

**The Reception of Qoheleth in a Selection of Rabbinic,
Patristic and Nonconformist Texts**

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Abstract

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The purpose of this thesis is to examine the reception of the text of Qoheleth in a selection of rabbinic, patristic and nonconformist literature. The differences in the act of reading, reception and response to this text in discrete Judaic and Christian locations is examined. The source texts that are considered are Qoheleth Rabbah, Targum Qoheleth, Gregory of Nyssa's homilies and Matthew Henry's exposition on Ecclesiastes. The thesis further investigates historical and theological experiential influences on the reception of Qoheleth as portrayed by the source texts.

The text of Qoheleth and its history of interpretation, and the value of examining the reception of the text by specific readers from a variety of contexts are discussed in the first chapter. In the consecutive chapters the reception of Qoheleth by each source text is examined individually. The historical and theological contexts of each source text are described, including literary traditions and exegetical principles. In the detailed examination of the source texts, the textual structural challenges that Qoheleth poses and how and why they are responded to by the author(s) of the source texts are analysed.

The final chapter compares and contrasts the main issues raised by the differing readings of Qoheleth, including the identity of Solomon and the view of God, and also, the differing contextual perspectives in which the reception process took place. Finally, a brief examination of a modern reader's (Michael V Fox') reception of Qoheleth is contrasted with that of earlier readers of the text. The manner in which the potential effects of Qoheleth are actualised and the process of meaning production varies between readers, being conditioned by their historical horizon.

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Chapter One

Introduction

A. Theoretical Context

1. Qoheleth: Literary Effects and Responses

In its history of interpretation, Qoheleth has been and continues to be viewed and read from numerous perspectives and ideological backgrounds, each giving birth to their own individualistic understanding of this textually and theologically provocative piece of religious literature. The enigmatic text of Qoheleth stands out from other biblical books, being considered alternative, critical and ironic in comparison. Thus, it has undergone a long period of accommodation to more traditional views but there appears to be a shift among modern scholars to try and read it as the author intended it to be understood: as a critique of traditional views. The attraction of Qoheleth when read this way is that it seems to be more 'modern' than its readers. Hence, Qoheleth presents a vibrant text of reception and one that is still being received. Qoheleth appears to be a 'modern' text waiting to be (re)discovered.

The copious number of readings and commentaries on Qoheleth testifies not only to its textual repute within biblical literature but also to the fact that the book has nearly as many interpretations as it has readers. The popularity of new readings of Qoheleth continues to increase with the adoption and application of literary critical methods within the study of the Hebrew Bible.¹ Michael V. Fox's *A Time to Tear Down and A Time to Build up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* exemplifies the recent movement to (re)approach the text of Qoheleth in new ways but building on pre-existent exegetical readings and comments.² The trend in rereading Qoheleth is accompanied by a simultaneous penchant to (re)discover the meaning of the text, often with a seemingly predetermined subjective parameter, for example as seen in the labelling of Qoheleth's message as either

¹ One of the most recent critical analyses of Qoheleth is Mary E. Mills, *Reading Ecclesiastes: A Literary and Cultural Exegesis* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003) where socio-rhetorical criticism is the method adopted.

² Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and A Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999).

pessimistic or optimistic.³ Readings that appear obviously biased in hindsight are clearly not a new phenomenon and Roland Murphy draws attention to this fact in his commentary on Ecclesiastes when he states that:

If there is one feature that is common to *all* periods in the history of the interpretation of Ecclesiastes it is that of selective emphasis.⁴

It is in this forum of divergent interpretations and readings that this research proposes to examine the theological, historical, social and literary setting in which a selection of these literary responses to Qoheleth arose and to further examine the textual structures of Qoheleth that effect and give rise to a particular reading. The interpretative process is a dynamic and complex one, involving a number of internal and external structural conditions relating to the text, which force a response or reaction to the text. The reader or interpreter of the text is not immune from these forces when confronted with the text but is often unconsciously permeated by them to create a reading. The Marxist writer, Fredric Jameson, insists that a text is never totally new or fresh but rather

texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or—if the text is brand-new—through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions.⁵

This notion, of course, is not only applicable to the text of Qoheleth but other biblical books and literature in general. Qoheleth remains a book that continues to challenge and intrigue its reading audience, one that integrates both theology and philosophy.⁶ Qoheleth's contradictions and apparently untraditional religious ideology have seen its position within the Hebrew Bible, along its turbulent path to canonisation and following, being questioned but also relished as an exegetical challenge, one where it has come to be a refuge for seekers of wisdom and

³ Examples include H. U. William *Qoheleth and its Pessimistic Theology: Hermeneutical Struggles in Wisdom Literature* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997) and R. N. Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy." *JSOT* 23:87-98.

⁴ Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, vol. 23A, *Word Biblical Commentary*, (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 1v. The introductory chapter of the commentary provides a brief comparative look at both the Jewish and Christian history of interpretation of Ecclesiastes.

⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 9. Jameson goes on to expound the significance of the presence of cultural conflict within texts and the uneasy balance that these create.

⁶ In R. N. Whybray's paper "Qoheleth as a Theologian" in *Qoheleth in the Context of Wisdom* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998) he maintains the view that Qoheleth was a theologian rather than a philosopher. He places Qoheleth in the realm of modern theologians who "even though they may be aware that their writings will be studied only by a minority of educated people, are more inclined to address contemporary issues and to express their arguments as far as may be possible in plain language" (p 239).

interrogators of life. It expresses thoughts and emotions that are often silenced in a community of faith. Qoheleth raises questions that challenge and provoke the reader, not to answer them but to be mindful and aware of the mystery of God and the enigma of life. For Qoheleth raises more questions than he can answer and in so doing often forces a strong response from the reader.⁷

It is notable then that in the history of literary responses to Qoheleth readers have attempted not only to provide answers to Qoheleth's questions but to also re-actualise textual problems and so provide new meaning to the text. How and why this is done is important not only in understanding these responsive texts but also in understanding the text of Qoheleth and its interaction with its reading audience.

