More on Kohelet

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KOHELET’S FINAL WORD:

MORTALITY, WISDOM, AND REVERENCE

Kohelet Chapter 12

Kohelet’s final chapter brings the book to a powerful and poetic close. It is not a reversal of the skeptical tones that preceded it, but their culmination—a sober and poetic reckoning with finitude, faith, and the fragility of wisdom. Through evocative metaphor and theological reflection, chapter 12 distills the book’s major themes and delivers its final charge.

Remember Your Creator: The Poetry of Mortality (12:1–7)

The chapter opens with a directive: “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth” (12:1). The verses that follow offer one of Tanakh’s most elaborate allegories—a haunting depiction of aging and dying. According to the Gemara (Shabbat 151b–152a), the breakdown of the body is illustrated through metaphor: the keepers of the house (hands) tremble, strong men (legs) bow, grinders (teeth) cease, and those who look through windows (eyes) darken.

While commentators differ on some of the specific imagery, the general message is clear: life is fleeting, and physical strength will inevitably decline.

Having appeared 35 times throughout the book, the sun now darkens—its setting signals the end.[i]

The sequence ends: “The dust returns to the earth… and the spirit returns to God who gave it” (12:7). This may hint at divine accountability beyond death—but not necessarily in the form of a developed afterlife doctrine. As Psalm 104:29–30 describes, the spirit returns to its source, emphasizing the divine origin and destination of life. Kohelet’s goal is not metaphysical speculation, but existential awakening: mortality humbles and clarifies.[ii] As in 3:21—‘Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward?’—Kohelet gestures at the divine origin of the soul without resolving metaphysical questions.

Kohelet the Teacher: Wisdom as Spur and Anchor (12:8–12)

In verses 9–12, we learn of Kohelet not only as a seeker but also a teacher. He listened attentively (*izzen*), evaluated deeply (*hikker*), and weighed carefully. Rashbam and Ibn Ezra highlight that Kohelet neither blindly inherited nor hastily discarded tradition, but engaged it with discernment and depth. This dialectical approach is the hallmark of Kohelet’s entire discourse.

Wisdom, we are told, is like a goad—prodding the animal forward—and like well-driven nails, planted by the masters of assemblies (12:11). It guides and steadies, but can also wound. The lifestyle of Torah is not about emotional ease, but about walking in truth.

All wisdom, says Kohelet, comes from one Shepherd. This image, developed in *Kohelet Rabbah* and Hagigah 3b, calls for humility in the face of legitimate debate. The *Arukh HaShulhan* (introduction to *Hoshen Mishpat*) likens Torah to a symphony: the more varied the voices, the richer the music.

The End of the Matter (12:13–14)

The last verses bring the book to its conclusion: “The end of the matter, when all has been heard: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole of man” (12:13).

Some view this as a corrective to the book's searching and challenging tone. However, it appears to express the message that has been unfolding all along. As Zer-Kavod observes, this is not a new idea but a summary: Kohelet has taught reverence, realism, and responsibility throughout. The same fear of God appeared in 3:14, 5:6, 7:18, 8:5, and 8:12–13. Kohelet's conclusion doesn't override his doubts; it distills them into a deeper commitment.

Kohelet does not promise justice on demand or clarity without struggle. But he insists that the fear of God remains both the starting point and the final aim. As Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik teaches, the consciousness of mortality is not an obstacle to faith but its foundation. The fleetingness of life should not drive despair, but devotion:

> The finite experience of being arouses man's conscience, challenges him to accomplish as much as possible during his short life span. In a word, finiteness is the source of morality…For orgiastic man, time is reduced to one dimension; only the present moment counts. There is no future to be anticipated, no past to be remembered.[iii]

Faith After the Verdict

If Rabbi Soloveitchik frames finitude as the source of moral urgency, Kohelet's moral seriousness also resonates in more modern trials of faith—none more haunting than the one remembered by Elie Wiesel from Auschwitz: a group of Jews, in a symbolic courtroom, put God on trial—and found Him guilty. But then they turned and prayed to that very God. [iv]

To remember our Creator in our youth, to reflect on death without fear, to seek wisdom even when certainty eludes us—this is the life Kohelet commends. In that spirit, his final words echo not only the end of the book, but its entire sacred path: "God will bring every deed into judgment... whether good or evil" (12:14). That promise is not always visible to people—but it is the thread that holds all things together.

