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THE ABSURDITY OF THE ETHIC: THE HISTORY
OF PIOUS INTERPRETATION OF ECCLESIASTES 8:1-15

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of the requirements for Ordination

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DIGEST

In Eccl. 8:1-15, Qohelet challenges two fundamental doctrines adopted by Judaism: the efficacy of wisdom and divine justice. For a pious believer, Ecclesiastes brings into focus the difficult questions that can threaten faith. These questions have to be pondered and answered in such a way as to strengthen that faith.

Later Judaisms were unable to accept Qohelet's ultimate conclusion that life had no value or meaning. On the contrary, a fundamental goal of Judaism was to make life meaningful. Ethical behavior and observance of the commandments made life meaningful and made the world a better place. Right action led inevitably to reward, and divine providence was an indisputable fact. The absurdity of Qohelet's world was radically incompatible with these other Jewish conceptions.

Traditionally-minded readers of Qohelet's teachings were stirred by his writings; they were shocked at his advice, and felt motivated to comment. Some commentators went far beyond a simple response to Qohelet's conclusions and attempted to solve the dilemmas that he posed.

This thesis is a study of the solutions of leading Jewish commentators from various periods in history, particularly in response to Eccl. 8:1-15, one of the most problematic passages in the book. Each response is examined and compared to the "plain meaning" of the text, the "plain meaning" being understood to be the original intention of Qohelet as determined by modern scholarship. The purpose of this work is (1) to give a precise

explanation of Eccl. 8:1-15, (2) to compare this precise explanation to traditional commentary, and (3) to examine the various definitions of absurdity.

Pious commentators have various conceptions of "absurdity," none of which seems to conform to Qohelet's plain sense. The Talmudic sources have the least developed definition of *hebel*: absurdity is anything that contradicts rabbinic law. This definition applies not only to ideas but also to people. Thus, gentiles who fail to comprehend the superiority of Rabbinic Judaism are labelled absurd. The definition of absurdity as a contradiction of traditional teaching applies throughout the talmudic commentary on Ecclesiastes Chapter Eight but there is no systematic theological argument of the point.

Qohelet's proof for the rejection of divine retribution is absurd, according to Saadia Gaon, because it is a simplistic generalization. A wise man knows that this matter is beyond human comprehension. Absurdity is manifest in simplistic generalizations that lead one away from religious belief and practice. Sophistry is absurdity.

Rashi appropriates Qohelet's method of argumentation. Qohelet's style of rhetoric is to take a pious wisdom saying turn it on its head. In Rashi's account, Qohelet comes to reject the case of the apparent lack of divine justice in the world. Qohelet proves that the claim that divine retribution does not exist is an illusion. Absurdity, for Rashi then, is any conclusion that people draw based on appearances. Empirical observation leads easily to false opinions; the world and God are

much too complicated for the faithless to comprehend. One acts absurdly when denying the existence of divine retribution merely on appearances.

According to the Zohar, absurdity has both a negative and positive connotation. The everyday events that seem to disprove divine retribution are the absurdities because the truth is that divine retribution suffuses the world.

For Qohelet, belief in the efficacy of wisdom or divine retribution is absurd; for pious commentators, the denial of either is absurd. The truth is not a choice between skepticism and belief but a confrontation between the two. Absurdity is relative to the truth that one accepts. Since the definition of absurdity is dependent upon one's religious beliefs, each definition rejects every other dissonant system of religious belief.

To My Wife

Marilyn

Whose Love and Support
Has Guided Me Through This Work

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ABBREVIATIONS

BDB	Brown, Driver, and Briggs. <u>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament.</u>
DR	<u>Deuteronomy Rabba</u>
GR	<u>Genesis Rabba</u>
Jastrow	<u>A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature.</u>
LR	<u>Leviticus Rabba</u>
NJPS	<u>Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures.</u>
NR	<u>Numbers Rabba</u>
PRK	<u>Pesikta d'Rab Kahana</u>
PR	<u>Pesikta Rabbati</u>
RSV	Revised Standard Version
QR	<u>Qohelet Rabba</u>
Cantr	<u>Song of Songs Rabba</u>
TDOT	<u>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament.</u>

Complete references are given in the bibliography.

"Ecclesiastes" refers to the text; "Qohelet" refers to the author of the text.

All references for Ibn Ezra, Ramban, and the Targum are found in the standard version of Miqra'ot Gedolot.

Introduction

Absurdities of absurdities!-said Qohelet-
Absurdities of absurdities! Everything is absurd!

These words are the introduction to the book of Ecclesiastes according to the definition of *hebel* proposed by Michael Fox.¹ Qohelet, the sage (according to Eccl. 12:9), is for the modern reader an antithesis of a wisdom teacher. He rejects and ridicules wisdom; he mocks those with pious reverence for wisdom (Eccl. 1:18). What a person acquires appears to be a matter of luck rather than divine providence. One can do no better than to eat, drink, and enjoy the portion that one receives, says Qohelet (Eccl. 5:17, 8:15).

Traditionally-minded readers of Qohelet's teachings were stirred by his writings. Some were shocked at his advice, and felt motivated to comment. For example:

Rabbi Judah son of R. Samuel ben Shilath said in Rab's name: The sages wished to hide the Book of Ecclesiastes because its words are self-contradictory; why did they not hide it? Because its beginning is words of Torah and its end is words of Torah.²

Some commentators went far beyond a simple response to Qohelet's conclusions and attempted to solve the dilemmas that he posed. For a pious believer, Ecclesiastes brought into focus the difficult questions that could threaten faith. Those questions had to be pondered and answered in such a way as to strengthen that faith.

¹Michael V. Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet," Journal of Biblical Literature, 105/3 (1986), pp. 409-427.

²Shabbat 30b; LR 28.1 also gives an example.

This thesis is a study of the solutions of leading Jewish commentators from various periods in history, particularly in response to Eccl. 8:1-15, one of the most problematic passages in the book. Each response is examined and compared to the "plain meaning" of the text, the "plain meaning" being understood to be the original intention of Qohelet as determined by modern scholarship. The purpose of this work is (1) to give a precise explanation of Eccl. 8:1-15, (2) to compare this precise explanation to traditional commentary, and (3) to examine the various definitions of absurdity.

The traditional commentaries focus upon two major theological difficulties in Eccl. 8:1-15: the efficacy of wisdom and divine retribution. The first chapter of my thesis will seek to establish Qohelet's premises and describe his response to these theological difficulties. The next four chapters will concentrate on the various Jewish responses to Qohelet's daring and problematic discussion. In succession, they treat rabbinic interpretations (Chapter Two), Saadia Gaon (Chapter Three), Rashi (Chapter Four), the Zohar (Chapter 5). The purpose of these chapters is to explain each response and define the relationship between the text of Ecclesiastes and the content of the commentary. In each case, I will focus on the commentator's attempts to solve the theological difficulties posed by Qohelet within their particular hermeneutical framework.

The conclusion focuses on the definition of the "absurdity" (*hebel*) in Ecclesiastes Chapter Eight in light of traditional

commentary - particularly on the remarkable dissonance between that commentary and the apparent "plain sense" of the text. The question of what is absurd must be reevaluated in the context of the two theological issues of the efficacy of wisdom and the nature of divine retribution. Each commentator develops an account of Qohelet's absurdity according to his particular response to the text. In the end, one must decide who speaks the truth about wisdom and divine justice: Qohelet or his commentators.

Chapter 1
A New Translation

Ecclesiastes 8:1-15

¹Who is like the wise man, and who understands the interpretation of the saying:

"A wise man's wisdom illuminates his face

So that his stern visage is changed"

²I do! Obey the king's orders and do not be hasty in uttering an oath in the name of God. ³Leave his presence. Do not persist in a dangerous situation because he can do anything he pleases

⁴inasmuch as a king's command is authoritative, and none can say to him, "What are you doing?" ⁵One who obeys commands will not experience a dangerous situation.

A wise man knows intimately that there is a time of doom.

⁶That for all desire there is a time of doom because a man's calamity overwhelms him. ⁷For he does not know what will be; even when it will happen, who can tell him? ⁸A man is powerless over the lifebreath, to hold in the lifebreath: there is no authority on the day of death. There is no mustering out of this war and wealth is powerless to save its owner.

⁹All of this I observed, and I considered all the deeds that are done under the sun, when men have authority over men to harm them unjustly. ¹⁰Then I saw wicked men, approaching and entering the holy place, walk about and boast in the city that they have done right. This too is absurdity. ¹¹Because the sentence for evil deeds is not executed swiftly, therefore men are encouraged to do evil. ¹²A sinner may do evil a hundred times and his [life] is prolonged.

Although I know that it shall be well for those who fear God because they revere Him, ¹³and it will not be well for the wicked one and his days will not be prolonged because he does not fear God, ¹⁴there is an absurdity that occurs in the world: there are righteous people who receive recompense due the wicked and there are wicked people who receive recompense due the righteous. I say that this is also absurdity.

¹⁵Therefore I praised enjoyment. For the only good a man can have under the sun is to eat and drink and enjoy himself. That much can accompany him with his toil through the days of life that God has granted him under the sun.

The above translation of Ecclesiastes Chapter 8 is the subject of this discussion. The goals of this analysis are simply to ask: who is Qohelet and what messages does he preach? Particular attention is given to the grammatical and contextual difficulties of chapter eight. This chapter is not unique to the book of Ecclesiastes; on the contrary, it exemplifies themes and arguments from earlier and later chapters. When appropriate, these broad themes will be mentioned and examined.

8:1

Who is like the wise man, and who understands the interpretation of the saying:

"A wise man's wisdom illuminates his face
So that his stern visage is changed"

The epilogue in chapter 12 explains that Qohelet was a sage who searched for truth and wisdom for "The sayings of the wise are like goads...."¹ Because of the adage Qohelet introduces in verse 1, the verse confirms the assertion of the epilogue.

However, the same epilogue states that Qohelet "tested the soundness of many maxims" and the wisdom saying of this verse is no exception. Not only does Qohelet reject the adage in later verses, he ridicules those who would believe such pious teachings.

Verse one is divided into four parts: 1) Who is like the wise man; 2) and who understands the interpretation of the saying;; 3) "A wise man's wisdom illuminates his face; and 4) so

¹ Eccl. 12:11.

that his stern visage is changed." The first two clauses are the introduction to the third and fourth clauses. These last two clauses comprise the anonymous proverb. I will discuss each phrase individually and conclude with a general statement.

In the first clause the word *kehehakam* has attracted much commentary since the Amoraic period. The unassimilated definite article "h" in the presence of the prefix "k" is common in the later writings but it occurs in the text of Ecclesiastes only here. H. L. Ginsberg argues that the word is Aramaic (indeed the whole book is a Hebrew translation from Aramaic!) and should be read as *ke'an hehakam* (Now who is a wise man?).² Rashi suggests rendering "k" as *ka'n* (here, thus) which is an adverbial form. Gordis rejects the adverbial reading as unnecessary, citing other occurrences of the uncontracted article.³

An unavoidable consequence of accepting "k" as an adverb is the claim that 8:1 is the conclusion of the previous unit because the adverb must modify what precedes it. Although Eaton and Loader hold this position, there is no causal connection between 8:1 and 7:29.⁴ Grammatical analysis must be supplemented by examining the context, this argument will demonstrate that 8:1 is the introduction to Eccl. 8:1-8.

²Ginsberg, p. 104.

³ Robert Gordis, Koheleth: the Man and His World (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 286.

⁴Michael A. Eaton, Ecclesiastes (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), p. 117.

J. A. Loader, Ecclesiastes (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 93-94.

Only Ginsberg's suggestion solves the problem of context. First, "Here/now" (*ka'n*), reflects Qohelet's previously expressed opinion of wisdom in general as only relatively useful and overrated.⁵ Second, subsequent verses demonstrate Qohelet's mockery of adage which comprises the second half of this verse. Finally, some ancient manuscripts, according to Ginsberg, do concur with the reading of *ka'n hehakam*.⁶

Nineteenth-century scholars already considered the second half of verse 1 to be a quotation of an anonymous wisdom saying. Since the first formulation of this idea, parallels have been established with Ben Sira and Proverbs. The parallels read:

A man's heart changes his countenance,
either for good or for evil.
The mark of a happy heart is a cheerful face,
but to devise proverbs requires painful thinking.
Ben Sira 13:25-26

A glad heart makes a cheerful countenance.
Prov. 15:13

These parallels manifest clear similarities to the adage in Eccl. 8:1. The heart in biblical lore is the seat of wisdom and knowledge. Both parallels make the connection between the content of the heart and the facial expression. The importance of this parallel is the cause-and effect sequence, namely, a glad heart leads to cheerful face. The first clause of Ben Sira 13:25 is ambiguous; the same ambiguity is present in the verb of the second line of the Ecclesiastes quote: *ye^vsunne'* (lit. is

⁵Eccl. 1:18, 2:16, 4:13.

⁶Ginsberg, p. 105.

changed). Lifted out of the context of the chapter, the anonymous quote contains not only the same cause and effect sequence as Ben Sira but embodies the same pious flavor.

Ginsberg and Gordis both prefigure Qohelet's cynical rendering of the quote from later verses in their translations of the fourth clause. Ginsberg uses "dissembled," concealing one's real thoughts and motives behind a false appearance.⁷ The context is correct, but these translators fail to capture the cynicism of Qohelet's discourse when they remove the ambiguity. Crenshaw, who is in agreement with Ginsberg and Gordis, argues that the saying anticipates the discussion of the court; when, in fact, the saying precipitates the homily on court behavior.⁸

The ambiguity of the adage must be preserved in order to demonstrate the irony of Qohelet's interpretation. From a translation that preserves the ambiguity, the reader is able to decipher Qohelet's cynical attitude towards wisdom. Qohelet deliberately twists the meaning of the wisdom saying to elicit a jaded, albeit practical, guide to court conduct. He mocks this abstract praise of wisdom.

The other phrase within the proverb which is grammatically difficult is *we'oz panaw yesunne*⁹. The Masoretic Text reads *soz* as a noun but many prefer to end the text with an adverb.^{*}

⁷ NJPS p. 1450.

⁸ James L. Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), p. 150.

^{*} BDB, p. 739.

Gordis argues for the Masoretic Text because in Mishnaic Hebrew the phrase can signify the character of one's action or one's outer demeanor.¹⁰ In other words, the phrase reads simultaneously as a stern man and a man who acts in accordance with strict discipline. Upon this man, wisdom shows its effects, either by his expression on his action.

6:2

I do! Obey the king's orders and do not be hasty in uttering an oath in the name of God.

The first word of verse 2 has a long history of emendation and interpretation. The first person pronoun 'ani (I) appears by itself without a verb, hence without a context. Several solutions have been advanced but most are inadequate. The Septuagint ignores the existence of the pronoun. Others render 'et, the untranslatable sign of a determined noun, although a determined noun does not appear in the text.