Qoheleth's textual structure and challenges, and the socio-historical influences on the literary responses to its text argues for an examination of the interplay between text and reader, and the historical impact on its interpretation. The recognition that there are internal textual and external experiential forces at play in the reading and interpretation of a text is an important one. The reader does not come to the text untouched by external influences but with a palette of experiences that spill into this interactive process between reader and text and environment. The reader's role and the metamorphosis or modifications that the reader's perceptions undergo are important facets of actualising the text and forming meaning. The dynamic interaction with the text causes the reader to reformulate existing realities and create new ones as a direct result of structural conditions and codes within the text, which in turn govern meaning but which still allow individual and different interpretations of a text.⁸

The text of Qoheleth can therefore be viewed as a structure of codes that a reader receives and actualises through the reading process and so drawing interpretations and meaning:

The interpreter's task should be to elucidate the potential meanings of a text, and not restrict himself to just one. Obviously, the total potential can never be fulfilled in the reading process, but it is this very fact that makes it so essential that one should conceive of meaning as something that happens, for only then can one become

⁷ Hugo Grotius expresses this dichotomy well when he states that "not to know certain things is a great part of wisdom." Bergen Evans, *Dictionary of Quotations* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1968), 754.

⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 67, 70.

aware of those factors that precondition the composition of meaning. However individual may be the meaning realized in each case, the act of composing it will always have intersubjectively verifiable characteristics.⁹

It is therefore the act of reading that provides meaning to the text of Qoheleth, which contains potential structures and codes, that effect meaning production and consequently generate different interpretations. The act of reading is viewed in this thesis as a dynamic experience where the reader of Qoheleth attempts to recreate the implied author's original intent through a process of reflection, anticipation, questioning, review, acceptance, and rejection.¹⁰ It is the reading experience and the reader that actualises the text's potential meanings and so creates a history of different books of Qoheleth, a selection of which will be examined in this research.

An examination of the reception of the text of Qoheleth by specific readers from a variety of contexts illustrates not just those individual readings, but also facets of the text itself. Moreover, these individual readings are episodes in the history of reading that informs subsequent readings. The modern reader of Qoheleth confronts the book as a text "already read". The manner in which a text has been interpreted in the past, affects the way it is interpreted today, and in turn how it will be interpreted in the future. Hans Robert Jauss rethought this relationship between literary history and interpretation and concluded that:

interpretation of a text could no longer be undertaken by simply placing it in its historical context; rather, the history of its very interpretation was considered an integral part of our ability to understand it.¹¹

Therefore the historical literary life of Qoheleth can be best attained and understood through its readers. It is through this process that a work like Qoheleth enters into what Jauss calls a changing "horizon-of-experience" or "horizon of expectations" where it undergoes levels of reception, from the simple to the critical, resulting in a new production.¹² In the context of readings of Qoheleth, each generation of readers possess their own horizon of expectations, a

⁹ Ibid., 22.

¹⁰ Robert M. Fowler "Who Is 'The Reader' in Reader Response Criticism?" in *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism*, Paul R. House, ed. (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 391-2.

¹¹ Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Methnen, 1984), 159.

particular set of conditions, through which they read and respond to the text of Qoheleth.¹³ It is by attempting to reconstruct the horizon of expectations of the selected source texts that the present research endeavours to understand the questions or problems that the text of Qoheleth, with its potential of unrealised readings, posed to successive and very different generations of readers.¹⁴ Therefore it can be justifiably claimed that the history of interpretation of Qoheleth is embedded in the text itself, for only through the act of reading is meaning given to the text.¹⁵ The understanding of the interpretative mind or community in which the text of Qoheleth is encountered provides the context in which reader and text meet and contributes to the construction of a critical and responsive community through whom the reception of Qoheleth is processed.¹⁶

The actualisation of readings of Qoheleth, as documented by the source texts, will be examined in themselves and concurrently, attention will be given to the textual structure, codes and indicators within the text of Qoheleth that prompt and give rise to a particular reading.¹⁷ The manner in which the text of Qoheleth prompts a particular reader to respond to it and arrive at a certain meaning will be considered and other external factors that influence discrete readings.¹⁸

2. Sources: Rabbinic, Patristic and Nonconformist

This research proposes to compare the reception of Qoheleth among two communities of readers, Jewish and Christian, but also to compare different readers within their respective communities. The number of texts in both communities that contribute to the reception of Qoheleth is not exhaustive but an examination of the entire range of readings of Qoheleth is of course impossible. Hence the need to select a limited number of texts that will illustrate distinct readings both between the two faith communities and within them. Since the chosen literary critical model for this research is the reception of texts, the

¹² Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Timothy Bahti trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 19.

¹³ Raman Selden, ed., *The Theory of Criticism: From Plato to the Present. A Reader* (London and New York: Longman, 1988), 187.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁵ Philip R. Davies, *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 41-42.

¹⁶ Fowler, 386.

¹⁷ Willem S. Vorster, "Readings, Readers, and the Succession Narrative: An Essay on Reception," in *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism*, Paul R. House, ed. (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 396.

imposed parameters provided to an extent a pragmatic approach in the selection process but also create idiosyncratic markers or textual structures that favour certain texts over others.

The chosen Jewish texts are the Midrash on Qoheleth, Qoheleth Rabbah, and the Targum to Qoheleth. Both these rabbinic texts exemplify a period of authoritative and efficacious Jewish exegesis, in which the study of the Torah remained central to the faith community. The historical, social and religious contexts of both works will be discussed in greater detail in their respective chapters, as part of the application of the theory of reception. The multiple authors or compilers of Qoheleth Rabbah and the absence of and lack of authorial identity in Targum Qoheleth provide a further dimension when reasserting the role of the reader in the process of finding meaning in the text of Qoheleth. The rabbis' role in (re)reading the text of Qoheleth continued a process of actualisation of the text, whereby the textual structure and signs within Qoheleth stimulated a response, an interpretation that was coloured by their historical context. The apparent predisposed nature and objectives of the Midrash and Targum texts, one "searching out" Qoheleth and the other supposedly translating the Hebrew text of Qoheleth to Aramaic, provide two distinct surface level acts of reading.¹⁹ By examining how each work is affected by Qoheleth and in turn responds to its inherent structural and intellectual challenges, a selective history of reception of Qoheleth, as seen through its Jewish respondents, will be traced. The documentary classification and textual structure of these rabbinic texts provide the rationale by which they will be read and examined.²⁰ Both Qoheleth Rabbah and Targum Qoheleth will be read thematically, though Qoheleth Rabbah's classification as a form of theological discourse is more sympathetic to a topical approach.²¹ For they both present recognisable textual and theological themes and arguments that will be examined in a complementary manner.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 398. Vorster describes the act of reading as an "act of production, of making a new text".