Epilogue to Kohelet

Kohelet's voice remains singular in Tanakh—at once disillusioned and devout, weary and wise. Across twelve chapters, he dismantles easy theologies and inherited assumptions, only to rebuild something more honest and enduring in their place.

He begins with *havel havalim*—"utter futility"—not as a declaration of nihilism, but as a summons to humility. Life, he insists, is fleeting and difficult to grasp, like vapor. We seek *yitron*, lasting gain, but the world offers only *helek*—a portion, a gift. This shift—from control to gratitude—redefines what it means to live wisely.

Wealth and wisdom, Kohelet affirms, have value. But they offer no guarantees. The righteous may suffer. The wicked may prosper. Death comes to all. Rather than despair, Kohelet calls for clear-eyed, ethically grounded joy. "Eat your bread with joy," he says, "for God has already approved your deeds" (9:7).

His realism is not resignation. It is discipline. Kohelet urges us to act, to love, to seek justice—without illusions. To fear God. To revere wisdom even when it wounds, and to live responsibly even when the world feels chaotic. In the end, his message is quiet but uncompromising: we are not asked to explain the world, only to walk wisely and righteously within it.

REVIEW ESSAY

KOHELET IN OUR TIME:

A REVIEW OF FOUR NEW COMMENTARIES[v]

Erica Brown, *Ecclesiastes and the Search for Meaning* (Maggid Books, 2023).

David Curwin, *Kohelet: A Map to Eden* (Aleph-Beta & Maggid Books, 2023).

Menachem Fisch, *Qohelet: Searching for a Life Worth Living,* illuminations by Debra Band (Baylor University Press, 2023).

Yonatan Grossman and Asael Abelman, *Kohelet: Sedek shel Or* [Hebrew] (Maggid Books, 2023).

Introduction

Kohelet stands apart in Tanakh—a book of searching rather than proclaiming, of questioning rather than resolving. In 2023, four new commentaries offered fresh lenses on its enigmatic voice. In an age often marked by either disconnection from religion or superficial forms of spirituality, it is imperative to pursue an authentic religious quest based on Godliness, wisdom, and intelligence. Kohelet is among the richest biblical sources for insights into this *summum bonum* (the highest good). As no two people are alike, readers may find the diverse approaches of these authors particularly stimulating and meaningful.

In approaching this review, I had initially planned on letting the four works stand in dialogue and debate over the major issues in Kohelet. Having read the books, however, I found their perspectives and methodologies so entirely different that it became more reasonable to focus on each approach separately and invite readers to dive into this illuminating world. In these volumes, we find four distinct means of exploring God's word and the meaning of life. Each of these authors, from distinct disciplines—textual scholarship, pastoral theology, analytic philosophy, and literary midrash—contributes to the growing contemporary conversation about how Kohelet may speak religiously in a disoriented age.

Grossman and Abelman: A Model *Peshat* Commentary

In the spirit of his other excellent commentaries, Yonatan Grossman offers a comprehensive *peshat*-based approach to Kohelet, here co-authored with Asael Abelman. Their introduction covers the major critical issues, and then moves into a verse-by-verse commentary. Demonstrating command of the range of scholarship on Kohelet, they evaluate opinions carefully and judiciously.

Although Kohelet draws from King Solomon's life experiences, the book addresses every person's religious experience (63). Kohelet focuses on the human condition more broadly, rather than on Israel's unique covenantal mission. Kohelet is an inspired human voice standing before God, rather than God's voice revealed through prophecy (21-23).

The expression *tahat ha-shemesh* (beneath the sun) appears twenty-nine times in Kohelet, and nowhere else in the rest of Tanakh. *Tahat ha-shamayim* (under heaven) appears three additional times. This emphasis demonstrates an entirely this-worldly perspective.