Another suggestion is to add the word 'amarti (I state) but the loss of an entire word is rather farfetched; there are no similar words nearby in the text which could have caused a scribe to lose his place and thus the word.¹¹ Another emendation is *beni* (my son) in place of 'ani based on the use of the term in Proverbs 1-9. This emendation is rejected for two reasons:

¹⁰Gordis, p. 287.

¹¹Christian D. Ginsburg, The Song of Songs and Coheleth (New York: Ktav, Inc, 1970), p. 392. This suggestion is argued by C.D. Ginsburg based on the German scholar Franz Delitzsch.

the term appears elsewhere in Ecclesiastes only once in a suspect text 12:12, and the letters "v" and "b" are not easily confused.

Gordis argues, on the basis of one talmudic passage, that the text is correct as it stands.¹² However, his translation "I declare" fails to acknowledge a contextual connection between 8:1 and 8:2.

Failure to establish a connection between the verses results in an argument that the placement of the subject of courtly behavior is arbitrary. As suggested above, the placement of the discourse on the court after the adage is deliberate. Although court behavior is the immediate subject, the two major themes of the passage are the efficacy of wisdom and death, both of which are major themes from preceding chapters. This discourse is another argument by Qohelet that death renders human endeavors futile and that wisdom has only relative value (one does not attain happiness, but one avoids some suffering). Thus, the evidence supports the translation that Ginsberg proposes, "I do;" this interpretation unites the two verses.¹³

Another difficulty with the verse is "an oath in the name of God;" there is no verb present. Pious interpreters resolve the awkwardness of the text by defining "the king" as God. The orders are the commandments at Sinai which the Israelites swore to obey. This reading appends "the oath" to the first verb in the passage, "obey." For example, Rashi suggests rendering *ne'al*

¹²Gordis p. 288.

¹³NJPS p. 1450.

as "because," making the phrase a dependent clause. Gordis, who is not a pious interpreter, pursues the same solution. He attempts to translate the same term as "especially," equating the king's orders with an oath in the name of God.¹⁴ All of the suggestions fail to bring coherence to the text because the phrase "an oath in the name of God" cannot complement by the verb *שמע* (obey); a second verb is necessary.

The best solution is to shift the end of the verse to include *'al tibbonahel* (do not be hasty) in verse 3. A similar sentiment is expressed by Qohelet in 5:3-5 where he expounds his predisposition against vows. The intent of his message concerning vows is that fools make vows, but wise men keep silent. "Do not be hasty in uttering an oath in the name of God" offers similar advice. His counsel: do not make promises to the monarch, particularly grand ones. Such oaths can bring suffering to the oath-taker.

8:3

Leave his presence. Do not persist in a dangerous situation because he can do anything he pleases

Earlier translations read: "Do not be hasty to leave his [the king's] presence" and they explain it away by arguing that one should always be submissive, "we are not...hastily to quit his

¹⁴Gordis, p. 182.

service and throw off our allegiance to him."¹⁵ This explanation and similar ones must be read into the text; the assumptions are arbitrary and the argument clumsy.

By shifting *'al tibbonahel* to 8:2, 8:3 reads "leave his presence" which requires no assumptions to explain its relation to the rest of the verse. Qohelet advises one to stay away as much as possible from the king; when one is in court, one should not do anything to antagonize the king.

Crenshaw translates *dabar ra'* as an "unpleasant situation"¹⁶ and Gordis translates the phrase as a "distasteful matter;"¹⁷ both translations are too weak. In a critical note, Nahum Waldman argues that the phrase *dabar ra'* in Eccl. 8:3 can be defined as "do not join a rebellion" based on Akkadian parallels.¹⁸ Waldman concludes that his definition is preferable to the RSV translation, "do not delay when the matter is unpleasant." Although the Akkadian parallels are suggestive, I do not believe Waldman has fully explored this complex biblical idiom. I intend to argue that, for Qohelet, "bad things" are pains people physically suffer.

My argument is based on four points. The first point is the versatility and multiplicity of meanings of the word *dabar* in

¹⁵ C.D. Ginsburg, p. 393.

¹⁶ Crenshaw, p. 148.

¹⁷ Gordis, p. 182.

¹⁸ Nahum M. Waldman, "The DABAR RA of Eccl 8:3" in Journal of Biblical Literature, 98 (1979), p. 407-408.

Qohelet. The second is the contextual analysis of other texts which use the phrase *dabar ra'*. The third point is the interpretation of the verb *'al ta'amod* in the context of the verse. The final point is a question of which definitions fit the context and why Qohelet would dispense such advise.

The versatility of *dabar* in Qohelet's grammar indicates a variety of meanings. The TDOT¹ has identified three definitions of the substantive: "word," "thing," and "something." Qohelet contains numerous examples of the use of *dabar* meaning "word," in many contexts. The use of "word" by Qohelet, characteristic of Wisdom Literature, often denotes the words of the wise man and the babblings of the fool (Eccl 9:16, 12:10f). These words do not necessarily mean "talk" but can refer to the more formalized ideas of a speech (Eccl 10:12-14) or thoughts (Eccl 5:1).

The use of *dabar* meaning "thing" or "matter" is also found in the text of Ecclesiastes. A clear example is *pešer dabar* (Eccl 8:1) which translated literally reads "the interpretation of the thing" or in a contextual sense reads "the interpretation of the adage."² Qohelet uses *pešer dabar* in this verse to refer to a specific wisdom saying or proverb rather than a general category (Eccl 8:1b-c). Instead of using a more specific word, Qohelet uses the more general term *dabar* in a specific manner. The generalized use meaning "matter" can be found in

¹ TDOT, III.106.

² NJPS, p. 394.

Eccl 7:8 and also in the idiom *'al dibrat* meaning "in the matter of" or "because" (Eccl 3:18, 7:14, 8:2).

The final definition of *dabar* is the bland designation of "something." The word functions as an indefinite pronoun which rarely appears alone; it usually appears in a specific expression.²¹ There are two examples in the text of Qohelet: yes *dabar* (1.10) and *dabar ra'*; the latter is the phrase in question.

The foregoing discussion of the use of *dabar* in Qohelet demonstrates the flexibility of the word in the text. The next point of this exegesis is the analysis of the phrase *dabar ra'*. The phrase appears a number of times in the Hebrew text in an array of contexts; however, the apparent contextual definitions are grouped in seven categories. Only the last of these seems directly relevant to the definition of the phrase in Eccl 8:3.

The first contextual definition pertains to impurity. This impurity bars the object or the individual from activities or roles within the society (Deut 17:1, 23:10). The second definition comes from one of the Elisha stories, where *dabar ra'* refers to a poisonous gourd which causes death.²² These are the only categories with physical connotations.

The next definition appears in God's rebuke of the Israelites when God explains why He will not accompany them in their

²¹ TDOT. III.106.

²² 2K 4:41

conquest.²³ In this case, the phrase *dabar ra'* is used to define the content of God's admonition. Twice in Deuteronomy the phrase is used in reference to idolatry (Deut 13:12, 17:5).

In Josh 23:15, the phrase appears as the opposite of doing the good or correct thing. The good things are the laws that God has commanded through Moses to Joshua. The *dabar ra'* is whatever contradicts these laws. The use of the phrase in Ps 141:4²⁴ can be placed in this category or in the following category. The subject is the psalmist crying unto God lest he fall into the ways of evildoers. The sixth definition of the phrase is anything that subverts justice in the land such as false testimony (Deut 19:20). These definitions comprise an extensive list of "bad things."

As far as establishing a contextual definition for the phrase as it appears in Eccl 8:3, there are a number of choices. Just like the word *dabar*, *dabar ra'* has a variety of meanings. However, there are two clear examples of the phrase that correspond to the usage in Qohelet.

The first example is found in Jer 5:28. The oracle is that the deeds of wicked men have diverted the rains. Their deeds are the plotting against others (5:26) and the using of guile. These charges are the subject *dabar ra'*. The second example is Ps 64:6, where the psalmist lists the evil deeds of unscrupulous

²³When the people heard this *haddabar hara'*, they went into mourning, and none put on his finery. Ex 33:4

²⁴"Let my mind not turn to an evil thing, to practice deeds of wickedness with men who are evildoers..."

men and ends with a proclamation of belief in God. One of the evil deeds is plotting against others; this interpretation is consistent with the verse:

Who can search out our crimes?
We have thought out a cunningly
conceived plot.²⁵

The example cites plotting and scheming against others using the phrase, 'al ta'amod. Eccl 8:3 is Qohelet's advice on how to behave when addressing the king. In the presence of a king or in a king's court, plots of any sort are inadvisable. Thus, this contextual definition is possible in Eccl 8:3, but there is more evidence to be examined. An examination of the verb preceding the phrase is necessary to determine whether "plotting against the king" is the only definition.

Two definitions of 'al ta'amod seem most promising. Gordis proposes that the verb should be rendered "do not persist" based on the use of the verbal phrase in Mishnaic sources.²⁶ The second rendering is exemplified in Jer. 23:15 which reads: "he who has joined the council of the Lord...." Using the latter definition, the verse is rendered: "do not join in a plot."

The evidence for the use of Waldman's definition is first, demonstration of the flexibility and range of meaning of the root db"r in the book of Qohelet. Second, one Biblical parallel specifically suggests that his contextual definition fits the

²⁵ RSV.

²⁶ Gordis, pp. 182, 289.

context of Eccl 8:3. Third, the verb *'al ta'amod* can be interpreted either as "do not persist" or "do not join," and there are precedents for either.

On the other hand, the Hebrew text demonstrates that a variety of contextual definitions are possible. If this "evil thing" is indeed a powerful idiomatic phrase, then rebellion is a strong definition that fits well in this context, but only as the extreme example of a broad category. Thus using the Hebrew text, the verse Eccl 8:3 is an acknowledgment of the dominance of the king and a warning to avoid any offense from the most trivial to the most extreme. The flexibility of the phrase in the text argues persuasively against limiting the definition.

Turning to the end of the verse, the proposition *ki* in this verse is a pivotal point in the discourse. Qohelet turns from giving advice to explaining the "wisdom" of his advice (8:3b-5). Although his advice is good and his wisdom seemingly based on experience, the reader must be reminded that Qohelet is speaking "tongue in cheek." The purpose is not to dispense court etiquette but to denigrate the pious wisdom of the proverb in verse 1; the role of the statements in verses 2 and 3 is mockery delivered in a velvet pouch of actual advice. The message of Qohelet is that the "wise" courtier does not respect the king, he fears the king.

8:4

inasmuch as a king's command is authoritative, and none can say to him, "What are you doing?"

Verse 4 is a continuation of verse 3; it presents few grammatical difficulties. The question itself is not new and can be found in different forms in Job 9:12, Ts. 45:9, and Dan. 4:32. The thrust of the rhetorical question is to state that no one can tell the king what to do.

A few grammatical points need to be mentioned briefly. The first word *ba'aser* is rightly rendered "because" by Rashi and most modern commentators in contrast to the Targum "wherever" and Ibn Ezra "in every place where". The phrase *debar-melek* (literally word of the king) is certainly the king's commands. Finally, the word *silton*, although an abstract noun, has a concrete meaning not unlike that of its English equivalent "authority." One acts with authority and one has the authority to act.

8:5

One who obeys commands will not experience a dangerous situation. A wise man knows intimately that there is a time of doom.

The verb *yeda'* (to know) is difficult to translate into proper English. The object *dabar ra'* requires the same definition as in verse three: something that causes the king's wrath. The whole phrase is a conditional statement (if ... then) and a warning. If one does bad, one will be punished. Thus, contextually Ginsberg is consistent in translating *yeda'* as "suffer", but he violates the neutral quality of the verb (i.e. what you

know is good or bad but knowing itself is not good or bad).²⁷ Crenshaw and Gordis both translate *yeda'* as "the experience;" the suffering/punishment aspect is apparent from the context.²⁸ Thus, "to experience" gives a concise contextual rendering.

The phrase *we'et umiṣpaṭ* is an hendiadys in the Hebrew text. The Septuagint which apparently needs a construct, renders "a time of judgement." Gordis offers "a proper time and procedure."²⁹ The difficulty of both of these interpretations is that Qohelet argues consistently that justice is arbitrary; there can be no such thing as an appropriate time or procedure. Ginsberg argues that this hendiadys is a euphemism for "a time of death" or "doom" and "calamity."³⁰ Ginsberg's suggestion reads well, portraying Qohelet's ultimate proof of futility - death. The wise man takes comfort in the knowledge that this despot will die eventually. The wise man patiently awaits the king's death.

The reference to the wise man as *leb ḥakam* (the heart of the wise man) is not unusual. Several occurrences (IK 3:12, Prov 16:23, Ex 31:6) demonstrate that the heart is the seat of knowledge. A wise man knows "in his heart;" the thrust of the Hebrew phrase is a priori knowledge is reflected by the word "intimately" in my translation.

²⁷ NJPS, p. 1450.

²⁸ Crenshaw, p. 148; Gordis, p. 182.

²⁹ Gordis, p. 182.

³⁰ Ginsberg, p. 106.

Verse five is actually two separate thoughts. The first half of the verse, which states that one who obeys commands will not experience a dangerous situation, belongs contextually with 8:2-4. The second half, which states that a wise man knows intimately that there is a time of doom, is the topic sentence of the next thematic unit, 8:5b-8. The second thematic unit continues the discussion on wisdom. In other words, 8:5 is a well-wrought transition from one topic to the next.

8:6

That for all desire there is a time of doom because a man's calamity overwhelms him.

In order to understand this verse, one must recognize that it is a statement of absurdity. Despite all the desires one expresses, death is the only reality upon which one can depend. Even a king cannot escape death.

One can argue that *'et* is a dittography because the phrase *we'et umišpaṭ* is located in the previous verse; a scribe saw the word *we'et* and dropped down the term to match. Without *'et* the phrase *lekol-ḥepes yeš mišpaṭ* is a parallel to Eccl. 3:1.³¹ Certainly with the word *'et* removed, the verse reads more clearly in the general context (death or doom) of the thematic unit.

Another difficulty with this verse is the phrase *ra'at ha'adam* (the evil of humanity); the phrase is full of theological

³¹The conclusion of chapter 3 is the one moment of time that a person can depend upon is the time of death.

implications for Christian and Jewish commentators. Many use the phrase as a homiletical device: God condemns those who do evil. However, the subsequent verses of this chapter refute this interpretation; Qohelet's God seems to act in an arbitrary manner.

Verse 6 is a statement of evil to Qohelet; evil is not sin or blasphemy in this context, evil is what inevitably befalls a person. Man's evil is his inherent weakness which brings him to calamity; the phrase is a euphemism for death. The same thought is expressed in Eccl. 9:12: "...as fish are emeshed in a fatal net and as birds are trapped in a snare, so men are caught at the time of calamity, when it comes upon them without warning." Death is evil, yet everyone dies.

8:7

For he does not know what will be; even when it will happen, who can tell him?

Verse seven continues the thought of the previous verse and introduces the next verse. The subject is still death. G.A. Barton reads the verse as referring specifically to the king but the context is certainly general.³² The rhetorical question "who can tell him?" is the same device used in verse four: no one can tell him.