¹⁹ Daniel Patte, *Early Jewish Hermeneutics in Palestine* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), 118.

²⁰ Jacob Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 8-13.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

The chosen Christian texts are Gregory of Nyssa's *Homilies on Ecclesiastes* and Matthew Henry's *Exposition of Ecclesiastes*. These works differ more greatly in terms of historical time periods and geography than do the Jewish texts and they also represent a wider theological and sociological gulf. Gregory of Nyssa represents the early Orthodox faith writing to the ecclesiastical elite and Matthew Henry represents a later Protestant faith addressing the nonconformist masses. As with the Jewish texts the same questions will be asked in the application of the theory of reception. What is in the textual structures of Qoheleth and the horizon of expectations of its readers that result in difference in meaning production and interpretation of the same text by these Christian readers? How and why is the text of Qoheleth read in a particular manner, and what is it that each individual reader brings with them in the act of reading? Analysis will further show when the reader/commentator perverts the text and when the theology of Qoheleth is easily adopted. In contrast to the rabbinic texts, the Christian texts will not be read thematically but will follow the existing order of the text structure. Thus, the intended sermon/lesson format of these two Christian texts dictates a sequential mode of analysis.

Though English translations of Qoheleth Rabbah, Targum Qoheleth and Gregory of Nyssa's homilies are utilised in the comparative analysis of the texts in the body of the research, the original language texts in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek have been consulted as source texts. The use of these primary sources is essential in understanding the key concepts and linguistic nuances that exist in the individual texts in relation to the Hebrew text of Qoheleth. Hence vocabulary of significant conceptual importance is discussed in relation to the original languages.

B. Research Objectives

It is the objective of this research to understand how the history of reception of Qoheleth is influenced by historically and religiously distinct reading communities, and how the text of Qoheleth causes these readers to react to and draw totally different conclusions from the same text. It is this interaction between text and reader that will be examined and how the differing circumstances and perspectives that each reader brings to the text effects the reading process. The historical context of each source text will first be discussed,

including the political, social and religious climate of the period. Then the distinctive exegetical approaches and literary productions of each author(s) will be examined, followed by a close reading of the source texts. Finally, comparative conclusions will be drawn between the source texts and a brief examination of a modern reading of Qoheleth, Michael V. Fox's *Rereading of Ecclesiastes*, will enable the question to be raised of whether a modern reader has a better understanding of Qoheleth than an ancient one.

Chapter Two

Qoheleth Rabbah

A. Compilation of Qoheleth Rabbah

The literary history regarding the compilation of Qoheleth Rabbah remains incomplete but a number of textual indicators have helped in drawing the conclusion that it was edited sometime between the sixth and eighth centuries in Palestine.¹ While some scholars narrow the dating and editing of the Midrash on Qoheleth to the seventh century.² References in the text to Talmudic sources, extracts from earlier portions of the Midrash Rabbah, and the absence of a notable *pethihta* or proem, all indicate a late date.³ Qoheleth Rabbah borrows heavily from the *haggadoth* of the Palestinian Talmud and to a lesser extent from the Babylonian Talmud, both of which were compiled during the fourth and fifth centuries.⁴ It also relies heavily on classical Midrashim, like Genesis Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah, and on older traditions.⁵ The late date of Qoheleth Rabbah is further and strongly upheld by references in the text to Tractate *Abot* and several other smaller tractates.⁶ Tractate *Abot*, is thought to have been largely composed after the closure of the Mishnah and has been dated roughly at 250 CE.⁷ Another important textual indicator is that most of the rabbis quoted in and referred to in Qoheleth Rabbah are Palestinian sages from the Tannaitic and Amoraic periods, providing further evidence to its compilation date.⁸

¹ Marc Hirshman, *A Rivalry of Genius. Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 107. Hirshman classifies Qoheleth Rabbah as “anthological or encyclopedic.”

² Meyer Waxman, “From the Close of the Canon to the End of the Twelfth Century,” in *A History of Jewish Literature Vol. I* (New York: South Brunswick, 1960), 137.

³ L. Rabinowitz, trans., *Midrash Rabbah. Ruth and Ecclesiastes* (London: Soncino Press, 1939), vii.

⁴ Jacob Neusner, *Midrash in Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 113-114.

⁵ Herman L. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Athenum, 1969), 220-221. Both, Genesis Rabbah and Leviticus Rabbah have been dated to 400-450 CE.

⁶ Strack, 221.

⁷ Jacob Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 572. Tractate *Abot* is a collection of wisdom-sayings set in the context of the law, covering a wide range of topics. Neusner provides a useful introduction to the document, including its identification and rhetoric, in chapter 23.

⁸ Ruth N. Sandberg, *Rabbinic Views of Qohelet* (Lewiston, New York: Mellen Biblical Press, 1999), 28.

B. Rabbinic Tradition and Historical Context

It is helpful to trace some of the significant historical and religious events leading up to and during the period of Qoheleth Rabbah's inception, beginning with the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in 70 CE, to endeavour to understand how these events impacted rabbinic thought and literature.⁹

Prior to the calamitous events of 70 CE, Palestine and Babylonia were the leading centres of Jewish life, especially in terms of religious and literary activity. The destruction of the Temple by Titus in 70 CE threw the Jews into a period of turmoil, one in which they were without, both a religious and political centre. Jewish religious life, which had centred on the Temple and Jerusalem, required reorganisation and the synagogue became a partial substitute.¹⁰ Jewish polity survived, due in part, to the efforts of Yohanan the son of Zakkai.¹¹ He gained Roman permission to establish a rabbinical school in Jamnia in western Palestine and it was there that the Sanhedrin was reconstructed, forming both a religious and legislative centre.¹²

The Bar Kokhba revolt in 132 CE gave rise to nearly four years of relative independence for the Jews before Julius Severus succeeded in crushing the revolt.¹³ Following the revolt, the centre of Jewish life in Palestine moved from Jerusalem to Galilee. Rabbinic learning thrived once more and Tiberius, Caesarea and Sepphoris became the primary academic enclaves in Palestine.¹⁴ The upheaval, brought about by the exile from Jerusalem, was further compounded when a critical turning point occurred at the beginning of the fourth century, with Constantine's conversion to Christianity and the subsequent edict that made Christianity *religio licita*.¹⁵ The legitimisation of Christianity and its rise to power put Judaism increasingly on the defensive. Not only were they

⁹ Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature*, Batya Stein, trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 12. Hasan-Rokem looks in particular at how the destruction of the Second Temple influenced the reading of Lamentations as seen in *Lamentations Rabbah* and comments on how Palestinian haggadic literature is especially affected by this event.