Given this starkly anthropocentric focus, Kohelet should reflect different viewpoints than that of revealed prophecy. All people perceive the same reality that Kohelet does. On the basis of this observation, Rabbi Shimon ben Manasia maintained that Kohelet was not inspired altogether: "The Song of Songs defiles the hands because it was composed with divine inspiration. Kohelet does not defile the hands because it is only Solomon's wisdom" (Tosefta Yadayim 2:14).[vi]

Though our tradition generally insists that Kohelet is divinely inspired, it is indeed written from the perspective of human wisdom.

One of the most critical terms to define in Kohelet is *hevel*. It appears 38 times in the book, out of 73 occurrences in all the *Tanakh*. In Kohelet, *hevel* has a negative connotation, and is linked with *ra'ah rabbah*, a grave evil (2:21); *inyan ra*, an unhappy business (4:8); and *holi ra*, a grievous ill (6:2). Elsewhere it refers to vaporous ephemerality (Job 7:1–16). *Hevel* is linked to *shav* and *sheker* (e.g., Isaiah 30:7; 49:4; Job 9:29; 27:12; 35:16), suggesting worthlessness or senselessness. Many interpreters therefore translate *hevel* as "ephemeral" or "vanity."

However, Kohelet also describes certain permanent features of the human condition as *hevel*:

> For sometimes a person whose fortune was made with wisdom, knowledge, and skill must hand it on to be the portion of somebody

> who did not toil for it. That too is futile, and a grave evil. For what does a man get for all the toiling and worrying he does under the sun? All his days his thoughts are grief and heartache, and even at night his mind has no respite. That too is futile! (2:21–23).
>
> There is an evil I have observed under the sun, and a grave one it is for man: that God sometimes grants a man riches, property, and wealth, so that he does not want for anything his appetite may crave, but God does not permit him to enjoy it; instead, a stranger will enjoy it. That is futility and a grievous ill (6:1–2).

Therefore, the common translations are inadequate. Grossman and Abelman interpret *hevel* to mean that the world often seems illogical and chaotic. Knowledge of the purpose of life, or having a sense of order, is vaporous because the world lacks that order in human perception (31–32). In this regard, their interpretation approaches that of Michael V. Fox, who translates *hevel* as absurd. [vii]

Although Kohelet is steeped in biblical wisdom tradition, he also challenges many of its presumptions, including the necessary connection between a righteous life and worldly success (e.g., 7:15; 8:9–17). Similarly, Kohelet preaches diligence and condemns sloth, but concurrently is disillusioned that hard work does not always yield the expected results (e.g., 4:4–6; 9:11–12) (28, 83).

Kohelet is not a systematic work of philosophy, and therefore may have contradictions as it explores different aspects of the human condition.[viii] Perhaps the book's greatest contribution is its closing chapter (333–345). One of the most elusive aspects of Kohelet interpretation has been seeking an overall structure. Grossman and Abelman maintain that the repeated references to eating and drinking and enjoying life as gifts from God (2:24–25, 3:12–13; 3:22; 5:17–18; 6:12; 8:15; 9:7–10; chapters 11–12) are intended as refrains to conclude each section.

The authors conclude by summarizing their understanding of Kohelet's overall philosophy:

> Meaning for humankind is not rooted in the great and broad worlds of religious longing, which prods people to gather vast wisdom to become a prophet or to bring the Messiah. It occurs with the religious

> experience of observing the commandments, and sipping a cup of tea with mint or herbs. That is a gift from God (346).

This vision captures Kohelet's grounded theology: joy not as distraction, but as sacred attention to the small, good things in life.

One should add that other principal lessons include fearing God, pursuing wisdom, working diligently, having religious humility, and not being obsessive over the attainment of either wisdom or wealth.[ix] Overall, Grossman and Abelman's commentary is an exceptional resource for learning *peshat* in Kohelet.