The theme of this verse is that one cannot know the future. One cannot know when death will arrive. Qohelet comments earlier

³²George Aaron Barton, Ecclesiastes, International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908).

that humanity knows there is a future but cannot know the contents of the future.³³ He understands this contradiction as divine torture. Qohelet speaks here with the same irony as in verse 6.

8:8

A man is powerless over the lifebreath, to hold in the lifebreath: there is no authority on the day of death. There is no mustering out of this war and wealth is powerless to save its owner.

The term *ruah* in Qohelet usually refers to wind;³⁴ in juxtaposition with the "day of death," however, the term denotes lifebreath. The phrase *liklo' 'et-haruah* literally means to imprison (from the root *kl'*) or to hold the lifebreath. This definition of the verb is also determined by comparison to *teše' ruho*, in Ps. 146:4: His breath departs; he returns to dust; on that day his plans come to nothing.

In fact, Ps. 146:3-4 echoes the sentiment expressed in Eccl. 8:8. Just as the great ones of Ps. 146:4 die and their plans with them, so, too, does everyone die. The term *šilṭon* refers back to the authority of the king (*šilṭon*) in 8:4. No matter how much power a mortal has (even a king), he will die.

The next statement "there is no mustering out this war," offers several intriguing possibilities. The term *mišlahat* appears

³³ Eccl 3:15

³⁴ "The pursuit of wind." For examples see Eccl 1:14, 17; 2:17, 26.

again only twice: Ps. 78:49³⁵ and Numbers Rabba.³⁶ Commentators argue whether the term means a "battle" or "war." The finality of death signals the end of the war, the last battle is finished. Thus "war" presents a stronger image.

Not only does the human always lose this war against death, the human cannot opt out of the war. Unlike wars between humans where one can either find loopholes to avoid the draft or desert, there is no way to escape this war. The absurdity is that every human is forced to fight a war that he or she is doomed to lose. As the preceding verse implies, everyone dies.

In Eccl. 8:8b the Masoretic Text reads "evil is powerless to save its owner." Nowhere in the text does Qohelet qualify evil as stronger than good; the dichotomy between good and evil does not exist. Rather *reša'* is a metathesis of *'ošet*, "wealth" a theme that is present throughout the book. Qohelet argues in Chapter 2 that wealth alone does not lead to happiness; here, wealth fails to purchase deferment from death. The argument from Chapter 2 is echoed here: wealth is only relatively useful.

The same sentiment is expressed in Ben Sira 14:3-19, the subject of the poem is the uses of wealth. One verse in particular (14:12) reflects Eccl. 8:8 most succinctly: **Remember**

³⁵ "He inflicted His burning anger upon them, wrath, indignation, trouble, a band of deadly messengers."

³⁶ NR, chapter 14: "and he (Naftali) was zealous in carrying out his mission."

that death does not tarry nor have you been told the grave's appointed time.³⁷ This Ben Sira verse contains the same two messages as in Ecclesiastes: neither authority nor wealth staves off the moment of death and although death is inevitable, no one can know the precise time.

8:9

All of this I observed, and I considered all the deeds that are done under the sun, when men have authority over men to harm them unjustly.

Scholars continue to debate whether verse 9 concludes the passage of Eccl. 8:1-8 or introduces the next section, 8:10-15. Michael Eaton argues that this verse acts as a bridge between the two sections.³⁸ In order to maintain this argument, one must presuppose that, by and large, the text was carefully arranged by Qohelet himself or by subsequent redactors.

One might argue that the verse belongs to the preceding passage because of the repetition of the term *šalat* (authority). By the same argument verse 9 may have been placed here from another text because the preceding passage and verse 9 have related ideas. The most convincing argument is that the subject of the verse 9 is a generalization of the specific case in verse 10; thus, verse 9 belongs with the succeeding unit.

³⁷Patrick W. Skehan and Alexander A. DiLella, The Anchor Bible: The Wisdom of Ben Sira. New York, Doubleday, 1987, p. 257.

³⁸Eaton, p. 120-121.

The verb phrase *ra'iti wenaton* is a hendiadys; the construction of a perfect tense with an infinitive is not unparalleled (Gen. 41:43, Ex. 32:29, Est. 6:12). The contextual definition of the verb phrase is an observation of a daily occurrence which is common that many are oblivious to it.

8:10

Then I saw wicked men, approaching and entering the Holy place, walk about and boast in the city that they have done right. This too is absurdity.

The present verse 10 in the Masoretic Text is utterly incoherent. In order to make sense of the verse, there must be emendations; the goal is a coherent text with the fewest number of changes. The present translation, first proposed by G.R. Driver,³ has only three emendations. Even with few corrections, the understanding of the verse is tentative because of the nature of suggested reading of the text.⁴

The first emendation is to read *qerebin* (approaching) for the text's *qeburin* (buried). The word as it stands is untenable. Burial is ritually unclean and the *meqom qados*^v (the Holy Place) is the source of cultic purity; the two terms, under the influence of the same subject (the wicked men), are contradictory in the construction of this verse.

³"Problems and Solutions" *Vetus Testamentum* 4 (1954), p.230.

⁴See Crenshaw on 8:10 for a full explanation of "tentativeness." p. 154.

This contradiction has led some to assume two subjects for the verse, the wicked and the righteous, which is an indefensible complication. Thus, emend *qeburim* to *qerebim* with the nuance of drawing near to worship. Such a metathesis is possible in the ancient Hebrew script because the "r" and the "b" are similar in appearance.

The next difficulty is the grammatical inconsistency of *waba'u* (and they came, Qal 3mp) which is an abbreviated form and in context makes little sense. Emend the text by moving the first from the term following *waba'u* back to the end of "■":
^{mc}*umiqom* → *waba'u = uba'im* (participle, "coming"). The two verbs, *qerebim uba'im* now constitute a hendiadys. The mistake is simple to make when there is little or no space between the words, a common practice in ancient manuscripts in order to fit more material on a parchment. The interchange of "y" and "w" is also well attested.

The final emendation, which was suggested as a reading as early as the Talmud,⁴¹ is *weyistabbhu* (boast) in place of *weyistakku* (forgotten). In the square script the "b" and the "k" are easily confused by a less than exact copyist. The form *weyistakku* now present is an unknown form which appears again only once in the Targum (a dependent source), whereas *weyistabbhu* is found twice in the Hagiographa (Ps. 106:47, 1Chron. 16:35).

The final ambiguity of the verse is the last statement; what is absurd? Ginsberg argues that the absurdity refers to the

⁴¹Gittin 56b.

observation given in verse 11 that men do evil without fear of punishment.⁴² If verse 11 is the general statement explaining the specific case given in verse 10, there is no difficulty because the absurdity applies to the sentiment expressed by the verses and not the verses themselves. The phrase is a rhetorical device Qohelet so often uses for emphasis.

8:11

Because the sentence for evil deeds is not executed swiftly, therefore men are encouraged to do evil.

Not only do wicked people act out of their own volition, they are encouraged by the lack of punishment that befalls them. Verse 12a makes it clear that the one who has failed to punish swiftly is God. Qohelet denies that retributive justice exists.

One would expect to see a parallel between *ma'ašeh hara'ah* (evil deeds) in verse 11 and *'ošeḥ ra'* (evildoer) in verse 12 because the terms are very close. Also *la'ašot ra'* (to do evil) appears at the end of verse 11. Ginsberg argues that the terms should be the same and the confusion is caused by the underlying Aramaic *biš* which means *ra'*. The similarity in the terms demonstrates the connection of ideas between the two verses: the rejection of retributive justice.

In the Hebrew the parallelism is not present, but the

⁴²Ginsberg, p. 109.

relationship between verses 11 and 12a is contextually apparent. Despite evil acts, no punishment befalls the evildoer.

There is an oblique reference to the earlier *dabar ra'* which demonstrates an irony. An evildoer commits crimes against the divine authority with impunity but scrupulously avoids the wrath of the earthly authority. The human should fear the authority of a mortal king because it is visible but cannot rely on God's justice because it is not visible. Do reward and punishment only belong to the earthly realm?

8:12a

The fact that a sinner may do evil a hundred times and his [life] is prolonged.

Verse 12 also presents a problem of coherence but unlike verse 10, the coherence cannot be supplied by emendation. The first half of the verse is another observation by Qohelet that there is a definitive lack of retributive justice. There are two ellipses: *me'at* and *uma'arik lo*. The term *me'at* might refer to days (Rashi) or times (Ibn Ezra). Gordis argues 100 evils but this reading is impossible for it atomizes the phrase '*oseh ra'*' (see the comment in verse 11). The Vulgate, Symmachus, Gordis, and others supply '*ap*' as the missing word after *uma'arik*, "God's anger delays its punishment."

8:12b - 14

Although I know that it shall be well for those who fear God because they revere Him, and it will not be well for the wicked one and his days will not be prolonged because he does not fear

God, "there is an absurdity that occurs in the world: there are righteous people who receive recompense due the wicked and there are wicked people who receive recompense due the righteous. I say that this is also absurdity.

The content of Eccl. 12b-13 at first seems diametrically opposed to Qohelet's position. There are two possible explanations: either the statement was inserted by a pious redactor or Qohelet is using the statement as a foil for his own view, which is expressed in verse 14. The latter view seems by far the stronger of the two. First, in 8:1 Qohelet has already used the rhetorical device of citing a pious adage in order to refute it. Here, Qohelet produces a traditional dictum which he rejects in verse 14. In both cases he presents the "traditional" view and then rejects it by demonstrating his own position. In this case he proves his position empirically.

Second, the statement is introduced by the clause *ki gam yodea'*: *ki gam* (although) introduces a subordinate clause and *yodea'* (know) in this instance introduces a conventional teaching (cf. Eccl. 2:13-15). Thus verse 12b is another anonymous saying of conventional wisdom. Verse 13 continues and completes the traditional dictum.

One term stands out as incomprehensible in verse 13, *kaššēl* (like a shadow) which also appears in Eccl. 6:12. There is no image in the verse that has the metaphorical qualities of a shadow. Ginsberg suggests that the *ethnah*⁴³ be moved from *kaššēl* to the preceding word, so that *kaššēl* belongs to the following

⁴³A Hebrew technical term meaning "half-stop."

Conclusion

Qohelet is a shrewd man who has a pragmatic view of the world. He does not accept anything as true unless it can be proven. When he denounces wisdom in Chapter 2, one assumes he means all wisdom. Chapter 8 is a qualification of that first rejection. He rejects conventional wisdom in favor of knowledge gained by practical experience, such as in the court of the king. With such wisdom one avoids some suffering.

There is no doubt that Qohelet believes in God, but he does not accept God as omnibenevolent. God is also not the source of meaningful existence; the only good is the enjoyment a person creates for himself. The concept of retributive justice cannot be applied to God because this aspect of God's activity is not apparent in the world. Nonetheless, one should fear God and not tempt God's wrath.

Whether a man accrues reward or punishment appears arbitrary to Qohelet. This is the great absurdity; a man futilely tries to serve good and collect reward and there is no guarantee of ultimate benefit. Qohelet's great advice is an admission of human powerlessness under the sun. Enjoy what you have and make the most of it; there is nothing else.

Chapter 2
Ecclesiastes According To Talmudic
and Midrashic Sources

Rabbinic Judaism faces a quandary: The book of Ecclesiastes, in particular Chapter Eight, acknowledges the apparent lack of Justice and Providence in the world. Rabbinic scholarship uses Scripture to validate and emphasize the pious doctrines and teachings reflected in the Talmudim and the Midrashim. Thus Qohelet's views are potentially heretical and threatening to rabbinic doctrine. In the face of this methodological difficulty the goals of this chapter are: (1) to examine how the rabbinic sources address the difficulties inherent to Ecclesiastes and (2) to relate the rabbinic interpretation of this text as rabbinic teachings in general.

There are twenty-nine citations of Ecclesiastes Chapter 8 in the rabbinic literature outside Qohelet Rabba.¹ Qohelet Rabba is the largest collection of rabbinic interpretations of Ecclesiastes. It is a work dating to the sixth century, probably slightly preceded by Song of Songs Rabba. Not all of the material in Qohelet Rabba is original to that text. Parallel texts demonstrate that the redactors borrowed from many earlier sources, including Genesis Rabba and Numbers Rabba. The proem formula is found throughout Qohelet Rabba is derived from earlier midrashic literature. Many parallels to Qohelet Rabba, some earlier and some later, will be discussed below. Although there are a number of exegetical midrashim pertaining to these verses, most of the material is homiletical.

¹For a complete list, see Appendix 1.

Verse 1

Who is like the wise man and who knows the interpretation of a thing; a man's wisdom lights up his face and the boldness of his face is changed.

The rabbis read this verse as four separate but related units: (1) Who is like the wise man, (2) and who knows the interpretation of a thing, (3) A man's wisdom lights up his face, (4) and the boldness of his face is changed. Every passage of midrash which addresses this verse comments on each of the four units.

The first unit Who is like the wise man is not treated as a rhetorical question. Because of the comparative "k," the first letter in the word *kehehakam* (the wise man), the phrase is taken to be an actual question which demands an answer of comparison: _____ is like the wise man. Adam, Israel, the *talmid hakam* (the scholar of rabbinic texts), and Moses are given as possibilities. Each possibility is proven by a *gezerah shawah* using the word *hakam* (wise).² Thus, the referent of the verse is always given in the first unit, and then a complex explication follows using the remaining clauses. This formula of ascribing

²*Gezerah Shawah*: When the verse in question does not have a specific referent and there is another verse which uses the same word and has a stated referent, the stated referent of the second verse is applied to the verse in question.

different personalities as the referent of the verse is common and is found in earlier chapters of Qohelet Rabba.³

In contrast to the possible mortal candidates, the most common referent of Eccl. 8:1 is God.⁴ In translation Eccl. 8:1a reads:

"Who is like the Wise, namely God.

This alludes to the Holy One Blessed Be He, as it is written concerning Him He is wise in heart, and mighty in strength. (Job 9:4)"⁵ "That is, like the Holy One Blessed Be He concerning whom it is said The Lord by wisdom founded the earth (Prov. 3:19)."⁶

Various prooftexts are cited to identify God with wisdom personified; all the prooftexts use the same hermeneutic rule.⁷ A primary goal in Qohelet Rabba is not the identification of God in the verses but the manifestation of God's attributes and actions.

The question of "interpretation" as posed by Eccl. 8:1b is addressed succinctly in Qohelet Rabba 8.1: "[God] who expounded the Torah to Moses." "Interpretation" is understood as explaining and teaching the Torah. In this case Torah is indicated by

³QR 2.15.1-5; 4.8.1.

⁴PRK 4.4, PR 14.10, Qoh Rabba 8.1. Berachot 10b cites 8:1a-b and identifies the subject as the Holy One, blessed be He.

⁵QR 8.1, NR 19.4

⁶PR 14.10, PRK 4.4

⁷Gezerah ^vsawah. See footnote #2.

the word *dabar*. The theme of the Oral Law is again introduced: God taught Moses the Oral Law as He delivered to him the Written Law.