¹⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 261.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹² *Ibid.* The new Sanhedrin had seventy-one members, like the old one, but most of them were doctors of the law and the president was usually one of the most prominent rabbis of the day.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 271.

¹⁴ Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996), 14-15.

facing political coercion but also a threat to their very faith, identity, and Holy Scriptures. How Judaism responded to this challenge was crucial for its very survival and continuation. The Torah, now read and claimed by another, became a refuge for Jews searching for answers and questions. The need to accommodate the Torah to their time and condition was greater than ever, and the sages rose to meet that challenge. The Mishnah was compiled early in the third century and this process of law making was continued, partly, by midrash exposition.¹⁶ Scriptural exegeses became the tool for reassuring and reaffirming to the Jewish people of their validity in the face of a counter-claim. From the first century the Nazarenes, the early Christians, read and studied from the same scriptures as the Jews. They drew similar conclusions on the nature of history, and therefore asked the same questions about the future of Israel and argued over who had the right to be called *Israel*.¹⁷ But their answers were diametrically opposed to that of the Jews. For they found in the destruction of the Temple a powerful apologetic and evidence that God had now rejected Jewish Israel because of its iniquity and they now claimed to form the new and legitimate Israel.¹⁸ Prophecy, and more importantly its fulfilment, was now the urgent issue being addressed by both Jews and Christians alike. Counter-exegesis was the stage on which the play for the ownership of God and his Word was acted out.

Christianity was now addressing the world, including the Jews, with its own sacred scriptures. By the end of the first century the four Gospels were written but did not gain some semblance of canonical authority until the late second century.¹⁹ It is clear that in the second century the Gospels, the Pauline Epistles and other writings from the apostolic period were in circulation and used by various churches.²⁰ The process of the formation of the New Testament Canon and its coming to share equal authority with the Hebrew Bible was to be a slow and complex one. This process came to a close in the Eastern Church

¹⁵ Gunter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. and ed. Markus Bockmuehl (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 3.

¹⁶ Strack, 201-202.

¹⁷ Hirshman, 2.

¹⁸ Jacob Neusner, *A Midrash Reader* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 29. The early Christians not only pointed to Christ's prediction of the destruction of the Temple but also the disappearance of the priestly order, as proof of their spiritual legitimacy.

¹⁹ Alfred Wikenhauser, *New Testament Introduction* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 26-27.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

(Egypt, Palestine and Syria) in the mid-fourth century but the final fixing of the canon in the Latin Church did not come until later in the fifth century.²¹ With its own scripture, conversion successes, and favourable political standing, Christianity was becoming a powerful force, one to be reckoned with.

The events of the fourth and fifth centuries proved to be significant ones for the Jews, in both literary and political terms. A series of events that would have a fundamental impact and lasting consequence on Judaism took place during this time. One can mention the conversion of Constantine to Christianity and then the farcical attempt by Emperor Julian to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple. Julian's accession to the throne in 360 CE and his short-lived reign was marked by his patronage of the Jews and disdain of Christianity.²² After Julian's death there was systematic effort to remove paganism from the Roman Empire, which led to synchronous attacks on pagan temples and also, synagogues. Later significant events included the Christianisation of the majority of Palestine, and the creation of the Palestinian Talmud and other scriptural exegesis compositions.²³ The implications of these events on Jewish literature were beginning to be felt but were not actualised until after the close of the Talmudic era and the onset of midrash exegesis, the now innovative instrument for theological discourse.²⁴ Among the many claims that Christianity made contra to the Jews, were three specific motions that served to fuel the growing gulf between the two faiths. Firstly, Christianity's claim of the incarnation of the Messiah in the embodiment of Jesus, through whom salvation was provided for all through the cross. Secondly, the claim by Christianity to now be God's chosen people and so attempting to supersede Israel's claim to that position. And finally, the utilisation of scripture by Christianity to illustrate, to prove, and to back up these two claims.²⁵ To answer and repudiate these claims, Judaism called on its rabbis and sages to address these theological issues with a renewed encounter with scripture. The stakes were high, for the very validity and existence of religious Judaism was in danger.

²¹ Ibid., 36-52. The history of the New Testament Canon is broad and elaborate one. The limits of this research constrain the scope of material that can be presented regarding this topic.

²² Hirshman, 95. In his attempt to discredit Christianity, Julian wrote a treatise entitled "Against the Galileans".

²³ Neusner, *Midrash in Context*, 113-114.

²⁴ Neusner, *A Midrash Reader*, 96.

²⁵ Neusner, *What is Midrash?* 46.

The seventh century had seen the close of the Talmudic era and the dawn of the Geonim, an era of literary extension and creativity. Jewish literature during the Geonic period of about 450 years established itself as being innovative, complex, and broad.²⁶ The Talmud continued to be highly regarded but there was a shift away from the confines of religious literature which resulted in a more permissive approach that opened the way to biblical exegesis, philosophy, poetry and the introduction of a secular element.²⁷

The seventh century found the political and social world in a renewed state of turmoil. While still under Byzantine rule, the Persian armies invaded Palestine in 614 CE but did not attempt to establish any form of permanent political control over the region. Under Persian rule the Jews were persecuted and the Jewish literary centre of Babylon was under greater threat than that of Palestine. The Persian presence in Palestine was more intermittent intervention than political dominance. At the same time to the south east in the heartland of Arabia, a religious movement was in the awakening, which would further destabilise the political situation in most of the Mediterranean basin. Change was brought about in the mid-seventh century when Islam swept over Western Asia and brought an end to Roman/Byzantine rule with the fall of Caesarea.²⁸ The change in rulers brought a change in fortunes for the Jews. Once persecuted, the Jews now prospered and were even granted special privileges.²⁹ This change in circumstance to their daily existence was also reflected in the vibrant literary productions that followed.

