

○ QOHELET AND HIS 'VULGAR' CRITICS

A JAMESONIAN READING

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Scholars who read Qohelet from a sociological perspective often assume that the book should simply reflect the milieu in which it was produced: the sombre character of the book simply mirrors the anomy of the turbulent, Ptolemaic period. This is known as 'vulgar Marxism', i.e., the superstructure is completely determined by the infrastructure, never the reverse. In contrast, this essay will employ the more sophisticated Marxist approach of Fredric Jameson. Utilising his method, I will argue that the book's scepticism and pessimism are the means the author utilises to imaginatively resolve contemporary societal tensions.

In a 1998 article in *Hebrew Studies*, I took an essentially a-historical approach to the question of the social matrix of the book of Qohelet or Ecclesiastes (Sneed 1998).¹ In this paper, I take a decidedly historical perspective on the same question. How can I explain this apparent, one-eighty degree turn? The answer is vulgar materialism. This is the label used by Marxist critics to characterise any Marxist perspective that sees the relationship between base and superstructure as purely causal and going in one direction, from base to superstructure, never the reverse. It is described as 'vulgar' because its view of Marxist theory is rather simplistic and inflexible.

The article in 1998 reflects my misgivings concerning the adequacy of the contemporary tendency among biblical sociologists to connect the book's expressions of anomy and concomitant melancholy with supposed archaeological and literary evidence of social instability in Ptolemaic Judah. This type of approach just seemed too simplistic.

It has been widely assumed in Ancient Near Eastern studies. In the study of Egyptian literature, later texts that depict social chaos and express pessimism have often been used to reconstruct the earlier First Intermediate Period, thought to be their referent (Wilson 1969a pp. 441; Wilson 1969b p. 405; Wilson 1969c p. 467). Today, there are Egyptologists who find such a reconstruction problematic (Lichtheim 1975 pp. 83, 149–50; Trigger 1983 pp. 75–76, 115–116; cf. Hallo et al. 1971 p. 237).

As a whole, sociological interpretations of Qohelet have been guilty of being vulgar, to a great degree, in their approach to the book: trying to find direct matches between archaeological and/or extra-biblical literary sources and the social descriptions in the text and/or Qohelet's sceptical/pessimistic mood. Examples include Hans-Peter Müller and Bernhard Lang who argue that Qohelet's scepticism/pessimism is a direct reflection of the sense of loss felt by the social class to which he belonged, due to its disenfranchisement by the Ptolemaic regime and their Jewish collaborators such as Joseph Tobias (Müller 1978 pp. 256–258; Lang 1979 pp. 120–121). Frank Crüsemann (1984), who takes an avowedly Marxist approach, argues that Qohelet's pessimism/scepticism reflects a Hellenistic, Jewish aristocracy's alienation from the common people (pp. 57–77). Norman Gottwald (1985), also Marxist, notes Qohelet's sense of personal powerlessness under the machinations of the despotic Ptolemaic regime; both God and government appear distanced from the people (p. 582). Choon-Leong Seow directly connects Qohelet's social descriptions with literary evidence of the Persian period that he thinks demonstrates volatile economic conditions (Seow 1996 pp. 171–89; Seow 2001 pp. 238–243). Shannon Burkes (1999)

finds Qohelet's obsession with death reflecting a typical pattern found among ancient peoples along the Mediterranean connected to the disturbing effects brought on by the Hellenistic invasion (pp. 81–119, 236–259).

Yet, a less-than-vulgar side is also found among these and other scholars. They show how Qohelet attempts to cope with his social situation via his writing. For Müller, Qohelet's perennial theme of *carpe diem* (2:24–26; 3:22; 5:17–20; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:7–12:8) was his way of escape from the meaninglessness of life (Müller 1978 pp. 258–259; Müller 1987 pp. 449–453). Similarly, for Lang (1979), this theme served as compensation, a narcotic for Qohelet (pp. 114–120). However, with these scholars, the reaction by Qohelet is rather passive and negative. On the contrary, Gottwald (1985) speaks of Qohelet's attempt to preserve his own sanity by working, enjoying family, worshipping correctly, and preaching the irrationality of life (p. 582). Similarly, Seow describes Qohelet as teaching his readers to adopt a 'realist' position about life: to realise that it has its ups and downs and that human limitations are great (Seow 1996 pp. 189–195). Stephan De Jong (1994) understands Qohelet to be reacting aggressively to the new rampant materialism of the rapidly encroaching Hellenistic culture (pp. 85–96). Robert Harrison (1997) sees Qohelet reflecting a period of rapid social change and suffering from a 'sociology of uncertainty' (pp. 178–179). But at the same time, he speaks of Qohelet's sceptical, pessimistic theology as a coping mechanism that modifies the old Israelite worldview to withstand and survive the period of crisis.²