Erica Brown: Meaningful Inspiration Based upon a *Peshat* Foundation

Erica Brown builds her commentary on a solid *peshat* foundation. She relies primarily on the works of the classical *midrashim* and commentators for her text analysis, and also engages with contemporary scholars when they meaningfully contribute.

Brown focuses primarily on how the ideas of Kohelet are deepened through engagement with the wisdom of the world. Citing a dazzling array of quotations from works of Jewish tradition, philosophy, psychology, literature, poetry, art, contemporary sociological studies, and much more, she brings these ideas to bear on the meaning of life as reflected through Kohelet. Those inspirational ideas are the major contribution of this volume.

For example, Kohelet expresses chagrin over the person who has many children but is unable to enjoy his wealth:

> Even if a man should beget a hundred children and live many years—no matter how many the days of his years may come to, if his gullet is not sated through his wealth, I say: The stillbirth, though it was not even accorded a burial, is more fortunate than he (6:3).

Kohelet declares that it is better to have been a stillborn than to experience this particular misery. Brown goes on an extended discussion of the profound sense of

loss a stillborn brings its family (239–242).

In chapter 5, Brown presents an essay filled with insights pertaining to greed, including an illuminating study profiled in *The Atlantic* in 2011 regarding the widespread wealth dissatisfaction of the super-rich—defined in that study by people with fortunes upward of 25 million dollars. These discussions provide a poignant illustration of Kohelet's saying, "A lover of money never has his fill of money, nor a lover of wealth his fill of income. That too is futile" (5:9).

Brown's citations from the panoply of human wisdom bring the eternal messages of Kohelet to life.

Menachem Fisch: A Philosopher's Personal Worldview

Menachem Fisch, emeritus professor at Tel Aviv University, writes not as a Bible commentator, but as an engaged philosopher who admires Kohelet. Fisch adopts the position of Karl Popper, who maintains that science and rationality at their best disprove ideas and propositions, and can never prove anything. Therefore, one should relentlessly pursue truth by constantly subjecting arguments to criticism (3). Kohelet's unremitting challenges to the human condition and its wisdom assumptions promote religious and intellectual humility. Fisch thereby creates a thought-provoking lens through which to learn Kohelet.

Fisch writes brief essays to introduce each chapter, but does not present a systematic commentary in verse-by-verse sequence. This feature makes his self-styled "philosophical commentary" readable, but also leaves a critical void in several of his central interpretations.

For example, Fisch defines *hevel* as ephemeral like vapor, rather than vanity (7–8). Kohelet thus teaches how to pursue and live a meaningful life in our temporary existence. This message certainly is central to Kohelet; however, as discussed above in this chapter, *hevel* sometimes laments enduring situations, rather than fleeting existence. Fisch does not address the challenge to his definition that arises from these and other examples in Kohelet.

Fisch opposes passive piety, and promotes social activism to improve the world. He deems social action a cornerstone of Kohelet's message:

> We should act to better the world to our satisfaction as best we can, while humbly acknowledging our shortsightedness as far as God's response to our efforts is concerned (125).
>
> To act is to introduce change into our world…. To act wisely therefore consists first of taking keen critical stock of our domains of responsibility, on the lookout for possible problems or potential trouble spots and to determine how best to confront them (132).

To support his worldview, Fisch cites a passage toward the end of chapter 3:

> So I decided, as regards men, to dissociate them [from] the divine beings and to face the fact that they are beasts. For in respect of the fate of man and the fate of beast, they have one and the same fate: as the one dies so dies the other, and both have the same lifebreath; man has no superiority over beast, since both amount to nothing (3:18–19).

He interprets these verses to mean that people who are passively pious are no better than beasts. However, Kohelet describes *all* human beings, who will die just like animals. Kohelet does not limit himself to passively pious people here, nor does he elevate those who take an active role in their society.

More fundamentally, although the prophets endorse a life of God-fearing social action, this worldview is not expressed anywhere in Kohelet. When Kohelet sees oppression, he simply complains that it is appalling:

> I further observed all the oppression that goes on under the sun: the tears of the oppressed, with none to comfort them; and the power of their oppressors—with none to comfort them. Then I accounted those who died long since more fortunate than those who are still living; and happier than either are those who have not yet come into being and have never witnessed the miseries that go on under the sun (4:1–3).