Islam was the dominant force for most of the seventh century in Palestine but the influence of Christianity was still felt even after the coming of Islam.³⁰ Judaism, though not under threat, was struggling to maintain its identity in the face of a rapidly growing Islamic world and a Christian one, which remained a vital force in the eastern Mediterranean for still several centuries. In the midst of this political and social and religious unrest *Qoheleth Rabbah* was compiled. To accurately place the compilation of *Qoheleth Rabbah* in this period of historical

²⁶ Nathaniel Kravitz, *3000 Years of Hebrew Literature* (London: W. H. Allen, 1973), 189. The Geonic period lasted from about 576 to 1038 CE.

²⁷ Waxman, 156.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 190.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ A. A. Vasilier, *History of the Byzantine Empire*, trans. S. Ragozin (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1928), 237-252.

change is difficult, as has already been noted, and it remains a topic of investigation among rabbinic scholars. What is known is that a number of momentous and significant events took place leading up to and in the course of the sixth to eighth centuries, and that Palestine was part of this political and religious upheaval, during which time and location Qoheleth Rabbah was being compiled.

C. Midrashic Hermeneutics

The developmental history of Midrash,³¹ as both an exegetical process and a result of that process, has its place in the accommodation of the Written Torah in rabbinic literature and as the continuation of the Oral Torah.³² Rabbinic midrash is characterised by the basic principle of understanding scripture from scripture, in its totality.³³ Mishnah exegesis played an important part in the development of midrashic exegesis. While Mishnah exegesis concerned itself mainly with issues of *halakhah*, the law, scriptural exegesis, as found in midrash, focused on *haggadah*, a narrative form of ethical and moral teachings.³⁴ Mishnah exegesis set the template from which midrash, as a form of scriptural exegesis would develop. In the same way that the Mishnah was scrutinised word for word and line for line, so these same principles were applied to the study of scripture to both interpret and explain it. Some of the early Sifré to the Pentateuch characterise this early form of exegetical discourse, where collections of scriptural exegesis were related to passages from the Mishnah, with the intention of bringing the Mishnah and scripture into closer harmony.³⁵ This created an interest in examining scripture methodically, verse by verse, and then collecting and organising these disparate interpretative comments into a work.³⁶ This early type of Midrash is characterised by its lack of any one theological thought or theme, and also its ridged, systematic style of approaching the biblical text. This narrow exegetical stage gave way to a more discursive form of exegesis, where comments were not collected around verses but rather around topics, where

³¹ The literary text and the exegetical process will be distinguished between by the use of 'Midrash' and 'midrash' respectively.

³² Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, 10.

³³ Stemberger, 237.

³⁴ Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, 10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁶ *Ibid.* Genesis Rabbah exemplifies this form of exegetical work.

scriptural verses were used “in a context established by a propositional program independent of Scripture itself”.³⁷ The form of Midrash, as observed in *Qoheleth Rabbah*, is a combination of the earlier approaches, where the scriptural text is analysed systematically and comments collected but an underlying theological theme governed the process of exegesis.³⁸ It is important to note that midrash does incorporate and draws from to varying degrees a mixture of genres, including halakhic, haggadic, exegetical and homiletical traditions, which in itself characterises the nature of rabbinic midrash as being one that collects and quotes from various works, while retaining its own distinctive identity.³⁹

Layers of interpretative discourse and a multiplicity of rabbinic readings exist in midrash, where each reader, and previous readers, affects the final work. Its conversational language, flair, imagery, and ingenuity, and a hermeneutic approach built on a pre-existent and developing convention of scriptural exegesis exemplify the prose of midrash. It is a paradigm of exegesis that strives to derive textual meaning through various means. The rabbinic readers, the midrash compilers, impose and derive questions and answers from scripture, and each reader is allowed to comment and retain their interpretative independence. Midrash may appear to be a deviant in the literary sense of what would be considered today to be a traditional *reading*. Boyarin defines Midrash to be:

a radical intertextual reading of the canon, in which potentially every part refers to and is interpretable by every other part. The Torah, owing to its own intertextuality, is a severely gapped text, and the gaps are there to be filled by strong readers, which in this case does not mean readers fighting for originality, but readers fighting to find what they must in the holy text. Their own intertext—that is, the cultural codes which enable them to make meaning and find meaning, constrain the rabbis to fill in the gaps of the Torah’s discourse with narratives which are emplotted in accordance with certain ideological structures.⁴⁰

The manner in which this midrash exegesis developed and the rabbinic motivation to create this interpretative and theological discourse is important to consider. For the historicist, midrash is a pure reflection of the historical and

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 12. *Leviticus Rabbah* marks the shift away from a systematic, syllogistic reading of scripture.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁹ Stemberger, 240.

⁴⁰ Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 16. Boyarin makes a strong case for a new theory of Midrash, in which intertextuality is redefined and reapplied to the reading of Midrash.

social conditions, which were existent during its conception.⁴¹ On the other end of the spectrum, deconstruction theorists have suggested that midrash is a

kind of protodeconstruction, a hermeneutics of Dionysian free play with the biblical text.⁴²

The very nature and process of midrash means that it is dynamic and constantly changing and so potential inferences abound. The textual complexity of Midrash calls for a balanced approach in its reading and an understanding of midrash hermeneutics and rabbinic thought. Boyarin attempts to find the balance between traditional historicism and the new age of literary theories by stating that

a revised conception of the hermeneutics of midrash ought accordingly to allow us to reunderstand its relation to history and rabbinic culture and account for both its character as interpretation and its relation to life in historical time.⁴³

It is important to place the readers of the text, the rabbis, in their historical, social and ideological context to understand their relation to the hermeneutics of midrash but also to understand how they viewed scripture, the written Torah, and in turn God. Midrash, meaning 'to inquire', in the context of Torah is understood to be the 'inquiring of' God in search of knowledge and answers.⁴⁴ Therefore, Torah played an intermediary role between God and his people, and the task of inquiring of God, through the Torah, was given to the sages and the rabbis.⁴⁵ Rabbinic thought perceived of a God that was both personal and omnipresent, guiding the events of human history through intervention and removed activity and the process of midrash reflects this worldview.⁴⁶ The idea of theodicy was part of this rabbinic tradition, where God's intervention in history followed a pattern of sin-punishment-redemption through seemingly paradoxical means.⁴⁷ This understanding was extended to where the onus of responsibility for suffering was placed on Israel and not on God.⁴⁸ There is a further dimension to be examined in the understanding of rabbinic midrash and its relation to God and

⁴¹ Ibid., 117. In chapter 8 Boyarin considers the whole subject of the relationship between textuality and history.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 118.