In this paper, I do not want to debunk all of the existing, more or less 'vulgar' solutions to the problem of the book's social matrix. Indeed, I will not take the opposite tack that it does not reflect its social environment. Rather, I want to demonstrate that it can be read to reflect its matrix in a more complicated and interesting way. The book's pessimism and scepticism are not merely a direct reflection of bad circumstances. The book can be viewed as imaginatively resolving contemporary societal tensions. The particular method I adopt is that of Fredric Jameson, of Duke University, foremost Western Marxist critic and well known in the field of cultural criticism.³ Most of his fans are impressed by the scope and breadth of his knowledge of various fields, particularly comparative literature, philosophy, and post-modern method. Biblical scholars that have utilised at least aspects of his method include Tina Pippin (1992 p. 194), Carol Newsome (1992 p. 141), Gale Yee (1995 p.149), David Jobling (1992), David Clines (1995 pp. 10, 132), Roland Boer (1996), and David Penchansky (1990 pp. 10–18).

Jameson views both art and literature as an aggressive response to relieve the underlying social contradictions within hierarchical societies. The superstructure reacts to and compensates for deficiencies in the base. It aesthetically and imaginatively resolves social contradiction. Jameson draws on Freud and sees art and literature as a major means of a society repressing these underlying contradictions. Literature serves to smooth over these underlying tensions and enable both oppressor and oppressed to live together more manageably. The methods of repression Jameson calls 'strategies of containment'. This process is easier than actually changing the social reality, as it exists, which would be largely unthinkable.

The famous example Jameson uses is taken from Levi-Strauss' fieldwork with the Caduveo Indians (Jameson 1981 pp. 77–79). Their women use art (facial paint) to repress the hierarchical, caste society they live in. 'Cadeveo decorations are patterns organised along an axis running obliquely to that of the face...' (Dowling 1984 p. 119). This formal contradiction begs for ex-

planation. Jameson does this by comparing the facial art of this people with that of its neighbours, the Guana and Bororo, who use a non-aesthetic solution to mitigate the inequalities of their caste system. The castes are divided into moieties, providing the illusion of egalitarianism. The Cadeveo people, to the contrary, have no moiety system, and so resort to art to help reduce the social tension.

Jamesonian analysis begins by closely searching for formal or logical contradictions in the text. These are essentially battle scars that betray the underlying societal tensions. It is a scar, but it also points to the attempted solution that the text produces for mitigating the tension. From this aesthetic contradiction, a Jamesonian approach develops along three horizons of interpretation. The first involves the attempt to speculate on the particular historical/political situation that drives the need for repression. The second shifts to the broader category of social class conflict and how the text is part of such conflict. The third focuses on mode of production, a distinctively Marxian idea, that history can be divided into broad categories of economic strategies of subsistence and profit: communal, Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and capitalistic. Different conflicting modes are viewed as existing simultaneously in the same text.

David Jobling (1992) provides perhaps the best example of applying a Jamesonian approach to a biblical text (Boer's analysis involves a larger text and is, thus, more complicated). He analyses Ps. 72. On the first level, he carefully shows how the psalm has a logical contradiction (not truly formal, which is Jameson's favourite type) between verses 1–7, which assume a Zionist mythological view of the king whose reign is inviolate and permanent and vv. 8–17, which essentially 'demythologise' the previous verses with their emphasis on the righteousness of the king. Jobling does not speculate on the specific historical/political occasion for the writing of the psalm. On the second level, the author's elite status is revealed in his attempt to occlude many inherently oppressive facets of the monarchic polity. On the third level, the contradiction in the psalm is explained as ultimately due to the fact that the highly stratified Asiatic mode of production (the type that fits all Ancient Near Eastern monarchies and empires that were driven by the collecting and unequal redistribution of surplus crops) assumed in the text overlays vestiges of a more primitive communal mode that was essentially egalitarian.

