinions, are grounded by him in factual observation. He makes pragmatic choices as to how to present his worldview, and there is certainly no romanticism in the, often bald, illustrations that he chooses. At the end of the day, Qoheleth is a teacher telling of life it as it is, in a straightforward and practical way. He is no idealist; rather, as I argue here, he faces the world as a realist.

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