⁴⁴ Daniel Patte, *Early Jewish Hermeneutic in Palestine* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), 118.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 119. Patte sees the sages as taking over the role, once held, by the prophets and further notes that prophecy ended when the Pentateuch was canonised.

⁴⁶ Ira Chernus, *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1982), 126.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 133.

⁴⁸ Ibid. This notion had great relevance and implication on the Jewish political nation, and was promoted in an effort to deter rebellion and political uprising.

to the language of scripture. It is suggested that a language of myth developed in scripture, one which, expressed the relationship of God to Israel and the world, mainly through narratives:

Rabbinic Midrash reads this language and coordinates its diverse images. In its third-order mythic formulations, the whole of Scripture provides the linguistic signs of God's deeds and personality. The details are there – plain to see, or clarified by exegesis. An obscure point in one place is illumined by a clearer expression elsewhere, and telling gaps are filled...In all these ways, exegesis constructs mythic forms new to Scripture.⁴⁹

This idea and extension of the language and adoption of myth from scripture to midrash exegesis will be considered in the reading of Qoheleth Rabbah, especially in regards to the Solomonic persona and its portrayal. The rabbinic understanding of myth and its revelation in scripture is important in identifying possible mythic language and creations within Midrash.

It is clear that some general principles governed the rabbis' approach to the text and their subsequent interpretation of scripture, a critical component of which was their view of scripture. The concept of the dual Torah, consisting of both the written and oral Torah, was the basis of rabbinic Judaism. This concept allowed for them to perceive God as being able to communicate not only through the written word but also through other means, including the sage or rabbi.⁵⁰ The rabbis viewed their authority to be descended directly from Moses and so legitimate heirs to divine inspiration as transmitted through the written and oral Torah.⁵¹ The written Torah was, of course, seen as a divine book one not comparable to human literary designs but significantly, the rabbis themselves were equated with Torah and enjoyed the same authority. The authority and challenge of the Written Torah, though, was not diminished, for there was a need, if not a necessity, on the part of the rabbis to interpret and examine every tiny detail encapsulated within scripture, for it was God's Word and in it new meanings could be found.⁵² It was also accepted and highly feasible that each

⁴⁹ Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 99.

⁵⁰ Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, 6-7. Neusner argues that "the sage embodied the Torah, another way of saying that the Torah was incarnated in the person of the sage".

⁵¹ Sandberg, 10.

⁵² Addison G. Wright, *The Literary Genre Midrash* (New York: Alba House, 1967), 62. The other main principle that Wright presents is that "all parts of the Bible (the letters, the words, the verses, and the sections) may be explained not only as a continuity in relation to the context

reader could and would find various ‘truths’ and interpretations within the language of the text, and in this way, meanings accumulated.⁵³ The belief was that scripture was a self-contained divine speech system containing a number of distinct contexts:

The result is that that the extended (but bounded) speech of Scripture is reconceived as the multiform expressions of divine revelation – beginning with the individual letters of its words, and including all the phrases and sentences of Scripture. These all became the constituents of possibility in the opening of Scripture *from within*...In other words, Scripture becomes a closed and unified system of language with particular possibilities for linking words and phrases. Midrash is the name for the speech-acts that arise from this system.⁵⁴

Therefore, the equation of rabbis with Torah, scriptural canon, in this context is understood by the notion that rabbinic midrash was seen as the actualisation of the divine language of scripture and therefore midrash was already part of the language of scripture.⁵⁵ Further still, midrashic exegesis not only promoted the unity of the written Torah but also attempted to disclose it as a rabbinic work.⁵⁶ The rabbis’ ideological context allowed for a mode of exegesis that created a form of literature that went beyond a limited definition or understanding of hermeneutics and the text.

When reading Midrash it is tempting to conclude that there is a lack of structure and cohesion. Texts and comments appear to be pulled at random and fused with others, without apparently sound reason and rationale but this was clearly not the case, for a central theological thought or theme governed the collection of comments and intertextuality.⁵⁷ The intertextual links between all parts of scripture was understood and what may appear as intertextual dissimilarities were considered to show a deeper level of scriptural connections

(as with human documents), but also as autonomous units, for the parts retain an independent significance as well as unlimited possibilities of combination with each other.”

⁵³ Mostly building on pre-existing tradition. Fishbane notes that “Scripture is remembered first and foremost-and then the teachers, who are remembered by the anonymous editor by their own names and those of their teachers” (18).

⁵⁴ Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination*, 12.

⁵⁵ Ibid. Fishbane equates the sages with Moses, whose speech was an actualisation of the divine language through him.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 20. Fishbane argues that the idea of scripture as a rabbinic work was the ultimate achievement of midrashic exegesis.

⁵⁷ Irving Jacobs, *The Midrashic Process* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 170. Jacobs states that “no matter how extrinsic the rabbis’ treatment of the biblical text may appear to the modern reader, it was neither vicarious nor haphazard.”

and the notion of scripture interpreting scripture.⁵⁸ Therefore, the need to look for patterns of exegesis, reoccurring themes and motifs within the text is essential to a faithful reading of Midrash, specifically theologically discursive Midrash. Once a pattern is realised then it can be placed within a contextual framework to provide an evaluative critique. By drawing similarities and connections within and outside of scripture, the rabbis through exegesis were constructing a different reality:

The world of the text serves as the basis for the textualization of the world – and its meaning. Through exegesis new forms arise, and the content varies from one teacher to another. What remains constant is an attempt to textualize existence by having the ideals of (interpreted) Scripture embodied in everyday life.⁵⁹

The need to find intertextual similarities was one part of a wider exegetical strategy but this search for likeness also extended to everyday realities. The historical and ideological position that this form of rabbinic exegesis grew out of provides clues in understanding the images and concepts that the rabbis drew on to interpret scripture.