FIRST HORIZON: HYBRID IN FORM AND CONTENT

My uniqueness is in attempting to elicit ways the text of Qohelet can be understood as imaginatively resolving class conflict in Ptolemaic Judah. This means I assume a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' that does not take the text at face value. I appeal to the general social history of the period in which the book was written (Ptolemaic) but avoid viewing the text's relation to its economic base vulgarly. If I accomplish nothing else, I at least hope to 'muddy the water' a bit regarding this issue.

A truly Jamesonian approach begins by seeking aesthetic or formal contradiction in the text, which will reveal an underlying logical problem that the book is attempting to solve. Source criticism has been the usual way to detect this kind of contradiction among biblical scholars who use a Jamesonian approach.⁴ However, this creates a problem for the book of Qohelet. While earlier scholars had serious questions about the book's integrity, today most scholars see the book as essentially the work of one individual: a person who calls himself Qohelet. However, there have been two additions: a frame-narrator has preserved the words of Qohelet, introducing him

and commending his work at the end (1:1–2; 7:27; 12:9–12); a pious redactor then added vv. 12–14 to soften the book's somewhat heterodox character.

For our purposes, my Jamesonian reading will focus only on the body of the book, assumed to be written by someone who calls himself Qohelet. The main formal contradiction I see in Qohelet is its hybrid character. It wants to be both Jewish and Greek. The literary styles of Qohelet and Job contrasted with that of Proverbs is a key to the discernment of social changes affecting style. Robert Alter (1985) describes this contrast as the order and symmetry expressed by the book of Proverbs versus Job's 'richly imaged poetry' and Qohelet's 'cadenced prose' (p. 167). Qohelet's hybrid, 'cadenced prose' perhaps reflects indecisiveness regarding whether to be poetry or prose, expressing formally the deep sense of ambivalence the Jews felt before Hellenism. Norbert Lohfink (2003) describes it as a 'philosophical prose unknown in Israel before this book: observations marshalled in a row, a line of thought developing step for step, motifs dropped and then picked up again, commenting on venerable sayings by cleverly reformulating them so that they mimic the old but affirm something new' (p. 7).

As for content, this is a bit trickier. Many scholars argue for a direct Greek influence on Qohelet's thoughts and concepts (e.g., Braun 1973), but this is difficult to demonstrate. What can be shown is how Qohelet's thinking departs from normative Judaism, which may indicate Greek influence. For example, Qohelet's God (he only uses what is considered the more generic name for God 'Elohim' instead of the more personal 'Yahweh') is not the God of the patriarchs, who cares for them, or of the Exodus, where he delivers his people out of bondage and makes a covenant with them, or of the Davidic kings, who blesses them when they are obedient. Crenshaw (1981) aptly describes Qohelet's conception of God, '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' (p. 137). Some see a striking resemblance in Qohelet's theology and the Greek concept of Fate (Pfeiffer 1948 p. 726; McNeile 1904 p. 15; cf. Hengel 1974 p. 127). Yet, the book is certainly Jewish. It was written in Hebrew, and its themes can all be found elsewhere within the Hebrew Bible. It is strongly monotheistic.

So the book expresses both discontinuity and continuity with the rest of the Hebrew Bible, formally and content-wise. It is indeed a hybrid.⁵ Lohfink summarises it well, 'The book of Qoheleth can only be understood as an attempt to profit as much as possible from the Greek understanding of the world, without forcing Israel's wisdom to give up its status' (Lohfink 2003 p. 6). The underlying antinomy that the book would then be attempting to resolve is conformity/resistance regarding Greek culture.

A typical way that Qohelet resolves this dilemma is demonstrated in 7:15–18, specifically with his novel use of an old concept, God-fearing:

15. 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.