In contrast, Berachot 10b explains that Eccl. 8:1b refers to God's role in the relationship between Isaiah and Hezekiah. Both are considered righteous individuals who came to loggerheads.⁹ The rabbis want to read the word *pešer* (interpretation) as *pisrah* (reconciliation). Thus Eccl. 8:1a-b reads: 'Who is like the Holy One Blessed Be He who knows how to bring about reconciliation between two righteous men.'

The difficulty of reading God's presence into 8:1 is the presence of the word *'adam* (man) which can presumably only be understood as a flesh-and-blood man. The solution to this difficulty is to read "man" as an anthropomorphism. The prophets are accustomed to referring to God in such a manner. The clearest text, quoted in the name of R. Judan, is Ezekiel's vision of God: ... upon this semblance of a throne, there was the semblance of a Man (Ezek. 1:26).¹⁰

An important methodological task is to assign attributes to the different names of God. Qohelet uses *'elohim* exclusively throughout the book of Ecclesiastes.¹¹ The name *'elohim* connotes the Attribute of Justice; thus Divine Justice does

⁹ 11 Kings 20:1.

¹⁰ QR 8.1. PRK 4.4 and PR 14.10 quote I heard the voice of a Man between the banks of the Ulai (Dan. 8:16) as the proof-text.

¹¹ Also *ha'elohim*, Eccl. 2:24, 26; 3:11, etc.

appear in the text of Ecclesiastes according to rabbinic understanding. In the rabbinic theology of Divine Justice in the world, God has two attributes: Justice and Mercy. If God ruled the world by strict justice alone the world could not endure; therefore, the Attribute of Mercy allows a person to repent before his sentence of punishment. God's Attribute of Mercy is usually inferred by the tetragrammaton which is not present in Ecclesiastes. Even though the tetragrammaton is not present, the rabbis still manage to discern the Attribute of Mercy in Ecclesiastes.

"Who is like the wise man, this alludes to Adam of whom it is written, You were the seal of perfection, Full of wisdom and flawless in beauty. (Ezek. 28:12)"¹¹ The author according to this interpretation means 'Who is like Adam in wisdom.' This interpretation of Adam relies on an earlier midrash which is also a *gezerah sawah*. The prooftext is derived from an oracle directed at the king of Tyre. The midrash in Qohelet Rabba is more than just the identification of Adam but the identification of the story of Adam in the garden of Eden.

The display of Adam's wisdom is found in the second phrase and who knows the interpretation of a thing. Adam's wisdom is his ability to give names to all of the creatures of the Garden (Gen. 2:20) which is assuredly only a reflection of the wisdom of God.

¹¹QR 8.1.2, PR 14.10, PRK 4.4.

Similarly, the next phrase (Eccl. 8:1b) gives another description of Adam in the garden. Adam's face was alight with the wisdom that God had endowed him. Even the ball of Adam's heel shone more brightly than the sun.¹² This midrash not only extols the virtue of wisdom, but also emphasizes its divine origin.

The exegesis of Eccl. 8:1c takes the reader abruptly from the Creation to the downfall of Adam. The midrash reads a negative connotation of Eccl. 8:1d as God strips away Adam's brilliance and banishes him.¹³ Another midrash relates that God changed the boldness of Adam's face out of anger.¹⁴ The concept of Adam's reduction from his former self is a common theme found already in Genesis Rabba which relates that Adam was reduced to a height of 100 cubits when God learned of his sin.¹⁵

The midrashim which identify the *talmid hakam* (the Torah scholar) as the subject of Eccl. 8:1 follow the same methodology. Obviously the rabbis have a strong desire to elevate their scholarly approach to Judaism; the text of Qohelet Rabba has several statements about rabbinic relationships and etiquette. This verse elicits several midrashic statements which

¹²QR 8.2

¹³PRK 4.4, PR 23.6.

¹⁴PRK 4.4 and PR 14.10: "For after Adam had sinned and said, (Gen 3:12), the Holy One, blessed be He, indeed changed his face and banished him."

¹⁵GR 12.6, 19.7.

allows the modern reader to examine the character these scholars idealized.

The first comment occurs three times in the literature:

Who is as the wise man? He who is a disciple of wise men. Who knows the interpretation of a thing, that is, he knows how to explain what he has learned. A man's wisdom lights up his face when he is asked a question and is able to answer. And the boldness of his face is changed when he is asked a question and is unable to answer it.¹⁶

The thrust of the passage is the adulation of the scholar/teacher. The teacher has two roles: to teach what he has learned and to answer questions. The author of this midrash knows two types of questions, those he can answer and those he cannot.

As a further comment on this midrash, three short stories are presented which exemplify the religious exultation of this interpretation. R. Hiyyah is teaching his students a law which is derived by a clever exegetical rendering of a particular verse. The face of one student, Bar Pedaiiah, brightens with the light of comprehension. R. Hiyyah, upon seeing this reaction of his student exclaims: A man's wisdom lights up his face!

This passage is a small example of the statements and stories which tell about the sages and their students. There are remarks concerning the proper respect of a student for his teacher and respect between sages.¹⁷ This statement fits within a context of many statements of rabbinic collegial conduct.

¹⁶PRK 4.4, PR 14.10, QR 8.1.4.

¹⁷For examples, see Qoh Rabba 1.3.1, 1.4.1

The next tale is the reply of R. Judah to the accusation that his face glows. "One thing is true of that man: either he lends money upon interest, or he raises pigs, or he is drunk with wine."¹⁰ All three are invidious accusations to a pious Jew. The source of his luminous face can only be his instruction in Torah. An early strain in the Midrashic tradition is the designation of the word "wisdom" in the biblical text as a synonym for "Torah." Thus A man's wisdom lights up his face (Eccl. 8:1c) should be read here as 'R. Judah's instruction in Torah lights up his face.'¹¹

The third story teaches the same general rendering of Eccl. 8:1c derived by R. Judah. R. Abbahu returns from a trip with a shining face. His students assume that he found some treasure but are in error. The source of his glowing face is an ancient *tosefta*¹² which he had never heard before. He has gained more knowledge of Torah.

The interpretation of Eccl. 8:1 as referring to the *talmid hakam* emphasizes a positive connotation of Eccl. 8:1c-d. Of course Torah study brightens the face; however, the opposite of study, the failure to comprehend, is also acknowledged. Whereas Qohelet understands the light and dark side of a man's character, the rabbis choose the positive side with pious fervor and

¹⁰PRK 4.4, PR 14.10, QR 8.1.4.

¹¹Cf. Nedarim 49b, where a fragment of this midrash appears. Also note that R. Judah's face glows when he eats beets, especially salted ones.

acknowledge quietly the pain and failure that can be identified in Eccl. 8:1d.

The third candidate for the *hakam* of Eccl. 8:1 is Israel, for Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people (Deut. 4:6).²⁰ The interpretation, suggested by Eccl. 8:1b, refers to Israel's ability to determine ritual cleanliness and uncleanness. The rabbis thus introduce their concern for the laws of purity.²¹ The midrash tells the legend that the Israelites in the wilderness were so pious that they knew forty-nine modes for determining the purity of an object. Numbers Rabba 19.2 states that sinless children in the time of King David were also able to interpret Torah in forty-nine ways.

Eccl. 8:1c-d are also read as a brief synopsis of the events at Sinai. Eccl. 8:1c demonstrates that Israel shone with the splendor that God bestowed upon it at Mt. Sinai. The negative reading of Eccl. 8:1d is the result of Israel's building of the Golden Calf.²² Thus Israel, previously destined to live forever according to Psalm 82:6-7, is reduced to dying like mortals.

Moses can also be taken as the referent of Eccl. 8:1. "The wise Moses of whom it is said A wise man prevailed over the city

²⁰PR 14.10, PRK 4.4, QR 8.1.3. All three versions are identical concerning Eccl. 8:1a-b. For Eccl. 8:1c-d, QR is lacking both the rabbinic sages and the prooftexts. The other two sources are complete and identical.

²¹Cf. QR 6.2.

²²Taanith 7b is a parallel text. However, this passage proposes one read the word *yešunne'* (change) as *yešunne'* (haters or hated).

of the mighty and brought down its mighty stronghold

(Prov. 21.22).²³ This is Moses who brought down the Torah from the heavens despite the objections of the angels.²⁴ Interpretation (Eccl. 8:1b) is read as "Oral Law," the commentary needed to apply the Written Law. According to rabbinic tradition, Moses is the source of the Oral Law.²⁵

Qohelet Rabba 8.1.5 discusses Moses and the Oral Law as the subject of Eccl. 8:1c-d. As Moses asked questions concerning the Law, his face would shine (Eccl. 8:1c). While reading Lev. 21 he asked God how a defiled priest purifies himself. When he did not receive an immediate reply, he was crestfallen (Eccl. 8.1d). Later he received the laws concerning the red heifer in Num. 19. Eccl. 8:1a-b establish the general reference to Moses and the Oral Law while the last two phrases describe a specific instance. This is a well balanced homily.

The midrashim are not merely an exercise in reading rabbinic doctrines and ideals into the book of Ecclesiastes. The midrashim do perform this function, but there is a second more fundamental function operating in the collection of Qohelet Rabba. The lack of apparent Divine Justice and Providence in the

²³PRK 4.4, PR 14.10, QR 8.1.5. Sotah 13b. quotes 8:1a-b in reference to Deut. 54:5: So Moses died there etc.

²⁴PR 20.4.

²⁵QR 1.1.5 adds: "He said to the Master of the World, 'Is this purification?' The Holy One, blessed be He said to Moses, 'it is a law and a decree which I have decreed and no human can fathom my decree,' as it is written, This is the statute of the law (Num. 19:1)."

world is a formidable challenge of this chapter of Ecclesiastes for Rabbinic Judaism. By introducing the Attributes of Justice and Mercy in verse 1, the tools are already present to address the issue directly in verses 11-14. Even if the individual midrashim come from different sources, the redactor appears to have an agenda. The repetition of the theme of divine retribution in almost every verse demonstrates this agenda.

Verse 2

I [counsel you]: keep the king's utterance, and that in regard to the oath of God.

The major problem in verse 2 is the identification of the king. "R. Levi said: This means, I will keep the commandment of the Supreme King of Kings."²⁶ The commandment R. Levi refers to is the first commandment of the Decalogue I am the Lord your God (Ex. 20:2).

Although the five versions of this midrash vary, all agree that this verse refers to commandments listed in the Decalogue. The Decalogue references do correspond. The utterance refers to You shall have no other gods before Me (Ex. 20:3).²⁷ The "oath" is the next commandment You shall not take in vain the name of the Lord your God (Ex. 20:7).

Numbers Rabba 15.14 presents a unique application of Eccl. 8:2. The theme is still the Decalogue, but the context is

²⁶QR 8.2, PR 22.1, SongRabba 2.14.1.

²⁷QR 8.2, PR 22.1, Jerushalmi Sanhedrin, chapter 3, NR 15.14, SongR 2.14.1.

the Book of Daniel, chapter 3. The replies of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego in Dan. 3:16 are subtly examined. In response to Nebuchadnezzar's demand to worship his idol, the heroes respond that they will not: "O Nebuchadnezzar..." (Dan. 3:16). The fact they did not address him with his title suggests to the rabbis "You are our king as regards taxation, and levies on crops, but as regards the worship of idols, O Nebuchadnezzar, you and a dog are the same to us."²⁰ In civil law, the mortal king rules, but in the realm of worship, the King of kings rules as it is explained in Eccl. 8:2.

The division of power between the mortal king and the divine King is quoted as halacha of precedence in an argument in Talmud Jerushalmi Sanhedrin. The question is who is eligible to give testimony in a Jewish court of law. If a man fails to observe the sabbatical year because of decrees from Rome, is he considered ineligible to testify? The midrash about Nebuchadnezzar is produced to argue that such a person may serve as a witness. The inability to observe the sabbatical year cannot be construed as worshipping false gods. Although observance of the sabbatical year is law, failure to observe it does not constitute idolatry.

Only Numbers Rabba 14.6 takes the king of Eccl. 8:2 to be an earthly king. Just as Joseph obeyed Pharaoh, a man must obey his king in all matters that do not contradict his oath to God. In

²⁰NR 15.14. A parallel story is found in SongR 2.14.1 but this version is more of a folktale with stylized additions: "O Nebuchadnezzar, bark like a dog!"

the same manner as in the midrash of Nebuchadnezzar, God reigns supreme.

Verse 3

Be not hasty to go out of his presence; stand not in an evil thing; for he does whatever pleases him.

The lesson of this verse is neither to pause nor mumble when reading a string of curses from the Torah in the synagogue. For R. Huna says: "Raise your voice; they are not curses but reproofs."²

Numbers Rabba 14.6 elicits an entirely different connotation: if a mortal king rages against you in order to force you to transgress Torah law (an evil thing), do not obey him. An evil thing may also be understood as the threat by the king of torture and death to force you to submit.

Verse 4

For a king's word has power and none can say him, "What are you doing?"

Numbers Rabba 14.6 continues its theme of the orders of a mortal king versus the decrees of the King of Kings. This verse teaches that if one is righteous, God will use His power to reject the decrees of mortals. God will even punish measure for measure³ for such decrees.

² QR 8.3.

³ "Measure for measure" in this collection of midrashim means that God will punish according to the crime committed. The term connotes divine retribution. The term is also a legal

Three other sources quote Eccl. 8:4: Shabbat 63b, Qohelet Rabba 8.4, and Genesis Rabba 55.3. Genesis Rabba is an earlier, more complete version of the Qohelet Rabba passage.

In Genesis Rabba, the identity of the king is God. The verse is brought forth as part of an early apologetic concerning the Akedah. The specific difficulty is an apparent contradiction between a command not to try God and an apparent breach of the law by God when He tested Abraham.³¹ If humans should not try God, why does God try humans? Two lessons are derived: (1) to try God is lack of faith, but God tries Abraham to strengthen faith; (2) nonetheless one should not question God; this is the explicit meaning of Eccl. 8:2.

Shabbat 63a mentions in one sentence the verse and an explanation. If God makes a decree, He can annul it. The sentence can be read two ways. The first is that only God who issued the decree may annul it.³² The second is that the one who observes the precept can annul it, even if the law is promulgated by God. The latter interpretation is a very daring thought but evidence does validate this possible rendering.³³

principle meaning let the punishment fit the crime.

³¹You shall not try the Lord your God (Deut. 6:16) and God tested Abraham (Gen. 22:1).

³²Cf. Baba Metzia 85a.

³³Moed Katan 16b.

Verse 5

One who keeps the commandment will not suffer for the evil thing; and a wise man's heart discerns time and judgment.

There are four unrelated interpretations of this verse although all produce similar pious connotations. A most distinctive midrash is Qohelet Rabba 8.5. Esther keeps the commandment to remove leaven which is why she has to be told of the decree by Mordecai: she is so busy observing the law. The wise man is Mordecai because he is wise enough to devise a plan to defeat Haman.