There is another element that should also be considered, and that is the audience for whom the text was intended. Palestinian rabbis in late antiquity, in contrast to their Babylonian counterparts, interacted in various contexts with non-rabbinic Jews and non-Jews and heretics.⁶⁰ Therefore, though, the midrashic process itself was to a certain extent a cloistered one, reserved for the educated rabbinic class,⁶¹ there was an element of a wider public persona that was adopted by the authorship and which is evident in both the content and context of the message.⁶² The rabbis' intent, among others, was to make scripture relevant to the people by adapting the Torah to the changing circumstances of Jewish life.⁶³ They expounded and interpreted scripture in a manner that would make it familiar and inviting to the reader or hearer, with memorable narratives and

⁵⁸ Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination*, 2-3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁰ Richard Kalmin, *The Sage in Jewish Society of Late Antiquity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 5.

⁶¹ Hirshman, 108. Hirshman states that Qoheleth Rabbah “fulfilled an educational role in various educational frameworks, beginning with elementary schools and up to rabbinic academies, where disciples studied Scripture with the sages’.

⁶² Jacobs, 13.

⁶³ Stemberger, 15.

relevancy, and by making connections with everyday reality.⁶⁴ This was, of course, important since non-rabbinic Jews would have received most of their instruction and knowledge of scripture from the rabbis.⁶⁵ *Qoheleth Rabbah* provides a distinct form of Palestinian rabbinic exegesis and interpretation, where not only the desire to ‘inquire of God’ motivated the reading of scripture but also social and religious concerns affected the collective comments and discourse.

The process of midrash was not intended to re-write the biblical text but was a means to preserve and promote the unity of scripture, and to continue the tradition of the Oral Torah, where God reveals himself through his Word, which is expounded on by those who continue the Mosaic tradition, the rabbis. The rabbis’ objective was not to find the ‘correct interpretation’ but rather to bring the biblical text into what was their reality, in a form of literature that would both edify and influence the ideology and behaviour of its readers and listeners.⁶⁶ Rabbinic exegesis, in the form of midrash, was used as a tool for ideological communication, one in which the rabbis were fully convinced that God’s will and plan for the Jews lay in the text of the Torah.⁶⁷

D. Rabbinic Exegetical Techniques

In the history of rabbinic biblical exegesis a distinctive set of parameters and techniques developed with which scripture was approached, read and consequently understood. Rabbinic exegeses employed an apparatus, a seemingly creative dichotomy in the reading of the biblical text, in the form of *peshat*, the plain meaning, and *derash*, the applied meaning. The manner and frequency with which *peshat* and *derash* have been used has altered and evolved from early rabbinic literature, and in later Medieval and modern exegesis. The tension

⁶⁴ Jacobs, 170. Jacobs notes the importance of the nature of the audience. “The rabbis were highly sensitive not only to the social and economic conditions of their audiences, but also to their intellectual capacity. They realised that abstract ideological concepts could most effectively and dramatically conveyed in the form of three-dimensional, familiar images.”

⁶⁵ A. I. Baumgarten, “Literacy and the Polemics Surrounding Biblical Interpretation in the Second Temple Period” in *Studies in Ancient Midrash*, James Kugel, ed. (Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies, 2001). The mutual relationship of literacy and polemics is examined by Baumgarten and his central thesis is that an increase in literacy can “yield a push for greater precision in the interpretation and application of the central texts of society, and a concomitant growth of pitched debate” (41).

⁶⁶ Boyarin, 37.

⁶⁷ Stern, 41.

between scriptural *peshat* and rabbinic *derash* is one that existed and had to be grappled with in the process of rabbinic exegesis.⁶⁸ The preference for either *peshat* or *derash* developed and varied in the course of the ongoing exegetical process.⁶⁹

1. Peshat

The understanding of *peshat*, the plain meaning of the text, as a mode of interpretation can itself be defined in various ways, and within historical rabbinic tradition different emphases is placed on its function and its meaning. The preference for or superiority of *peshat* over *derash* in different periods of rabbinic exegetical history is contended but there is some consensus behind the notion that the preference for *peshat* increased over time, finding its height during the Medieval period.⁷⁰ The rabbinic understanding of *peshat* is not to be equated with a modern sense or concept of plain meaning. As has been put forward, the basic principle of hermeneutics by which an interpreter approaches the text is greatly influenced by what he perceives the text to be.⁷¹ *Peshat*, in the rabbinic context, is more than just the plain or simple meaning and is also understood to provide an extension or context for the verse being interpreted.⁷²

The complex nature of *peshat* is evident in this text from Qoheleth Rabbah:

I made me gardens and parks (II, 5): this is to be understood literally. **And I planted in them all kinds of fruits:** even pepper. R. Abba b. Kahana said: Solomon made use of the spirits and sent them to India from where they brought him water with which to water [the pepper-plant] here [in the land of Israel] and it produced fruit. R. Jannai b. R. Simeon said to him: If you hold that opinion you attribute much labour to Solomon [in connection with his plantations]; the truth is that Solomon in his wisdom stood upon the centre of the earth, and saw which root branched off to a particular country. He planted upon the root of that country and in this way produced fruits.⁷³

It is understood that the text should be taken literally, its plain meaning, but then you have the expositions given by R. Abba and R. Jannai on Solomon's

⁶⁸ David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat & Derash* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), xiv. The tension that exists and arises between *peshat* and *derash* is shown by Halivni to be one that is positive in nature, complementary rather than decisive.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, xv. Halivni presents the thesis of "timebound exegesis", where exegesis is timebound and historically conditioned and therefore, must be historically contextualised.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 79. Halivni argues that "peshat in the plain, simple meaning is entirely the invention of the medieval exegetes".