16. Do not be too righteous, and do not act too wise; why should you destroy yourself?

17. Do not be too wicked, and do not be a fool; why should you die before your time?

18. It is good that you should take hold of the one, without letting go of the other; for the one who fears God shall succeed with both.⁶

V. 15 forms the descriptive statement by Qohelet concerning the lack of retribution, as traditionally defined, in the world. Vv. 16–17 constitute an ethic derived from this deficit. V. 18a adds emphasis by recommending that one steer the moderate path inferred in vv. 16–17. V. 18b seems to be a summary statement that redefines the person who wisely follows the counsel of vv. 16–17. It represents a third alternative to the traditional notions of piety/wisdom or wickedness/folly. Thus, it is a *via media* (cf. Schwienhorst-Schönberger 1998 pp. 184–193, 195–197; and Müller 1986 p. 16, n. 70).

V. 15 is fundamental to the entire unit. It reflects a change in Judean society both socially and religiously. The traditional ethical categories (righteousness/wickedness; wisdom/folly) did not seem to live up to their expectations.⁷ Qohelet is questioning the traditional doctrine of retribution, that the just are rewarded by God and the wicked are punished (e.g., 3:16; 8:10; 14; 9:11; 10:5–7). This scepticism is no doubt connected to the encounter between Judaism and Hellenism in Ptolemaic Judah. While in earlier times, a traditionally pious Hebrew might expect to live long and prosper, the Ptolemaic period witnessed profound social changes that questioned such a religious assumption. The wrong people, most likely the Greeks or Hellenists, it seemed, got rewarded (e.g., 3:16; 8:14).

The determinate factor for understanding what God-fearing means in v. 18b is the antecedent of *Kullam* ('both of them'). The most likely candidates are the immediately preceding admonitions to avoid extreme behaviour (vv. 16–17) (cf. Longman 1998 p. 197; Fox 1999 p. 262). *kullam* would then refer to the admonitions, understanding *yetse'* ('he will go forth') as a late Hebrew idiom for 'doing one's duty by' (Gordis 1968 pp. 277–278) or, slightly different, would signify the notion of succeeding by them (e.g., NRSV translation; 'come or go forth, with esp(ecially) ref(erence) to purpose or result' (Brown et al. 1980 p. 423; cf. Judg 2:15).

The God-fearer would then be a person who holds tightly on to both admonitions, doing his duty by both, preventing any slippage into the extreme of one or the other. This points away from the traditional categories of righteousness/wickedness and wisdom/folly to something fresh and novel (see Sneed 2002 pp. 120–121). The literal, straight-forward meaning of this passage is indeed a 'Golden Mean' or *via media* ethic, reflecting Qohelet's typical self-interest, caution, and even a degree of non-commitment, notwithstanding scholars' sophisticated attempts to exonerate him of any impropriety or impiety (e.g., Schwienhorst-Schönberger 1998 p. 195; Choi 2002 pp. 359, 363–365; Brown 2000 p. 82; Whybray 1978). Qohelet is saying that the upright righteous have a thing or two they could learn from the wicked and foolish; straddling the fence is the wisest and safest option.

Schwienhorst-Schönberger (1998) has insightfully argued that this passage reflects the contemporary debate about Torah piety. He cites Psalm 1 and Mal 3:13–22, roughly contemporary with Qohelet, as evidence of a growing enthusiasm for the Torah. He sees Qohelet steering a path between two extremes: avoiding fanatic Torah-observance versus a total debunking of it. Similarly, Thomas Krüger (1997) maintains that the book as a whole should be situated within

the context of dispute about the role of Torah in Judaism. He argues persuasively that Qohelet in fact frequently alludes to the Law (e.g., 4:17–5:5; cf. Deut 23: 22–24; Lev 4–5 and Num 15), but then relativises it (see pp. 305–306). Taking advantage of contradictions within Torah legislation itself, Qohelet even seems to play texts off each other (see pp. 307–308). Qohelet views the Law more as a classic or resource for ethics rather than a rigid, absolute canonical code (p. 321). This would mean that Qohelet is among those who were not as enthusiastic about the growing, fanatic Torah-pietism. This could place him within the trajectory of Jews who were more open to Hellenism.