While Fisch's reading reflects deep moral seriousness, the emphasis on social action may draw more from the prophetic corpus than from Kohelet itself.

It is worth noting an added feature of this book. Fisch's cousin, Debra Band, contributed original Kohelet-inspired artwork and extensive commentary on her pieces. Much of her oeuvre in one way or another reflects ephemerality, adding misty elements to a variety of scenes depicting the physical world. Several of her illustrations give expression to other specific ideas in Kohelet. For example, regarding her piece on the Song of the Seasons in chapter 3, she offers the following interpretation:

> Qohelet meditates further on how every aspect and moment of life has its converse moment; the destined time for each is unknowable to any but God, the master of all existence. Gazing at his garden, he perceives life as a river, its origin unknowable, its endpoint obscure, each mirage-like moment subject to fluctuations and eddies that he cannot anticipate. The wall through which the stream emerges is capped by a mosaic bearing a fragment of the musical notation of Pete Seeger's famous 1965 setting of the poem "Turn, Turn, Turn" (113).

David Curwin: A Modern Intertextual Midrash

David Curwin presents a creative network of intertextual associations. He reads Kohelet as a personal confession of King Solomon, and finds allusions to Solomon's feelings of guilt over the mistakes he made throughout his reign. Curwin argues that Kohelet gives a voice to Solomon to repent for his sins. Curwin argues that the primary message of Kohelet is that one should not rationalize one's sins, one should repent, and God will forgive (17). Through this process of repentance, we may return to the Garden of Eden.

To develop his thesis, Curwin relies on an array of intertextual connections he has identified. Readers will have significantly different thresholds of what they consider convincing. When one breaks the book down into its various component sections, several arguments become more compelling than others. We will focus on two examples, one where the parallels appear to be unpersuasive (to this writer), and another which appears to be a model of how Curwin's inventive

technique can open new vistas in learning.

Curwin connects Kohelet to the Solomon narratives in the Book of Kings. He summarizes his central thesis at the end of his volume:

> However, even though we said earlier that unlike his father David, "there is no sign of Shlomo repenting," Kohelet is evidence to the contrary…. [Shlomo] uses one long speech—the book of Kohelet—to address the mistakes of his past. He ceases rationalizing his sins and accepts God as Judge. Kohelet became his *vidui* (confession), which…is necessary for any authentic repentance (196–197).

To evaluate this claim, let us consider several representative examples:

"A good name is better than fragrant oil, and the day of death than the day of birth" (Kohelet 7:1). The "fragrant oil" alludes to Solomon's anointment as king. Kohelet wishes he never had been anointed king, but instead should have lived up to his divinely-given name of Jedidiah, God's beloved (see II Samuel 12:24) (19–20).

"O youth, enjoy yourself while you are young! Let your heart lead you to enjoyment in the days of your youth. Follow the desires of your heart and the glances of your eyes—but know well that God will call you to account for all such things" (Ecclesiastes 11:9). Solomon regrets the sinful indulgences of his youth, and warns readers not to emulate his behavior (20).

"Be not overeager to go to the House of God: more acceptable is obedience than the offering of fools, for they know nothing [but] to do wrong" (Ecclesiastes 4:17). Solomon bemoans the oppressive measures he imposed on his nation in order to build the Temple (23).[x]

There are several flaws with this line of interpretation. Solomon's experience lies in the background of Kohelet, but Kohelet contains guidance to

teach all people for all time, and not a personal confession: “A further word: Because Kohelet was a sage, he continued to instruct the people. He listened to and tested the soundness of many maxims” (12:9). Kohelet takes a painfully hard look at human experience and helps readers navigate life’s difficulties (cf. Grossman and Abelman, 63; Brown, 447).