In Numbers Rabba 14.6, the wise man is one who compares gain in this world by transgression with gain in the world to come by observing the law. He knows that God's Attribute of Justice is measure for measure and that all transgressions are punished. Wisdom is the knowledge that divine retribution does operate in this world.

Although Shabbat 63a and Exodus Rabba 30.20 are distinct from one another, a similar theme of obeying the commandments unifies them. Shabbat 63a reads: "Whoever fulfills a precept as it is commanded, no evil tidings are told to him." If one does as God commands, one will not receive bad news; therefore, do as God commands.

Exodus Rabba 30.20 expounds upon parashat Mishpatim, the Torah portion which includes the covenant code. If a person observes every commandment written in this portion, evil will never come upon that person. The Hebrew word to observe (a commandment) is *שמר* as in the verse *שמר 'et-yom ha'sabbat*

(Deut. 5:12); ^všəmor is read as an imperative: "Observe the sabbath day." The same word is used in Eccl. 8:5a and is read as an imperative. Again, the lesson is to observe God's laws.

Verse 6

For to every matter there is a time and judgment; for the evil of man is great upon him.

The rabbis use this verse to expound on their doctrine of this world and the World To Come. The comment is short: "As a man wishes, so can he act in this world, but there [in the World To Come] will be judgment and reckoning."³⁴ This little comment also presents an answer to the theological quandary of free will versus determinism. Humankind needs free will to choose between good and evil in order to merit the World To Come. If God is omnipotent and omnipresent, then all actions are predetermined. The rabbinic reply is that in this world humankind does have free will and in the World To Come, God exercises His direct power.

Numbers Rabba 14.6 reinforces this doctrinal lesson by expanding the comment on Eccl. 8:5. The midrash reads the rabbinic view of divine justice into the two words time and judgment. Time is the Attribute of Mercy and judgment is the Attribute of Justice. The Attribute of Justice signifies that all transgressions are punished but the Attribute of Mercy indicates that God allots a period of grace before judgment so that the guilty one can repent.

³⁴QR 8.6.

Verse 7

For he does not know what shall be; for even when it does happen, who can tell him?

Only Numbers Rabba 14.6 addresses this verse; even Qohelet Rabba is silent. The verse refers to those who fail to heed the lessons Numbers Rabba 14.6 brought to bear in its commentary on the two previous verses; namely, that all transgressions are punished unless one repents. One who repeatedly commits transgressions will not benefit from God's Attribute of Mercy; for him there will be no grace period.

Verse 8

There is no man that has power over the wind to retain the wind; neither has power over the day of death; and there is no discharge in war; neither shall wickedness deliver him that is given to it.

Verse 8 has drawn much commentary over the peculiar list of items that humanity has no power to control and is powerless to avoid. Modern commentators offer emendations to rectify the peculiarities although they are merely continuing the work begun by the early rabbis. These early rabbis sensed this imbalance of ideas despite the coherence of the overall message. Both Qohelet Rabba 8.11 and Deuteronomy Rabba 9.3 offer an extensive array of exegetical attempts to explain this passage.

Neither the ancients nor the moderns accept *ruah* in Eccl. 8:8a as referring to "wind;" rather *ruah* refers to life-breath. "No man has power over the Angel of Death to keep the

Angel from himself."³⁵ One cannot stave off the moment of death; *ruah* refers to the Angel of Death yet the theme is the inability of a man to control his lifebreath. A man cannot know when he will live and when he will die.

A more subtle interpretation of *ruah* is that which is internal to a person and causes that person to live. R. Eliezer ben Jacob explains:

No man has the power over his soul to destroy it.... Had God concentrated it into one limb then if a man found himself in trouble he would cut off that limb and die. Therefore it is spread throughout the whole body, that he should not be able to destroy it.³⁶

Without his *ruah* a man cannot exist. This exegesis explains the lack of authority a man has over his soul; he cannot rid himself of it even if he wants.

One lesson derived from Eccl. 8:8b is that all people are equal at the time of death. The two examples which are paralleled in several places are David and Moses. At the time of his death, David was not addressed as king (1Kings 11:1)³⁷ and at the time of Moses's death, his silver trumpets were not blown to assemble the people. Neither titles nor divinely given gifts availed them at the time of death.

Furthermore, no person has the ability to postpone the day

³⁵QR 8:8, DR 9.3.

³⁶DR 9.3.

³⁷QR 8.11, DR 9.3, and GR 96.3.

of death. There is no bargaining. There is no extra time given to settle one's accounts or set one's house in order.³⁰

The most forceful explanation which clarifies the relationship of Eccl. 8:8c (There is no discharge in war) to the rest of the verse is in Deuteronomy Rabba 9.3: "No man when about to die can say, 'I will send my slave in my stead.'" Just as a man cannot avoid war, so, too, a man cannot avoid death. R. Shimon ben Halafta gives a similar lesson by using the motif of the Angel of Death: "No man can make weapons which will save him from the Angel of Death."³¹ One cannot fight off and thereby avoid death.

A midrash in the name of R. Eliezer ben Jacob asserts a relationship between Eccl. 8:8c and 8:8d. His exegesis should be understood in the context of Ps. 78:49 *mislahat mal'akey ra'im*, a sending of evil messengers. If one does evil, then according to the verse, one will receive evil, just as Egypt received the ten plagues. The positive lesson of Eccl. 8:8d is: if one abandons evil and repents, one will be delivered from evil. The theme is the efficacy of repentance.

Another midrash in Deuteronomy Rabba 9.3 suggests that "no one can lodge a protest against the Angel of Death." When the midrash states that to resist the Angel of Death is futile, the

³⁰ DR 9.3, QR 8.8.

³¹ DR 9.3.

message is that one should not resist death or its inevitability.⁴⁰

Two interpretations stand apart from the statements on death; they instead relate the verse to prophecy. R. Nehemiah explains Eccl. 8:8 as relating to the prophecy of Jeremiah. The word *ruah* (Eccl. 8:8a) is the Spirit of God which the prophet cannot keep within but must declare as an oracle. In a related lesson R. Haggai teaches that evil (Eccl. 8:8d) is scoffing at prophetic oracles; because the people of Israel scoffed at Jeremiah's oracles, the First Temple was destroyed.⁴¹

Numbers Rabba 14.6 is concerned with retribution. In brief, the four clauses correspond to the four methods of execution commanded by God. Wind (*ruah*) indicates strangulation, the second clause refers to stoning, war refers to death by the sword, and the last phrase refers to burning. Thus, one learns that no one can escape the judgment of God.

Verse 9

All these things I observed; I noted all that went on under the sun while one man still had power over another to do evil.

The first comment of this verse refers to the word 'et: "There is a time which is bad for him who exercises the power, and there is a time which is bad for him upon whom it is

⁴⁰QR 8.8 gives a similar reading: "Nobody can question His decision, nor can a person say, 'I appeal against His verdict.'"

⁴¹QR 8.8.

exercised."⁴² A homily follows which states that no person can incur guilt through another unless that person is likewise guilty. A pure, innocent person can never incur guilt. Nonetheless, the power a person holds over another can also be power to cause another to sin.

Verse 10

And so I saw the wicked buried and they came (entered into their rest); but they that had done right went away from the holy place, and were forgotten in the city; this also is vanity.

As I have explained in chapter 1, Eccl. 8:10 lacks coherence.⁴³ The rabbis noted this difficulty and two approaches arose: interpretation or suggested alternative reading. Two readings are suggested in Gittin 56b. The first suggestion is to read *qeburim* (buried) as *qebu^sim* (collected) although there is an opinion that it is not necessary. The second change is reading *weyi^sta^kkk^hu* (and were forgotten) as *weyi^sta^bbb^hu* (and triumphed).

The verse now reads:

And then I saw the wicked coming and gathering, and they left the Holy Place and triumphed against the city. This too is vanity.

This suggested reading refers to Titus, the wicked one, who came and gathered all the treasures in the Temple for himself and vanquished the city. Titus is even more wicked for he took a whore into the Holy of Holies and fornicated upon an opened Torah scroll.

⁴²QR 8.9.

⁴³p. 28.

The text of Qohelet Rabba seeks to reinterpret the verse rather than suggest alternative readings. The subject is either the wicked or proselytes. If the subject is the wicked, by interpretation, either the death of the wicked atones for their sins when they are *qeburim* (buried), or the wicked who are alive are considered as dead; there is no hope for the wicked.

The verse may also refer to proselytes who by the act of conversion repent their former lives. They go into a holy place (synagogue), their evil deeds (idolatry) are forgotten, and their good deeds are discovered.⁴⁴ The vanity is proselytes who are brought into the fold (i.e. Boaz and Ruth) rather than entering by their own accord. Another explanation of vanity is all the people who do not convert.⁴⁵

In Pesikta Rabbati, Eccl. 8:10 is used to address the textual difficulty of Gen. 12:5 and all the persons that they made in Haran. The most common exegesis on Gen. 12:5 is that Abram and Sarai converted the slaves they acquired in Haran. The subject is proselytes. In light of Gen. 12:5, Eccl. 8:10 should read: "And so I saw the wicked who deserved to be buried, but then they came [into the congregation of Adonai]." This interpretation is homiletical, but it complements the midrash of Abram and Sarai who "made" souls by converting them.

⁴⁴ In Hebrew *weyištakkhu* can also mean 'discovered.' See Jastrow p. 1572.

⁴⁵ QR 8.10.

Verse 11

**Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily,
therefore the heart of men are set to do evil.**

Surprisingly, the rabbis agree with this verse which decries that Divine Justice is not apparent in this world. The text quotes a common folk saying with the same message: "Just as the haughty come, so, too, the haughty exit without stumbling."⁴⁶ They also assert that this situation (the lack of punishment) exists because of the lack of swift justice. However, the rabbis conclude that despite appearances, Divine Justice does exist. As proof they quote Eccl. 8:13, **But it will not be well with the wicked....**⁴⁷ The midrash suggests that one read the two verses together without 8:12 interceding between them.

Verse 12

There is no response to the charge that a sinner may do evil a hundred times and still his life is prolonged.

Verse 13

**But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he
prolong his days, which are as a shadow, because he does not fear
God.**

In Kiddushin 33b, the rabbis use this verse to define what type of wickedness will be punished: a student who does not

⁴⁶QR 8.11.

⁴⁷QR 8.14.

respect his teacher, a usurer, or a person who uses false weights. For the other reference to Eccl. 8:13, see the comment under Verse 11.

Verse 14

There is a vanity that takes place on the earth; there are righteous men who receive recompense due to the wicked and wicked men who receive the recompense due to the righteous; I say this too is vanity.

The theological difficulty of the apparent lack of Providence in the world is removed by the insertion of words and phrases. The entire meaning is altered. Although this text is found in Qohelet Rabba 8.14, a more complete version appears in Horayot 10b:

Happy are the righteous men who receive in this world the recompense due to the wicked in the world to come, Woe to the wicked men who receive in this world the recompense due to the righteous in the world to come.**

This text attempts to reinsert Providence into the verse by alternating between this world and the world to come. With this construction the world has order again.

There is a terrible inconsistency with this interpretation. "Raba said: 'Would the righteous, then, if they enjoyed both worlds find it so distasteful?'"** In other words, why do the righteous not have the best of both worlds? Raba's statement leads back to the same point Qohelet makes.

**Also found in Yerushalmi Horayot 3.2.12.

**Horayot 10b. This statement follows immediately after the preceding quote in the Talmud passage.

Numbers Rabba 20.12 attempts to clarify the verse in pious terms without inserting words. Moses and Aaron are punished for their actions at Meribah. This midrash explains Aaron's punishment using Eccl. 8:14 with the assumption that Aaron did not break a law. Just as the wicked serpent in the Garden of Eden was punished and not allowed to plead, so the righteous Aaron, is punished without an opportunity to plea. The righteous man suffered according to the recompense due the wicked.

Verse 15

Therefore I praise joy, for there is no other good for man under the sun but to eat, drink, and be joyful and have this accompany him in his toil, during the days of his life, which God has given him beneath the sun.

"All the eating and drinking mentioned in this book signify Torah and good deeds."^o The ultimate worth of worldly existence is shifted from simple joys of physical sustenance to rabbinic virtues. The primary tasks of humanity are Torah and good deeds.

In Shabbat 30b the rabbis note an apparent contradiction between Eccl. 2:2b and of joy, "What good is it" and Eccl. 8:15 I praise joy. The rabbis assign the following definitions: the latter refers to following celebratory precepts such as marriage and the former refers to celebrations which are not commanded by law. Social gatherings not prescribed by law which involve much merry-making are frowned upon as 'vanity.'

^oQR 8.15, 2.24.

Conclusion

In general, Chapter 8 is interpreted to demonstrate God's power in the world. The doctrine of the World to Come is carefully inserted to deflect the charges of Qohelet that there is an apparent lack of Justice and Providence in the world. Humanity should no longer eat, drink, and make merry but instead follow the Decalogue, observe Torah law, and do good deeds. Ecclesiastes is an exercise in explaining theodicy.

In terms of piety and doctrine, the source material demonstrates the success of the interpreters. A text which may border on heresy is used to teach lessons of religious piety. Almost every verse (Eccl. 8:12 excluded) has at least one lesson pertaining to rabbinic doctrine.

A prominent method of interpreting Ecclesiastes, particularly in Qohelet Rabba, is the atomization of the text. Words and phrases are lifted from the text and interpreted to promote significant doctrines of Rabbinic Judaism. The subjects are now God and humanity.

To the rabbinic mind, the focal point of Creation is humanity. Qohelet has a world view quite the opposite: **Generations come and generations go but the earth abides** (Eccl. 1:4). The world continues to carry on at its own pace and humanity is inconsequential. The idea that a man's thoughts and actions are inconsequential to the world from a moral point of view is intolerable to the Rabbinic Jew. Throughout the comments, the significance of humanity is reiterated.

The same is true of wisdom. Qohelet considers wisdom to be only relatively useful; this produces a reaction among the midrashic sources, which positively extol wisdom. This may explain the desire of many to expound at length on Eccl. 8:1a, Who is like the wise man? Once the text offers an ambiguous referent, the possibilities expand exponentially.

Another aspect of the rabbinic comments on this chapter is the paucity of commentary on some verses. Verses 12 and 14 challenge the existence of divine justice in the world; yet, few comments are made. The dichotomy is clear: reading new meanings in the text is an exciting and productive arena for rabbinic homiletics; however, the methodology is limited when confronted with direct scriptural challenges to rabbinic doctrine.

To the rabbinic sages the world has meaning. God is present and operates in the world. There is justice for humanity, if not now then in the World to Come. Only wisdom and good deeds are worthwhile; through them one secures justice.

Chapter 3

Rashi's Interpretation of Ecclesiastes

Rashi was an eleventh century French exegete whose commentary is considered the standard work in both Bible and Talmud. His writings are the standard because of Rashi's encyclopedic knowledge of rabbinic sources and his own pious insight into the material. Rashi's interpretation of Ecclesiastes demonstrates his exegetical prowess. Rashi not only draws from Talmudic sources but also utilizes the rules of grammar to interpret the text. In this chapter I present a translation and analysis of Rashi's commentary on Ecclesiastes 8:1-15.