From a Jamesonian standpoint, Qohelet's notion and usage of God-fearing is highly significant. It is a mediating concept that solves the dilemma between conformity/resistance by merging them. It is a Hebrew concept, especially prevalent in the Wisdom tradition, which expresses the quintessence of individual piety (e.g., Prov 1:7; 31:30; Job 1:1), but gets revamped by Qohelet to signify those who take a more moderate approach to the Law. It distinguishes itself from the categories of wickedness/folly and righteousness/wisdom, which have become too hackneyed and unreflective of the new social situation, where Greek and Semitic ethics have clashed.

While Qohelet does not totally embrace Torah piety, neither does he do the same with Hellenism. De Jong (1994) has convincingly demonstrated Qohelet's warnings about the dangers of the Hellenistic lifestyle, though he fails to detect Qohelet's other polemic against Torah fanaticism. Placing De Jong's work alongside that of Schwienhorst-Schönberger (1998) creates a more balanced perspective and shows Qohelet's attempt to mediate between two positions.

Qohelet's oblique criticism of God further serves to justify a more moderate position on the Law. In 7:13, Qohelet declares, 'Consider the work of God; who can make straight what he has made crooked?' 6:1–2 is also rather poignant: 'There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy upon humanity: those to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honour, 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 a vanity; it is a grievous evil.' Also, Qohelet's frequent questioning (scepticism) of the doctrine of retribution, which was at the heart of the Wisdom movement and the basis of Torah piety, further confirms his less-than enthusiastic endorsement of a new movement. This questioning served to counter any fanatic, obsessive adherence to the Torah. In other words, his scepticism serves to defend his group's reluctance to join what they perceived as a fanatic religious development.

Qohelet's pessimism further serves to bolster a moderate approach to both Hellenism and Torah-piety. It emotionally buttresses Qohelet's scepticism about each, downplaying any enthusiasm concerning either of these lifestyle options.

Thus, on this first horizon of interpretation I have shown that one of the major contradictions in Qohelet is the tension inherent both formally and logically in the attempt of the book to remain Jewish, while simultaneously, cautiously exploring the new cultural effusion of Hellenism. This has been applied to the social situation of the growing division among the Jews of the Ptolemaic and Seleucid periods regarding the reaction to encroaching Hellenism. Qohelet and the group to which he belongs resolves this political/historical problem imaginatively by embracing a sceptical/pessimistic worldview and concomitant moderate ethic that serves to justify his lifestyle and piety in the hostile context of resistance by other groups that had either embraced the new Torah-piety in defiance of encroaching Hellenism or had abandoned the faith for the Greek lifestyle. His questioning of the doctrine of retribution further served to provide a more moderate piety

in view of the newly merging influence of Hellenism. In effect then, the book of Qohelet represents the quintessential apology for the moderate Hellenists of his time.

HORIZON TWO: MODERATE HELLENISTS AMONG UPPER CLASS FACTIONALISM

An illuminating piece by Antoon Schoors (1996) offers the possibility of filling out our reading according to the second horizon: social class antagonism. He argues that both the textual and archaeological evidence point to the problem of the rising status of Hellenists in contrast to the diminishing economic status of Torah-adherents (pp. 68–87). The often cited ‘wicked’ in Qohelet would then be these Hellenists or members of the Greek Ptolemaic regime. Schoors does not discuss how the author himself is socially situated within this crisis, but my proposal fits well his scenario for the broader social context. Qohelet takes his stand with the Hellenism-sympathisers who cautiously remain open to the new changes and influences in their culture.

As a result, Qohelet himself most likely had much to benefit from such an alliance. His own ability to write his book demonstrates that his lot was comfortable enough to allow the leisure time to produce such a work. Also, the fact that Qohelet could even read and write should mean he is to be socially located in the Jewish aristocracy, which included both the ruling class and its retainers. Gerhard Lenski (1966) has argued that in ancient agrarian societies, the top 2% consisted of the ruling class and the next 5% would constitute the retainer class, which served the rulers (p. 245). As a teacher/scribe (12:9), he should technically be located in the well-to-do retainer class. As an intellectual, he formed part of the propaganda machinery for the aristocrats. 7:21–22 and 9:1, which assume the perspective of a slave-owning class, add further indirect support. Qohelet even adopts the class fantasy that labourers always sleep well, while the rich cannot for worries about their possessions (5:12) (Müller 1978 p. 257). Being wealthy, in itself, is also unproblematic for Qohelet: ‘Also, to everyone to whom God gives wealth . . . it is a gift from God’ (5:18). Only being enamoured with wealth is to be avoided (5:9).