There also is no mention of repentance in Kohelet. Kohelet calls for a God-fearing, wise, righteous life. Although the prophets routinely promoted repentance, it is difficult to consider repentance to be the primary message of Kohelet when the concept never appears in the book. Curwin’s personal repentance model is imaginative and spiritually resonant, but ultimately ungrounded in the text’s explicit themes or language.

It also is noteworthy that Curwin paints Solomon as regretting the sinful behavior of his youth. The Book of Kings dates Solomon’s religious decline to his old age: “In his old age, his wives turned away Solomon’s heart after other gods, and he was not as wholeheartedly devoted to the Lord his God as his father David had been” (I Kings 11:4). It is likewise dubious to ascribe to Solomon feelings of guilt over building the Temple, his crowning achievement.

Even if one finds some of the literary parallels intriguing, the overall analysis belongs to the realm of Curwin’s *derash*. If readers are inspired by the religious message that the doors of repentance are never closed, that is all for the good.

There are more convincing analyses in the book, particularly his explorations of texts pertaining to priestly clothing, the Temple, the Garden of Eden, and Yom Kippur (137–165). Curwin begins this leg of his journey with a survey of some well-known parallels between the Garden of Eden and the Tabernacle. Given that Adam was expelled from Eden, what would it take to return to paradise? Adam and Eve began their lives free of shame and naked, and felt shame only after they sinned. Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (on Genesis 3:7) suggests that shame is a God-given instinct to remind us that we are not animals. When our bodies completely fulfill God’s commands, there is no shame. Here, Curwin draws attention to a puzzling detail of the Yom Kippur ritual:

> And Aaron shall go into the Tent of Meeting, take off the linen vestments that he put on when he entered the Shrine, and leave them there. He shall bathe his body in water in the holy precinct and put on his vestments; then he shall come out and offer his burnt

> offering and the burnt offering of the people, making expiation for himself and for the people. The fat of the sin offering he shall turn into smoke on the altar (Leviticus 16:23–25).

According to the plain sense of the text, the High Priest disrobes, leaves his garments in the Holy of Holies, and then emerges for the final time on Yom Kippur. Ramban is astonished: “It is completely impossible that [the Torah] would command Aaron to go to the Tent of Meeting for no reason, only to remove his clothing, be naked in God’s Sanctuary, and leave [the garments] there to rot!” (on Leviticus 16:23). The Torah expressly outlaws such conduct, and threatens death for violating the requirement of being properly covered:

> You shall also make for them linen breeches to cover their nakedness; they shall extend from the hips to the thighs. They shall be worn by Aaron and his sons when they enter the Tent of Meeting or when they approach the altar to officiate in the sanctuary, so that they do not incur punishment and die. It shall be a law for all time for him and for his offspring to come (Exodus 28:42–43; cf. Exodus 20:23).

Halakhah resolves this difficulty by reading the actions of Leviticus 16:23 as occurring *after* 16:25. The High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies after bathing. He therefore was dressed while in the Holy of Holies. He removed his garments prior to bathing, and left nothing behind in the Holy of Holies (Yoma 32a, Rashi).

Nevertheless, the plain sense of the text suggests that the High Priest actually disrobed in the Holy of Holies. Is there a religious message underlying the *peshat*, even though this was not the applied law? Curwin maintains that the *peshat* suggests a return to the Eden-like state of pre-sin unashamed, naked existence.

Unlike Adam and Eve, who failed to take responsibility for their sins and were expelled from Eden, Yom Kippur is characterized by confession of sin and atonement. Whereas the Cherubs in Eden prevented Adam and Eve from re-entering, the Temple’s Cherubs welcome the High Priest to the restored state of Eden. Curwin’s creative analysis thereby provides a stimulating interpretation to an age-old crux.

Conclusion

It is edifying to consider four diverse approaches to Kohelet at once. Grossman and Abelman are exemplars of the pursuit of *peshat*: painstaking analysis of the text, thorough surveying and analyzing ancient and contemporary commentaries, and a comprehensive methodology to navigate the debates and text. Brown engages readers with a plethora of insights into the human condition. Fisch's philosophy of uncertainty and humility dovetails meaningfully with Kohelet. His emphasis on social action, while an important biblical value, is not manifest in Kohelet. Curwin offers an array of potential intertextual links between Kohelet and other biblical books, and readers are invited to determine what they find compelling within his nexus of connections.