Ecc1 8:1

Rashi: *mi kehahakam* who in the world is as important as the wise man? *Peser dabar* is an interpretation of a matter. As we find in Daniel, who was wise in his fear of heaven; secrets of interpretation were revealed to him. Who is like Moses who made a reconciliation between Israel and their Father Who is in the Heavens? *we'oz pana(y)w y^vsunne'* his countenance became so different from that of other creatures that they shrank from coming near him for the skin of Moses's face was radiant (Ex. 34.30).

Rashi deviates from earlier traditions which give a specific answer to the question "who is like the wise man?" Previous homiletical commentary suggests that *hakam* is a symbol for God, Moses, Israel, Adam, or the talmudic sage. Not only does Rashi read the wise man as a mortal instead of a euphemism for God, he

also restates the phrase as a rhetorical question.¹ By choosing this rhetorical rendering, Rashi anticipates the modern reading of the text.

Rashi's assertion of the rhetorical question is derived from the surprising appearance of the definite article "h" which which should have assimilated in the presence of the "k" of comparison. He reads the definite article "h" as emphasis of the importance of the wise man. 'The wise man, who else is as important as he is?'

The comment on 8:1b begins with a straightforward definition of *pešer*, "interpretation" or "solution." Rashi uses Biblical verses from the book of Daniel as grammatical referents for the definition "interpret." Although the phrase *pešer dabar* never appears in Daniel, the verb *ps"r* (the Aramaic equivalent) appears only in the book of Daniel (particularly in Daniel Chapter 2 where many of Daniel's predictions from dream interpretations are recorded).

The interpretation of *pešer* as "reconciliation" is taken from a talmudic source.² Rashi is referring to the incident of the Golden Calf and Moses's intervention with God on Israel's behalf. In Rashi's last comment on the verse, he compares 'change registering on the face' (8:1d) to the verse in Ex. 34:30 which describes the change in Moses's countenance after his

¹Cf. QR 8.1.1-5, PRK 4.4, and PR 23.6.

²Berachot 10a. "Who is like the Holy One Blessed Be He, who knew how to effect a reconciliation between two righteous men, Hezekiah and Isaiah?"

encounter with the Lord. This prooftext adds weight to the idea that 8:1 actually refers to a wise man such as Moses.

Eccl 8:2

Rashi: *'ani pi-melek* Therefore I am obliged to keep the utterances of the King of the World because that is the best thing of all. *we'al dibrat Yebu'at 'elohim* that we swore to him at Horeb to keep His commandments. Another interpretation: I am obliged to keep the words of the kings of nations who rule their subjects with various types of taxes. *we'al dibrat Yebu'at 'elohim* only insofar as they do not cause us to transgress the oath that we swore to God. *we'al dibrat* Alongside the oaths sworn to God I will keep the words of the kings. Thus we find in the case of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah that they said to Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter." (Dan. 3:16) If "king" then why "Nebuchadnezzar," and if "Nebuchadnezzar" why "king?" The answer is this: they said to him "You are our king when it comes to service and paying taxes but when it comes to worshipping stars and planets O Nebuchadnezzar, you are not king." ("And you and a dog are alike")³

Eccl. 8:2 is a difficult verse to interpret because there is no logical connection between the first word (*'ani*) and the rest of the verse. Rashi attempts to rectify the difficulty by filling in the words that are missing after the first word and

³ In some editions from NR 15.1.

reading ^vsemor as an imperative rather than an infinitive. Thus he reads the verse: " Therefore I am obligated to keep the utterances of the (K)ing of the world."

The last three words of the verse are also difficult. The solution Rashi offers is from earlier traditions. To the rabbinic mind the word *dibrat* in the context of "the oath to God" must refer to the 'aseret haddibrot, the Ten Commandments.⁴ Therefore the oath is the one that binds the Jewish people to the Sinai covenant.

Rashi's lengthy comment at the end of this verse is a midrash about Nebuchadnezzar. The lesson here is that mortal kings have dominion in the economic and business spheres, but in the sphere of religion, the King of Kings reigns supreme. Rashi inserts in his retelling of this midrash a specific reading of the word 'al which should be understood as meaning "alongside." Thus, he creates the image of a Jew who can simultaneously obey the laws of the land and Divine law.

Ecc1 8:3

Rashi: 'al tibbahel' mippanaw telek Do not be hasty, that is, to flee from His presence to a place where He does not rule, for He rules everywhere. 'al ta'amod bedabar ra' Do not involve yourself in wicked deeds. ki kol-'aser yahpos to punish you; He has the authority and the ability to it.

⁴QR 8.2.1.

In 8:3, Rashi makes several grammatical observations. He reads 'al *tibbahel*' as 'al *tehi nibhal* "Do not be hasty" and he adds "še" ("that") as a prefix on the word *telek*. Rashi is struggling to give a nearly incomprehensible verse clarity and direction by glossing the entire verse. He further explains the 'al *ta'amod* by the causative 'al *ta'amid*. This reading specifies the intent of Qohelet's advice as "do not involve yourself." Rashi also "unpacks" the double meaning of the last word *ya'aseh*: the king has the authority and he has the ability to exercise that authority.

Rashi understands verse 3 as an admonition of God's retributive justice. The *dabar ra'* is a sin a person has perpetrated against God. He reads the verse as a warning: Do not be so hasty that you flee from His presence (because God rules everywhere); do not involve yourself in sins against God because all of the sins that He desires to punish you for, He will do so because He has the authority and the ability to judge. God, the Judge, is not arbitrary concerning whom He punishes; there is retributive justice.

Ecc1 8:4

Rashi: *ba'ašer dabar melek šilton* because the word of the Holy One Blessed Be He governs and who will say to him: "What are you doing?" If you keep the commandments, you shall not know an evil thing nor will it come upon you.

Searching for grammatical clarity, Rashi renders *ba'ašer* as *bišbil 'ašer* (because, since, inasmuch as). In contrast, Ibn Ezra and Rashbam insert a clause in the middle (*be'oto maqom še*____, Ibn Ezra). Rashi's elegant solution demonstrates the dependence of this verse upon the context of the previous verse. Rashi's interpretation is still accepted by many scholars today.

The rest of his comment continues to expound the theme of retributive justice. If a commandment is broken, the sinner will be punished by God; for every action there is an appropriate divine response. In his comment on 8:3, Rashi begins to build an argument that demonstrates Qohelet's belief in divine justice. Here he continues that demonstration.

A critical reader may argue that Rashi is imposing his own belief on the text. He is, I think, aware of the difficulty of this chapter, the assertion of no divine justice or providence in the world. Rashi reformulates the difficulty as the "apparent" lack of divine retribution in the world. His reformulation asserts that Providence does exist and the problem is how to demonstrate its power in this world. In these early verses Rashi is laying the groundwork for his interpretation of later, more controversial verses.

Ecc1 8:5

Rashi: *we'et umišpaṭ yeda' leb ḥakam* The wise man knows that there is a fixed time to punish the wicked and there is justice

before the Holy One Blessed Be He that in the end He will bring punishment upon them. *mišpat* means "justice" (Old French).

Rashi's statement refers to a midrashic source: "He whose heart is wise knows that if he transgresses the commandments a time will come when the Holy One, blessed be He, will execute judgment upon him; and so he keeps away from transgression."⁵ Rashi shows by this interpretation that he believes that even if the punishment is not immediate, there is a point in time when God executes his justice upon the evildoer.

Eccl 8:6

Rashi: *ki lekol-hepes* that the man does what he desires and transgresses the law; there is a time of punishment and retribution, and divine punishment is ready for him. *ki-ra'at ha'adam rabbah 'ala(y)w* when the evil of a man is great and oversteps the bounds, then his punishment comes. The word "k" is used in the sense "when" (*ka'ašer*) as in the verse when they have a case they come to me (Ex. 18:16).

Rashi quotes again from Numbers Rabba 14.6 which reads that every transgression that is not repented is punished. The difficulty for a pious commentator is not knowing the time when God chooses to punish evildoers. The midrash responds with a metaphor: "When does He inflict punishment upon him? When the

⁵NR 14.6.

hin* is full..." Rashi accepts the metaphor: when a person has committed a certain number of transgressions, then punishment comes.

Ecc1 8:7

Rashi: *ki-'enenu yodea' mah-seyyihyeh* When the wicked sins, he does not consider that God will bring him to judgment, and woe to him because of it, for when the retribution comes "who will tell him," that is, counsel him or give him advice or strength, for He brings it upon him all of a sudden.

Rashi concludes that this verse expresses the fate of the sinner (referred to in the verse as "the man") in 8:6: even when a person's evil is great, who knows when retribution will come? The second half of the verse is an emphatic denial: no one can tell the sinner about retribution because he does not believe in it.

Rashi returns to Numbers Rabba 14.6 to explain the mechanics of divine justice. This verse teaches that if a person does not repent any transgression he may have committed because he is not afraid of a Day of Judgment, he will receive no favor when the Day does arrive. God will listen to pleas before the sentence is passed but not after punishment is decreed. Unless the evildoer realizes for himself that he has sinned, he is doomed. At some

*A measure of volume.

point in time which no mortal knows, God will exact punishment and at that moment there will be no recourse to repentance.

Ecc1 8:8

Rashi: 'en 'adam ^vsalit baruah over the spirit or the will of the messenger of God; to withhold his lifebreath from him so that the Angel of Death might not take it. 'en ^vsilton that is, no king's authority is recognized on the day of his death. In every place you find "King David" but on the day of his death "When David's life was drawing to a close" (1Kings 2:1) and there is no mention in this verse of "kingship." we'en ^vmislahat hamilhamah - that is, one might say "I shall send my son or my servant in my place."

Rashi's explanations are derived directly from the midrashim on this verse.⁷ Death comes upon all individuals regardless of their place in life. God has supreme authority and at the time of death, human beings have no authority. Both the midrashic sources and Rashi are close to the modern reading of this verse.

Rashi's comment on the third phrase, "there is no mustering out of war" is quoted from Deuteronomy Rabba 9.3. Death is one war a person must fight alone.

⁷QR 8.8, DR 9.3.

Eccl 8:9

Rashi: *'et-kol-zeh ra'iti* the foregoing. *wenaton 'et-libbi lekol ma'a'seh* and also all of the deeds of humanity I contemplated and I realized there is a time that a man has dominion over his companion and overpowers him, but in the end his evildoing turns upon him. Amalek prevailed over Israel but in the end but his fate is to perish forever (Num. 24:20). Similarly Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, and Sennacherib.

In Rashi's point of view, this verse is a minor conclusion to the ideas presented in verses 6 - 8; the word *zeh* (this) refers to the three preceding verses.

The rest of the verse depicts the tyranny that people afflict over one another. Such inhumanity, according to Rashi, will be punished in the end by retributive justice. The specific examples he uses are Amalek, Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, and Sennacherib who were all punished in the end for their persecution of Israel.

Eccl 8:10

Rashi: *ubeken* and then. *ra'iti re'sa'im qeburim* In this prophecy I saw the wicked buried; that is, those who deserved to be hidden in the ground because they were the most despised of the idolatrous nations as it is said of them: **this people does not deserve to be a people.** (Is. 23:13) And yet they ruled in the house of the Lord, which is a holy place. When they went

from it into their own country they were praised in their city, because they have done this or that in the house of the Lord. Do not read *weyistakkhu* [they were forgotten] but rather *weyistabbu* [they were praised] as the sages interpreted it. According to the reading forgetting, it is rendered thus in the Aggadah: yet their end is that their name and memory is blotted out from the very town wherein they acted so as it is said: **And I will gather all nations into the valley of Jehoshaphat. (Joel 4:2)** They shall be punished in that very place where they despised me. Similarly the text reads: **O Lord on awakening [read: in the city] you shall despise their image. (Ps. 73:30)** *gam zeh* One of the vanities that exists which fatigues people is that God does not hasten to punish those who do evil and therefore people think there is no justice and no judge.

The first comment asserts that the relationship between 8:9 and 8:10 is temporal rather than causal. For contrasting opinions, see Ibn Ezra and the Septuagint.*

According to Rashi, 8:10 should be translated "And then I foresaw the wicked, deserving to be buried, rule in the Temple and when they went away from it they were praised in their city because they had done so." Rashi reads *weyistakkhu* (and were forgotten) as *weyistabbu* (and were praised) in agreement with the comments in Gittin 56b. However, Rashi also reports reading

*Both argue: because of the situation described at the end of verse 9 is one man ruling over another, and thus *ubeken* the situation in verse 10 occurs.

of *weyistak^tqhu* in Gittin 56b as forgotten, which Rashi reports and translates: "but they were forgotten in the city where they had acted so."

The word *ba'ir* also holds particular significance. The first prooftext is from Joel 4:2, I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat. There I will contend with them over My very own people, Israel.... In the very place where the nations scattered Israel, God will punish them there. God punishes evildoers in the place where they do their evil acts. In the second prooftext Rashi compares the term *ba'ir* with *ba'ir* (when aroused) in Psalm 73:20. He presents a play on the words of Psalm 73:20: 'O Lord, in the city you shall despise their image; the very city in which they did their evil deeds.' Rashbam concurs with this reading.'

The "absurdity" mentioned at the end of the verse, according to Rashi, is the assumption that there is no divine justice in the world because there is a lack of immediate retribution. This is a misperception; God does not hasten to punish despite the mortal desire for instantaneous retribution. Divine Justice does exist, Rashi contends, but God chooses when he will punish the evildoer.

"I have seen wicked men in the world, who deserved to be buried, coming and going from the place of the Holy One, and committing therein destruction and great evil; and their end was that their name and memory were blotted out in the very town where they had acted so."

Eccl 8:11

Rashi: 'aser 'en-na'asah pitgam ma'aseh hara'ah meherah For God does not speedily punish the deeds of the evil doers. Therefore people think there is no justice and they presumptuously do evil.

Rashi anticipates this verse in his comment on the previous verse. God punishes evildoers when He chooses to punish them, not when mortals would like them to be punished. The misguided people described in 8:11 understand the delay of retribution as a sign of divine inaction; therefore, they think that they can do evil with impunity. The same interpretation is given in Qoh Rabba 8.14.

Eccl 8:12

Rashi: 'aser hote' because they see that the wicked do evil, a hundred, a thousand, or myriad times and God delays and does not punish him. me'at The text here is elliptical; it means 100 days, 100 years, 100,000. So too in the case of You are drunk (Is.51:21), the text is elliptical: "You are drunk with anger" and it is not with wine like the other times you are drunk. ki gam yodea' 'ani that even for every time that He does not hasten to punish the wicked, to make a distinction between the righteous and the wicked, I know that in the end, everyone receives his compensation and for those who fear Him it shall be well.

Rashi reaffirms the point that he made in his comments in 8:10 and 8:11. The evildoer does not believe in retribution and can demonstrate by everyday experience that he is right. Rashi does not explain why an evildoer can sin so often without being punished. Instead he states the dictum that God punishes the evildoer at some point. Instead of addressing the difficulty, he merely repeats himself: those who fear God shall receive reward.