The retainers of ancient times essentially adopted the worldview of their patrons, the rulers. Thus, ideologically the two classes cannot be clearly separated. Qohelet shares an aristocratic worldview with his patrons.

The legitimization of a moderate Hellenistic Judean upper class is subtle but strong in the book. In a chaotic world where traditional standards of good and evil no longer seem to apply, God rewards those who are cautious before him with the ability to enjoy life. Qohelet describes such persons as ‘pleasing before God’ (2:26; 7:26) and ‘God-fearers’ (3:14; 5:6; 7:18; 8:12–13). The exact denotation of these concepts is fuzzy enough in the book to include all those who had the capacity to follow the *carpe diem* advice. Thus, whoever in Qohelet’s day was enjoying a lifestyle that allowed festive eating, drinking, and the enjoyment of his labour was, by default, a God-fearer. The ability to enjoy comes only from God (2:25); it is a gift from him (3:13; 5:18) and constitutes the recipient’s ‘portion’ in life (3:22; 5:18). It is also sanctioned by God (9:7). As Robert Gordis (1968) notes, Qohelet’s *carpe diem* ethic, which assumes a wealthy lifestyle, ‘would be a bitter mockery to those living on the fringe of starvation’ (p. 179).

Conversely, to those who are not pleasing to God, called ‘sinners’ in 2:26, belongs the task of gathering and collecting for those who are pleasing to God. This is related to Qohelet’s typical anecdote of an entrepreneur who attains great wealth but then suddenly loses it to someone else,

perhaps a fool or stranger (2:18–21; 6:1–2). Also, in 5:5, one who is not cautious before the deity can expect his wrath. Non-God-fearers will not fare well (8:13), and excessive wickedness leads to a premature death (7:17c). A synthesis of these passages suggests that those who are displeasing to God or do not fear him will find themselves either eventually among the poor or else dead. Thus, the God-fearers are well-to-do, while the non-God-fearers either are or soon will be poor, many of whom were no doubt either scrupulous Torah-adherents or thoroughgoing Hellenists.

But the most important aspect of the social class antagonism reflected in the book is its occlusion of the author's underclass in Judah: the poor peasants. The poor are often merely a datum for Qohelet's portrait of a dark world (e.g., 4:1–2). They simply represent instances where things have gone awry in the world. Qohelet feels no compunction to counsel assistance for them.⁸ Qohelet appears to be totally oblivious to the fact that his leisure lifestyle of study and writing is dependent on the back-breaking labour of Judean peasants. The notion of finding pleasure in one's work (3:13; 5:17), something unthinkable for poor, hard-working peasants, demonstrates further that Qohelet does not share the concerns of the poor.

Connected with this legitimization is the detachment from any responsibility toward the poor. This is achieved primarily through a strong sense of fatalism that saturates the book. 9:12 is typical: 'For also no one knows the time of tragedy. Like fish caught in a cruel net and like birds caught in a trap, so humans, like them, are snared by an evil time as it falls upon them suddenly.' Against fate, little can be done: 'What is bent cannot be straightened, and to what is lacking, nothing can be added' (1:15).

While Qohelet was part of the Jewish aristocracy that was open to Hellenism, it does not mean this class was homogenous. Qohelet's warnings about the excesses of the Hellenistic lifestyle and his references to the 'wicked' indicate that within the aristocracy there were those whose embrace of Hellenism was not excessive, who did not agree with those who were willing to give up their Jewish identity. Thus, we can theorise class factionalism within the Jewish aristocracy between aggressive and moderate Hellenists, to which Qohelet belonged. The Torah-fanatics were largely becoming part of the underclass, and thus should be socially located among the poor peasants.