Kohelet challenges us to locate the sacred not only in divine revelation, but in the raw fabric of human life—marked by mortality, contradiction, and limited understanding. Each of the works reviewed here offers a distinct path toward making sense of this sacred dissonance, whether through close textual analysis, philosophical engagement, or existential reflection. Their diversity mirrors Kohelet's own multivocal complexity and invites the reader into a dialogue rather than a conclusion.

As the essays in this volume have sought to show, Kohelet does not resolve theological tension—it dignifies it. His voice asks not for certainty, but for reverence; not for mastery, but for humility. He sanctifies the human perspective not by answering every question, but by refusing to look away from life's hardest truths. In reading him alongside these modern interpreters, we continue the sacred task of seeking wisdom under the sun.

APPENDIX

[i] Choon-Leong Seow, *Anchor Bible: Ecclesiastes* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 376.

[ii] Michael V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 355.

[iii] Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukkah*, ed. Eli D. Clark et al. (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2007), 33.

[iv] In Dennis Prager, *The Rational Bible: Deuteronomy* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Press, 2018), 37.

[v] An earlier version of this essay appeared in *Tradition* 55:4 (Fall 2023), 147–157.

[vi] See discussion of sacred scriptures ritually defiling the hands in Sid Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Archon Books, 1991), 104–120.

[vii] Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Eerdmans, 1999), 41. Mark Sneed challenges Fox's translation, as there are no other biblical examples of *hevel* referring to such an abstract concept as "absurdity." Rather, he suggests, *hevel* means breath, vapor. See Sneed, "*Hevel* as Worthless in Qoheleth: A Critique of Michael V. Fox's 'Absurd' Thesis," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 136 (2017), 890-894. For the record, Fox admits that the term does not mean "absurdity" anywhere else. Coming to Fox's defense, Samuel T. S. Goh observes that vapor is vague and ambiguous. In Kohelet, wisdom, enjoyment, and divine justice cannot have absolute defining of terms, like *hevel*. Life defies either/or definitions, and has contradictions. The idea comes closer to Fox but retains the standard understanding of word *hevel*. See his "The *Hebel* World, Its Ambiguities and Contradictions," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 45:2 (2020), 198-216.

[viii] Shalom Carmy and David Shatz remark: “The Bible obviously deviates, in many features, from what philosophers (especially those trained in the analytic tradition) have come to regard as philosophy… Philosophers try to avoid contradicting themselves. When contradictions appear, they are either a source of embarrassment or a spur to developing a higher order dialectic to accommodate the tension between the theses. The Bible, by contrast, often juxtaposes contradictory ideas, without explanation or apology: Ecclesiastes is entirely constructed on this principle. The philosophically more sophisticated work of harmonizing the contradictions in the biblical text is left to the exegetical literature”; see their “The Bible as a Source for Philosophical Reflection,” in *History of Jewish Philosophy*, vol. 2, ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (Routledge, 1997), 13–14). Cf. Michael V. Fox: “Even without systematically harmonizing the text, the reader tends to push Qohelet to one side or another, because the Western model of rational assent regards consistency as a primary test of truth. But Qohelet continues to straddle the two views of reality, wavering uncomfortably but honestly between them”; *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 134.

[ix] For further discussion of Kohelet’s unique perspective within Tanakh, see “Kohelet: Sanctifying the Human Perspective,” in this volume.

[x] Curwin finds Solomon’s forced labor, called *mas* (I Kings 5:27), and his building of store cities, *arei miskenot* (I Kings 9:15–19) parallel to Pharaoh’s forcing his Israelite slaves to do the same (Exodus 1:11). Although Solomon’s extensive labor projects did cause northern resentment (I Kings, chapter 12), the direct analogy to the wicked Pharaoh appears strained.