The second comment on 8:12 is similar to the comment made by Saadia Gaon in his commentary.¹⁰ The wicked are not punished so that they will be utterly condemned and the righteous are punished in order to purge them of their sins.

Rashi remarks that *me'at* is elliptical because it is in the construct state without a following genitive. he brings a parallel case (Is. 51:21) to demonstrate his point. Rashi, following the Targum, argues that the missing genitive is "years" (*me'ah Shanin* ← Targum). In contrast, some commentators read "one hundred 'times'".¹¹ In any case, the point is that God will ultimately exercise retributive justice.

Ecc1 8:13

Rashi: *neṭob lo' yihyeh laraṣa'* refers to one who does not fear God.

¹⁰Chapter 4, p. 90.

¹¹Ibn Ezra: *me'at pe'amin*.

The evildoer is one who sins against God. In other words, the one who does not fear God is the one who is going to do evil.

Eccl 8:14

Rashi: *yeš hebel* A thing that leads people astray. *'ašer yeš*
šaddiqim Evil such as wicked deeds befall them; and there are wicked upon whom goodness like righteous deeds come. I say this is also one of the misleading aspects of the world. Our Rabbis explained this in one way [Horayot 10b]; it does not solve the problem for me, because of the way the sage concludes by saying this is also vanity.

Rashi derives the word *hebel* from *hamahabil* (to lead astray; cf. Jer 23:16) in order to emphasize that the injustice that seems evident in the world might easily mislead people to false opinions of divine justice. In a world where divine justice operates, the fact that evildoers flourish and the righteous suffer seems perverse. Rashi seems to reject the rabbinic explanation of this apparent perversity and offers no alternative of his own here. The rabbinic comment in Horayot 10b reads:

R. Nahman ben Hisda: . . . Happy are the righteous men unto whom it happens in this world according to the work of the wicked in the world to come; woe unto the wicked men to whom it happens in this world according to the work of the righteous in the world to come.

Rashi rejects the solution that all injustice in this world is compensated in the world to come. He omits a similar solution in 8:12 which is found in the Targum.¹² In the same Horayot passage the Babylonian Amora, Raba, also rejects this solution: "Would the righteous then if they enjoyed both worlds find it so distasteful?" In other words, why can't the righteous man merit reward in both worlds? Rashi accepts Raba's position.

Rashi's explanation for the apparent prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous is his assertion that retributive justice always comes eventually in this world. The momentary success of the wicked must therefore be an illusion. Evildoers are punished; to assume the contrary is "to be led astray" like the people described in 8:11. "To be led astray" is Rashi's definition of the term *hebel* (absurdity). Any opinion that leads one away from the Torah is *hebel*.

Ecc1 8:15

Rashi: 'et-*hassiahah* that one be content with one's lot and strive to do upright deeds that gladden the heart, and not lust after increasing wealth by usury and robbery. Anyone who is not content with his lot and greedily seeks possessions ends up

¹² "... and I saw by the Holy Spirit that the evil which happens to the righteous in this world is not for their guilt, but to free them from a slight transgression, that their reward may be perfect in the world to come; and the good that comes to sinners in this world is not for their merits, but to render them a reward for their small merit they have acquired, so that they may eat their reward in this world, and to destroy their portion in the world to come."

committing transgressions: robbery, deceit, and usury. And one who is not content with his marriage is attracted to other women, including married women. *le'ekol welištot* with what God has graciously provided him for his contentment. In the midrash it states that every instance of eating and drinking in Ecclesiastes actually refers to *talmud torah* as is the case in the verse, Ho, all who are thirsty, come for water, even if you have no money; come buy food and eat; buy food without money, wine and milk without cost (Is. 55:1). *wehu' yilwennu* He shall be joined with you as in the similar case, And your Vindicator shall march before you (Is. 58:8). *yemey hayya(y)w 'ašer-natan-lo ha'elohim* He should do thus. The end of the text refers back to the beginning [of the verse]. The transposed text reads: 'there is no good for a man during the days of his life that God gives him unless he is eating, drinking, rejoicing; then He will accompany him in his toil.'

Rashi understands 8:15 as a statement of rabbinic ethics. True joy in life is the victory of contentment over greed and love over lust. To eat and to drink is a reminder of a gracious God who provides sustenance. Sustenance is not foodstuffs but *talmud torah*.¹³ As Is. 51:1 states, everyone can attain contentment through study and good deeds.

¹³QR 8.15.2, 2.24.1. In 2.24.1, one word refers to "*talmud torah*" and the other word refers to "good deeds." However, there is no contradiction here.

It will accompany him is understood to mean that as God will accompany him.

The transposition suggested in the last comment is Rashi's formulation of the ethical teaching of verse 15. The only way a man may profit during his life is if God accompanies him, and God accompanies the man who "eats and drinks," that is, the man who occupies himself in the study of Torah and the performance of good deeds.

Conclusion

The purpose of Rashi's commentary on Eccl 8:1-15 is to explain "the lack of divine justice in the world" as an illusion fostered by disbelief. He argues that the absurdity in the world consists of the conclusions people draw based on appearances. Daily life may appear to reinforce the idea that there is no justice, but God is present and punishes evildoers at some point.

In his comment on 8:14, Rashi defines *hebel* as "something that leads people astray." In his comment on Eccl 1:2 where the term *hebel* first appears, Rashi does not define it, referring instead to a midrashic tradition.¹⁴ From his commentary on Chapter 8, it is evident that *hebel* denotes false opinions, specifically those opinions that contradict rabbinic teachings about divine justice.

¹⁴The seven mentions of *hebel* in the verse refers to the seven days of Creation.

Rashi draws freely from the midrashic material to support his thesis, and follows the essential rabbinic line of interpretation. Divine justice must exist, and the text needs to be interpreted in that light. God punishes the wicked, as reliable tradition states, but only at the time God chooses. Rashi deviates from earlier views when he rejects the world to come as a solution to the problems of suffering and apparent injustice in this world.

Rashi attempts to give a smooth, grammatically correct reading of the text. His rabbinic sources, in contrast, tend to atomize the text, tearing words or phrases from their contexts for homiletical purposes. Some of Rashi's interpretation may seem farfetched, but he never compromises the integrity of the verse.

Chapter 4

The Commentary of Saadia Gaon

Saadia (ben Joseph) Gaon was the leading Jewish intellectual figure of the tenth century. He was born in Egypt and eventually became head of the Academy at Sura in Babylonia. He wrote philosophical treatises, grammatical works, a translation of the Bible into Arabic and a commentary on the Bible in Arabic. The discussion in this chapter is based on a modern Hebrew translation of Saadia's commentary on Ecclesiastes.¹ In this commentary Saadia divides the text under discussion into four units: 7:29-8:1, 8:2-8, 8:9-13, and 8:14-16.

7:29-8:1

The content of 7:29 is the principle by which a person attains wisdom. The first component of this principle is praise: one should praise God because through God's glory humankind has become aware of the natural sciences and divine wisdom. Each human being must strive to attain religious and secular knowledge. The second component is self-denigration: in deference to God's laws, one should avoid areas of inquiry "that are none of one's business among divine matter." These are the two components of the general principle for attaining wisdom.

The first verse of Chapter 8 is woven into Saadia's description of the principle. Praise: Who is like the wise man, and who knows the interpretation of a thing (8:1a-b) is the utterance of a man at the height of his intellectual powers. Denigration: illumines his face (8:1c) signifies that the wise man dispels

¹Yosef Qafih, *Hames Megillot*.

the worries of those who seek out divine matters that are beyond humankind.

Saadia addresses the grammatical problem of the phrase 'oz pana(y)w in 8:1d and presents not only his own exegesis but the solutions of other sources as well. Saadia's analysis concludes that 'oz is parallel to ^ew'oz melek (Ps. 79:4) and migdal 'oz (Prov. 18:10) which refer respectively to "the strong" and "the difficult." Combining the two prooftexts into one definition, the phrase 'oz pana(y)w means "impudence" which, according to Saadia, will disappear with the accumulation of wisdom. Another interpretation from Midrash is that one's face is illuminated by wisdom; 'oz pan~~a~~a(y)w however, which is "anger," causes the face to change: wisdom disappears in the presence of anger.

8:2-8

In 8:2 the first word 'ani (I) has no apparent relationship with the rest of the verse. Saadia produces two prooftexts in an attempt to solve the dilemma. 2Kings 9:25 reads *ki zekor 'ani wa'attah* (remember how you and I) and Eccl. 4:2 reads *'sabbeah 'ani* (I praised); in both cases, the syntax does not follow the standard rule. Thus, 'ani is modified by a verb found further along in the verse. Nonetheless, Saadia again relies on Midrash for his commentary. The meaning of 8:2a is a warning to obey the commands of the king when they are in agreement with Torah. Another interpretation understands the verse as a warning against promises made with a sworn oath in the name of God to the king,

such as the vassal oath of Zedekiah to King Nebuchadnezzar (2Chron. 36:13).

The first clause of 8:3 *'al tibbonahel mippana(y)w telek* is also a warning to keep God's oath; in your coming and your going, do not rush through the performance of the oath. Saadia combines the end of 8:2 with 8:3 to form a single thought which does not pause at the end of the verse. The thrust of the verse is what God does not desire (*dabar ra'*), do not do because God's will is manifest in everything. There is no place to hide one's actions from God. God's will is the topic of 8:3c: all that He desires He will do. Other interpretations take the first clause to mean that despite what the king says one should not be confused and do something that is outside the boundaries of Torah.

In 8:4 Saadia renders *ba'a^vser* as *benaqom^v sesam^v* (in a place where). The term *sil^vton* signifies sovereignty and power. Saadia presents several ways to read the verse: Wherever God has authority, in that place his commands are fulfilled without opposition. A second interpretation reads: a king is wherever his name is present. Saadia reasons that if this is true of a mortal king, how much more so is it of the King of Kings.

Saadia's comment on 8:5 is difficult because the Arabic text is unclear to the translator.² The meaning of 8:5a is that one who observes the commandments will not experience evil. However, there are two types of people: those who learn the commandments from others, and those who learn the commandments from study.

²p.253, note 27.

The subject of 8:5b is the legitimate student; he (the wise man) knows the correct time for the commandments and the fixed customs (*w'et umiṣpat*) and the reasons behind them. The one who relies on others does not do anything but what he is told; thus, he will do the commandments at the wrong time out of ignorance. For all that He desires (8:6a), namely the commandments "there is a correct time and fixed custom" (8:6a).

The second half of 8:6 Because the evil of humanity is great is connected to 8:7; 8:6b refers to people who pursue actions whose consequences are unknown to them (8:7a). This failure to acquire intellect is the cause of evil. The end result is that they have neither the ability to postpone nor the strength to deflect the evil they have wrought by their actions (8:7b).

In earlier and later commentaries, *ruah* in 8:8 is rendered "lifebreath." Saadia refers to his philosophical treatise (*Emunot v'Deot*) which identifies *ruah* as *hannepes^v haḥiyyunit* (the vital soul). The "vital soul" is the fundamental part of the soul which humankind shares with animals; it defines the essence of life. A man has no ability to hold back (*liklo'*) the "vital soul;" when his time of death arrives, he has no authority over his "vital soul."

One term in 8:8c which is difficult is *miṣlahat*, mustering out; Saadia translates the term as "weapons." His translation also solves another problem of the relationship between 8:8b there is no authority on the day of death and 8:8c there is no mustering out of war. "There are no weapons of war that can

save a person on the day of death." By reading *mislahat* as "weapons," Saadia has combined two disparate phrases.

The last phrase 8:8d states that no matter how great and strong, evil will not save the wicked from death. Others translate this clause as evil and wickedness will not save them. The difference between the two renderings is subtle.

8:9-13

Saadia has the same difficulty with 8:9 as do modern commentators: does 8:9 conclude the preceding block of material or does it introduce the subsequent block of material? He presents detailed arguments for both solutions.

If 8:9 belongs with 8:8 Saadia sees the absurdity of one person's dominion over another. He reads the verses in a specific order 8:9a -> 8:9c -> 8:8: "All of this I observed, when men have dominion over men to harm them unjustly, no man has authority over the vital soul to imprison it" In other words, one can shackle a man, but not his spirit.

On the other hand, if 8:9 belongs with 8:10, then 8:10 refers to the reign of the wicked as described in the preceding verse. However, the thought which begins in 8:9 actually ends in 8:13. These people did evil yet they died a good death. This observation is the subject of the remainder of the chapter under discussion. In a grammatical note, Saadia remarks that just as 8:9 is in the perfect tense, 8:10 is also in the perfect tense.

Saadia attempts to present a coherent rendering of 8:10, which is almost incomprehensible as it stands. First, he gives contextual definitions for five terms: (1) *ubeken*, and then (the "b" is extra), (2) *qeburim*, they were buried with honor, (3) *waba'u*, they came in honor to their burial place, (4) *misneqom qados*³, an important and respected place³, and (5) *weyistakkhu* and their terrible deeds were forgotten. The verse reads: 'And then I saw the wicked ones who had dominion over others buried with dignity and brought to their burial site with honor from an important and respected place, and these wicked people were forgotten and their evil deeds were forgotten by the inhabitants of the city.'

According to Saadia, Qohelet explains in 8:11 that people were led astray to do evil because these wicked people in 8:10 died well and were buried with honor. When people saw that the wicked were not destroyed, they thought there was no divine punishment. The word *pitgam* suggests that there has been no decree of punishment; "nothing" was done to the evildoers.

The second half of 8:11 begins with the phrase *'al-ken* which is usually translated as "therefore." Saadia, however, translates it as "because." The verse is then inverted to read: 'Because men are encouraged to do evil (8:11b), the sentence for evil deeds is not executed swiftly' ((8:11a). God is merciful to

³Earlier and later traditional commentators render the term The Temple.

those who act out of ignorance or misunderstanding and assume there is no punishment.

The curious phrase *leb hakam* (heart of the wise man) refers to the heart as the seat of the intellect. The heart of the evildoer is filled with the presumption that there is no punishment.⁴ A wise man knows in his heart that there is divine retribution.

Eccl. 8:12a continues the idea of 8:11. Saadia contends that the life of the evildoer is extended even though he continues to do evil. This is true because 8:12b-13 testifies that there is a world of reward and punishment. Saadia's "world of existence" is bound up with his conception of the soul after death. In Emunot v'Deot, he argues that the soul is reason in its essence. When the soul is brilliantly illuminated by God, it is endowed with intellect.⁵ Therefore, the wicked are punished with total darkness; they lack the illumination of reason. The soul of the wicked ceases to exist. The lack of illumination is alluded to in the text by *welo ya'arik yamin*, his days [read intellect] will not be prolonged; he shall be without the light of day.

Within his explanation of reward and punishment, Saadia does mention two grammatical difficulties: the ellipsis *me'at one hundred* (8:12) and *kassel like a shadow* (8:13). He concludes

⁴Est. 7:5 One who dares to do this.