HORIZON THREE: RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE, PIETY, AND UTOPIA

In the last horizon, we transcend to the broadest level, that of mode of production. This horizon focuses on the 'ideology of form'. During the Ptolemaic period, the Jews were part of the Asiatic Mode of Production whose cultural dominant was religious discourse. This is certainly true for the book of Qohelet. As sceptical, cynical, and heterodox as Qohelet might get, the book remains firmly within the domains of religious discourse. There is no truly secular spirit yet within the book, even with its proclivity toward Hellenism.

More particularly, the colonial situation of the Jews under the Greeks gets reflected in a particular form of religious discourse: debate over individual piety and Jewish identity. When comparing the book of Qohelet with roughly contemporary Jewish canonical works (Daniel 1–6, Esther, Ben Sira, Wisdom of Solomon), one immediately discerns that Jewish identity and appropriate individual piety are the only arena for activity left for a tiny Jewish nation under the grip of Ptolemaic/Seleucid domination. The most popular genres become historical fiction and Wisdom

literature. With political independence not part of the picture, Jewish aristocrats re-channelled their libidinal (political) energies and frustrations into the domains of religious debate, moral teaching, and production of literature. However, when things became too oppressive for the Jews and compromise was no longer an option, the genre of apocalyptic, a subversive genre, moved into the dominant position (e.g., Dan 7–12) and piety became rather irrelevant.

Finally, while we have been discussing ideology per se, there is another dimension that Jameson most recently has focused on: its opposite, utopia. This is the notion of a better world that even ideologically saturated texts display. It reveals a dissatisfaction with the status quo, to some extent at least. With Jameson, these utopian facets of a text point toward the ultimate Marxist eschatological ending, its own version of heaven on earth, the truly communal world. But it also points back to the beginnings when the communal ethos prevailed among primitive humans. And so we travel both back in time and into the future toward the ultimate consummation of the Marxist kingdom! Though elitist, Qohelet's acute sense of injustice and disorder in the world (e.g., 3:16; 4:1) point to an utopian/communal kernel. Though I would disagree with Elsa Tamez's assessment of Qohelet as a renegade aristocrat who criticises his Hellenist compatriots, her hermeneutical move to turn the book of Qohelet into a platform for projecting utopian ideals for the poor and disenfranchised of the Third World is exactly what Jameson might do with the book (Tamez 2000 pp. 14–30).

CONCLUSION

Qohelet's scepticism and pessimism are not simply the effect of Ptolemaic social anarchy or anomy. Rather they are part of the solution. His dark/sceptical worldview and ethic enable him and the social class to which he belonged to live more comfortably as less than enthusiastic about recent developments in Torah-piety and more interested in Hellenistic possibilities, while maintaining their own sense of Jewish identity, and avoiding any consciousness of class-guilt.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ This essay is a revised version of a paper with the same title that was read at the SBL 2001 annual conference (Wisdom in Israelite and Cognate Traditions Section) on Nov 18 in Denver.
- ² Cf. RN Whybray, who admits that Qohelet is both radical and conservative but ultimately sees the author's intent 'to show a young but adult audience how to maintain their faith in circumstances that militated against it' (Whybray 1998: p. 245).
- ³ For helpful introductions to his work, see Dowling (1984) and Roberts (2000).
- ⁴ E.g., Yee (1995 pp. 152–156); Boer (1996 pp. 121–142); cf. Mathewson (2002), who shows how traditional source criticism is actually post-modern in some senses and how the biblical text actually argues against itself when it contains multiple sources.
- ⁵ Russell Peck (1985), a college English professor, uses Qohelet as 'pivotal text between Hebraic and Hellenistic traditions' (p. 43).
- ⁶ All verse citations are taken from the NRSV.
- ⁷ Qohelet essentially 'deconstructs' these dichotomies (Sneed 1997 pp. 306–307).
- ⁸ Contra Seow (1997 pp. 33, 334–336, 341–344), who argues that in 11:1–2, Qohelet advises the doing of good deeds and being generous without regard to reward. But even if Qohelet advised this, it would

be the stereotypical noblesse oblige and not true altruism, the fulfilment of a social responsibility placed on the upper class by the culture as a whole.

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