⁵Alexander Altman, trans "Saadya Gaon: Book of Doctrines and Beliefs," in Three Jewish Philosophers, (New York: Atheneum, 1985).

that the ellipsis is a necessary construction connected to the phrase which comes after it. Most commentators connect the term to the preceding phrase: **do evil one hundred times** but Saadia reads: **his days will not be prolonged by even 100 days.**

The term *kaššēl* like a shadow can be interpreted in two ways. According to Saadia, **like a shadow** refers to people who do not fear God. They are like a shadow because their soul is not illuminated; the fear of God demands intellect. Thus, Saadia moves *kaššēl* from 8:12b to the next clause 8:12c. He also cites another way of interpreting that keeps *kaššēl* at the end of 8:12b; that interpretation, he believes, leaves the clause incomprehensible.

At the conclusion of this block of material (8:9-13), Saadia acknowledges that he is aware of three other interpretations of these verses. One interpretation of 8:10 is that "I saw evil people buried and I saw the evil people pass from the holy places and were lost. Despite this, others replaced them and acted evil also." Another interpretation Saadia rejects is the reading of *weyištakk^hhu* were forgotten as "were discovered."⁶ Finally he mentions the possible insertion of a second subject, the righteous, in the midst of 8:10: 'the righteous were forgotten in their hometown.'

⁶QR 8.10 (based on the Aramaic usage of *šk^h*).

8:14-16

The term *hebel* (absurdity) signifies generalizations that are based on ignorance or simplicity; 8:14, which concludes with **I say this is also absurdity**, is an example of simplistic reasoning. That the wicked receive reward and the righteous receive punishment is only a matter of appearances. There is a hidden process which only the wise man (see 7:29-8:1) perceives. Unless one is a wise man, cautions Saadia, this is a divine matter to be avoided.

Saadia understands the text to say that God accelerates retribution. If the wicked are condemned, they are utterly condemned before death. If the righteous are rewarded after death, they are punished in this world in order to cleanse them thoroughly. One should not be bothered by what individuals "reap" in this life because 8:12b-13 demonstrates that the righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punished. This is the hidden process operating in the world.

When Qohelet says **I praised enjoyment** (8:15), he means, according to Saadia, that the only people who enjoy life are those who do not live by simplistic generalizations (*hebel*). However, 8:15 must be read in the context of 8:16. Qohelet attempted, as he states in 8:16, to live according to these simplistic generalizations. When he attempted to do so, he discovered that such a mindset gave no comfort. He could not enjoy sleep during the day or the night (8:16c) and his thoughts led

nowhere. Therefore, the person who eats, drinks, and enjoys himself is one whose actions are based on wisdom and not *hebel*.

Saadia's last comments on this block of material are concerned with the term *yilwennu* will accompany him. The inference is that God accompanies the one who ties and attaches himself to God like the quorum of mourners who accompany a funeral procession. The two are bound up together.⁷ Just as Leah attempted to endear herself to Jacob by giving him children,⁸ so people attempt to endear themselves to God.

Conclusion

Saadia's commentary is concerned with the unifying ideas within a block of material. Each of the divisions (which are also discerned by several modern commentators) demonstrates a particular theme. The first block (7:29-8:1) is the general principle of wisdom. The second block (8:2-8) is concerned with keeping the commandments. The next division (8:9-13) discusses retribution and how it is manifest in the world (contrary to Qohelet's assertion). The final division (8:14-16) is an extended definition of the term *hebel*.

Saadia uses all four blocks of material to solve the problem of no apparent retribution. Retribution does exist in the world, but it is a hidden process. Only the wise man knows the hidden process. The truth of retributive justice is that

⁷Sota 46b.

⁸Gen. 29:34.

those who observe the commandments properly will be rewarded with intellect and those who do evil will be punished with utter darkness. One who lives by the simplistic generalization that there is no retributive justice may have material goods and may die well, but he is not comfortable with himself. By his internal discomfort, the wicked one knows he is doing evil.

Chapter 5

The Zohar and the Exegesis of Ecclesiastes

The Zohar presents its mystical teachings in the traditional format of an exegetical commentary on the Torah. Within this commentary, there are four passages which utilize verses from Ecclesiastes Chapter 8. One passage (2.225) is a direct quotation from midrash and is therefore excluded from analysis here. The other three present fresh approaches as the commentators attempt to explain the most difficult verses in the chapter.

In Zohar 1.56b, Gen. 5:24 (Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, for God took him) and Eccl. 8:14 are interpreted in light of each other. When Qohelet says that the righteous suffer according to the work of the wicked, he means that good people die prematurely. Enoch, a righteous man, died prematurely because God desired to take him. "He takes him from the world, prematurely culling, as it were, the odor while it is still sweet." God removes a righteous person from the world before he sins lest the sweetness of his good deeds sour.¹

The rest of the Qohelet verse, that the wicked live according to the work of the righteous, is an example of God's graciousness. God allows the wicked to live in order that they may repent. This interpretation also goes back to midrashic tradition.²

¹QR 7.15.

²QR 7.15: "Perhaps they will repent, perhaps they will perform some precepts for which the Holy One, blessed be He, can reward them in this world, and perhaps righteous children will come from them."

A second passage from the Zohar also expounds on Eccl. 8:14. Part of the comment in Zohar 2.10b follows from the passage given above. God removes the righteous from the world prematurely if He is aware that they will commit a sin or if the sins of the generation are so great that the righteous would be penalized.

The interpretation of *hebel* (absurdity) in this passage is particularly interesting. The seven mentions of *hebel* in Eccl. 1:2 correspond to the seven firmaments. These seven mentions are mystical objects which are supernatural and depend on the souls of the righteous who have been removed from the world while they are still pure. In other words, *hebel* actually has a positive connotation of righteousness embodied in it. When one sees only a negative connotation to the word, one fails to grasp its hidden meaning.

The passage also repeats the response to the case of the wicked given in 1.56b. However, there are also two additional interpretations given. Not only is it a matter of impending repentance, but if God foresees virtuous offspring such as Abraham son of Terah, the wicked live. The other explanation is that not all wicked people are thoroughly wicked. There is the case of the highway robber who would warn his fellow Jews of danger. When the wicked do a good deed, God is glorified.

In 2.255, a passage comments on both Eccl 8:10 and 8:15. The passage reads 8:10 as if it had two subjects: the utterly wicked and the wicked who have some redeeming qualities. The wicked who can be cleansed must die and be buried. They will be

cleansed by rebirth, like metal is refined by remelting. The Holy Place is heaven, only the dead are there.

The same passage also comments on 8:15, interpreting *yilwennu* it **accompanies** him as if it were derived from *lw'h* "to loan." The righteous man, as it were, makes a loan to God by eating, drinking, and rejoicing on the sabbath and festivals, and by taking pity on the poor. By making this "loan" to God in the form of good works, a person can expect to be repaid many times over by his divine "debtor;" by these acts a person earns gratitude from God.

Conclusion

Human beings are powerless; God is omnipotent. This is the summation of the world under the sun according to Qohelet. The value of everything that a person has is arbitrary; such acquisition may, at best, bring temporary solace or avoidance of pain. Even wisdom is also only relatively useful. In the end a person has only himself, a remote and incomprehensible God, and the inevitability of death that reduces all worldly gain to nothing.

As Svend Holm-Nielsen writes, "What the Hebrew author meant when describing man's search for the meaning of life was that it was in vain, it was futile. There was nothing negative about it, only it did not lead him anywhere."¹ The absurdity of life, then, is that life has no meaning. Therefore, all pursuits (wisdom, wealth, piety) are also in vain.

Later Judaisms were unable to accept Qohelet's ultimate conclusion that life had no value or meaning. On the contrary, a fundamental goal of Judaism was to make life meaningful. Ethical behavior and observance of the commandments made life meaningful and made the world a better place. Right action led inevitably to reward, and divine providence was an indisputable fact. The absurdity of Qohelet's world was radically incompatible with these other Jewish conceptions.

Pious commentators have various conceptions of "absurdity," none of which seems to conform to Qohelet's plain sense. Each

¹Svend Holm-Nielsen, "The Book of Ecclesiastes and the Interpretation of it in Jewish and Christian Theology," Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1976), vol 10, p. 47.

commentator starts with the premises that life has meaning and that the source of meaning in this world is God. Qohelet could find no empirical proof and thus rejected them; the later commentators take these premises to be self-evident - elements of faith based on tradition.

Nevertheless, the commentators have to face the fact that there is no proof of divine retribution from everyday experience (Eccl. 8:10-14). Each exegete solves that dilemma by defining absurdity in terms of his own theology.

The Talmudic sources have the least developed definition of *hebel*: absurdity is anything that contradicts rabbinic law. This definition applies not only to ideas but also to people. Thus, gentiles who fail to comprehend the superiority of Rabbinic Judaism are labelled absurd.

When a person argues that divine retribution does not exist, the response of the Rabbinic Jew is the outright rejection of the assertion. The heterodox position is categorically absurd, and the rabbis go to extreme lengths to read Ecclesiastes Chapter Eight as an affirmation of divine retribution. The definition of absurdity as a contradiction of traditional teaching applies throughout the talmudic commentary on Ecclesiastes Chapter Eight but there is no systematic theological argument of the point.

Saadia Gaon agrees with Qohelet about the relativity of wisdom, although within a much more restricted context. He states clearly that divine matters are beyond a person's wisdom; the wise man learns which divine matters are left unquestioned.

One can know the human realm of the world (contrary to Qohelet) but not the divine world. Thus, Saadia agrees that wisdom does have limits.

Qohelet's proof for the rejection of divine retribution is absurd, according to Saadia, because it is a simplistic generalization. A wise man knows that this matter is beyond human comprehension. Absurdity is manifest in simplistic generalizations that lead one away from religious belief and practice. Sophistry is absurdity.

Rashi appropriates Qohelet's method of argumentation. Qohelet's style of rhetoric is to take a pious wisdom saying turn it on its head. For example, Eccl. 8:1, removed from its present context, praises wisdom, but in the context of Eccl. 8:2-8, this wisdom saying suggests the futility of wisdom. Rashi turns Qohelet on his head by construing his argument as ironic.

In Rashi's account, Qohelet comes to reject the case of the apparent lack of divine justice in the world. Qohelet proves that the claim that divine retribution does not exist is an illusion. Whereas one might think that Qohelet rejects the existence of divine retribution, that is actually the opposite of Qohelet's view, according to Rashi. Rashi has Qohelet proving that it is impossible to prove the lack of divine retribution on the basis of observation; therefore, retribution must exist.

Absurdity, for Rashi then, is any conclusion that people draw based on appearances. Empirical observation leads easily to false opinions; the world and God are much too complicated for

the faithless to comprehend. One acts absurdly when denying the existence of divine retribution merely on appearances.

According to the Zohar, absurdity has both a negative and positive connotation. Although a righteous person may die prematurely, the purity of his soul enriches the world. The completely wicked remain until they are utterly condemned. The everyday events that seem to disprove divine retribution are the absurdities because the truth is that divine retribution suffuses the world. Just like Saadia's wise man, only the mystic can understand the relationship between good and evil, and reward and punishment.

Each definition of absurdity not only has unique premises, but leads to a distinctive conclusion: a human being has some of control over his fate; a human being can understand the world to some extent, and a human being can have a meaningful relationship with God. On all three points, traditional exegetes seem to contradict the plain sense of Qohelet's teachings.

According to Qohelet, God is arbitrary, and man is totally powerless. At the opposite extreme Saadia argues that a human can attain knowledge of God's ways, and, thus, power over his own destiny. The Talmudic sources grant human beings the power to attain a share in the world to come (destiny) by a combination of right action and divine favor. Rashi advocates a traditional view of divine retribution coupled with an element of uncertainty: the time of reward or punishment cannot be determined. God punishes when God chooses, but no one can know the time. God's

treatment of humanity thus appears to be arbitrary, although in reality it is not. Rashi has replaced Qohelet's arbitrary God with a God who only seems to be acting in an arbitrary manner.

By recognizing the arbitrary element in God's dealings with humanity, Rashi approaches Qohelet's view of an uncanny world. In contrast, the Zohar argues for the incomprehensibility of God, yet its account of divine retribution is essentially rabbinic.

The question remains as to what is the truth concerning the efficacy of wisdom and the existence of divine retribution. For Qohelet, belief in either is absurd; for pious commentators, the denial of either is absurd. The truth is not a choice between skepticism and belief but a confrontation between the two.

Albert Camus observes:

I am thus justified in saying that the feeling of absurdity does not spring from the mere scrutiny of a fact or an impression, but that it bursts from the comparison between a bare fact and a certain reality, between an action and the world that transcends it.²

Absurdity is relative to the truth that one accepts. Since the definition of absurdity is dependent upon one's religious beliefs, each definition rejects every other dissonant system of religious belief. Thus, Qohelet and the traditional commentators appear contradictory for each views the other's position as absurd. In either case, absurdity strengthens the faith that each system of belief is true.

²Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, trans. Justin O'Brian (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 22.

APPENDIX

Rabbinic Sources By Verse

8:1

Berachot 10a
Taanit 7b
Sota 13b
Nedarim 49b
Numbers Rabba 19.4
Pesikta d'Rab Kahana, Piska 4.4
Pesikta Rabbati 14.10
Pesikta Rabbati 23.6
Qohelet Rabba 8.1.1-5

8:2

Numbers Rabba 14.6
Numbers Rabba 15.14
Song of Songs Rabba 2.14
Jerushalmi Sanhedrin 4.3.5
Pesikta Rabbati 22.1
Qohelet Rabba 8.2

8:3

Numbers Rabba 14.6
Qohelet Rabba 8.3

8:4

Shabbat 63a
Genesis Rabba 55.3
Numbers Rabba 14.6
Qohelet Rabba 8.3

8:5

Shabbat 63a
Exodus Rabba 30.20
Numbers Rabba 14.6
Qohelet Rabba 8.5

8:6

Numbers Rabba 14.6
Qohelet Rabba 8.6

8:7

Numbers Rabba 14.6

8:8

Genesis Rabba 96.3
Numbers Rabba 14.6
Numbers Rabba 15.15
Deuteronomy Rabba 9.3

Pesikta d'Rab Kahana, Supplement 1.20¹
Qohelet Rabba 8.8

8:9
Qohelet Rabba 8.9

8:10
Gittin 56b
Pesikta Rabbati 43.6
Qohelet Rabba 8.10

8:11
Qohelet Rabba 8.11

8:12
Qohelet Rabba 8.12

8:13
Kiddushin 33b
Esther Rabba 3.11
Qohelet Rabba 8.12-13

8:14
Horayot 10b
Yerushalmi Horayot 3.2.12
Numbers Rabba 19.11
Qohelet Rabba 8.14

8:15
Shabbat 30b
Qohelet Rabba 8.15

¹William G. Braude and Israel Kapstein, Pesikta d'Rab Kahana (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1975). The supplement contains passages that are present only in the Buber edition.

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