⁷¹ Jacobs, 12.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷³ Qoheleth Rabbah, 55-56.

horticultural skills, and the text takes on a new dimension. For Solomon, in the midst of a series of verses flaunting his accomplishments and wealth appears to rather embellish his gardening abilities, leaving the rabbis with a real problem to solve. Solomon claims to have planted *all* kinds of fruits in Jerusalem but it is clear to the rabbinic readers that *all* kinds of fruits do not grow in Jerusalem. The rabbis, in an attempt to overcome this problem through extension, turn Solomon into an assiduous, devoted gardener who not only had water brought from India but even knew the origin of each plant root. This appears to be in direct contrast to the persona of Qoheleth, the now midrashic Solomon, who unfolds in the biblical text of Qoheleth. For is this the same Qoheleth who, just a few verses later, anguishes over the futility of life and questions “For what does a man get for all the toil and worrying he does under the sun?”⁷⁴. This sentiment is repeated on a number of occasions and the answer is as wearying as the question, that all toil and labour are utter futility and bring more misery than good.⁷⁵ Qoheleth’s rather pragmatic, even fatalistic view of work and its consequences is in direct contrast to the picture painted by the rabbis. For Qoheleth does not see the point in labouring and toiling all your life but rather finds that “there is nothing worthwhile for a man but to eat and drink and afford himself enjoyment with his means.”⁷⁶ The rabbis faced with this problematic concept, read meaning in to the text, and Solomon, replacing Qoheleth, becomes the very example of a diligent and hard-working man. As will be shown in the later more comprehensive reading of Qoheleth Rabbah, this is just one example of Solomon undergoing a conversion, or possibly restoration, process at the hands of the rabbis.

2. Derash

The necessity for rabbinic *derash*, the applied meaning of the text, is called into question by the ardent devotees of scriptural *peshat*. A dictum from the Babylonian Talmud states “that no text can be deprived of its *peshat*”.⁷⁷ Some argued that this gave *peshat* superiority over *derash* but others pointed to the broader meaning of *peshat*, as context, so allowing both rabbinic tools equality and significance.⁷⁸ Rabbinic *derash* can appear at times to be far removed, even

⁷⁴ Qoh. 2:22.

⁷⁵ Qoh. 2:22-23, 4:4, 5:14-16.

⁷⁶ Qoh. 2:24.

⁷⁷ *Shabb. 63a, Yevam. 11b and 24a.*

⁷⁸ Halivni, 52.

contrary, to the plain meaning of the biblical text and it is argued that at these seemingly radical deviations that “rabbinic *derash* actually restores the original meaning of the scriptural verse, recovering its divine authorial intention”.⁷⁹ The notion is that rabbinic *derash*, rather than changing the plain or intended meaning of the text, actually reinstates the original *peshat* which had been corrupted, and so providing a more faithful reading of the text. This understanding of *derash* is important when applied to the reading of Qoheleth Rabbah, for discrepancies between *peshat* and *derash* do occur. For it appears on occasions that rather than restoring the supposed original meaning of the text, the rabbis read in to the text, reconfiguring Qoheleth into Solomon, mostly through *peshat* and derive the central theme or lesson of the book as being Torah, mostly through *derash*. It is therefore important in the reading of Qoheleth Rabbah to recognise and acknowledge any discrepancies and attempt to understand them in the context of historical rabbinic thought and theology.

3. Mashal

Mashal, an offspring of *derash*, is a literary device which is used extensively in the midrashic process. *Mashal* is a narrative or parable that is used to help interpret and comprehend a text:

The *mashal*, does its hermeneutic work by recasting diverse texts into a narrative, which then frames and contextualises the verse to be interpreted.⁸⁰

The use of narratives is an important feature of Midrash and an example of *mashal* is found in the midrash on Qoh. 1:1:

The words of Koheleth, the son of David, King in Jerusalem (I, 1). That is what scripture declares by the Holy Spirit through Solomon, king of Israel: *Seest thou a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings* (Prov. xxii, 29).

R. Simon said in the name of R. Simeon b. Halafta: It may be likened to a councillor who became great in the royal palace. The king said to him, ‘Ask what you will and I shall give it to you.’ The councillor thought to himself, ‘If I ask for silver and gold, or precious pearls, or garments, he will give them to me; but I will ask for his daughter [in marriage] and then everything will be given to me including his daughter.’

⁷⁹ Ibid., 132-133. The basis for this theory is found in Halivni’s interpretation of the historical process of *chate’u Yisrael* (“the people of Israel sinned”) and its resultant corruption of the biblical text. He understands the role of *derash* as being the act of restoration.

⁸⁰ Boyarin, 80.

Similarly, *In Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said: Ask what I shall give thee* (I Kings 3:5). Solomon thought to himself, 'If I ask for silver and gold and pearls, He will give them to me; but I shall ask for wisdom and then everything will be included.'

That is what is written, *Give Thy servant therefore an understanding heart* (I Kings 3:9). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: 'Thou hast asked for wisdom and didst not ask for riches, honour, and the life of thine enemies for thyself; therefore wisdom and knowledge will be granted thee and thereby riches and possessions also will I give thee'(cf. II Kings 3: 2ff).

Immediately, *Solomon awoke, and, behold it was a dream* (II Kings 3:15).⁸¹

In this midrash *mashal* is used to both interpret and contextualise the biblical text. An inference loaded text, alluding to Solomonic authorship, is expounded upon with use of a narrative and intertextual references. Firstly it appears that the primary text, Qoh. 1:1, is apparently ignored and it is instead Prov. 22:29 that is subjected to interpretation. It is in reference to this text that R. Simon relates the story of the councillor and his diligence. Then only is Solomon reintroduced and the tale is retold with him as the main character and key verses from II Kings are expounded upon. *Mashal* was meant to function as a tool for both teaching and learning.⁸² It was to make the biblical text accessible to readers and hearers alike. Both are engaged as a story unfolds of kings and palaces, treasures and romance. Once captivated they are then drawn into the biblical text and the prudent choices of Solomon. Here the device is the locking of three texts, two *by* Solomon and one *about* him, thereby uniting scripture. This kind of haggadic device illustrates one great strand of exegesis of Qoheleth by the rabbis, where it is used not to generalise but to particularise Solomon. *Mashal*, through making use of textual fragments promotes the totality of the biblical text and fills in apparent gaps.⁸³ By doing so it renders the text safer by illustrating a strand of exegesis that pulls the text together. *Mashal* can at times also have a darker side to it, in that the relating of an allusive narrative could be the bearer of an unspoken message.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Qoheleth Rabbah, 1-2.

⁸² Boyarin, 83. "The mashal is not an enigmatic narrative. Its central function is to teach knowledge to the people, to make "handles" for the Torah, so that people (not an elect) can understand."

⁸³ Ibid. This 'gap filling' is seen by Boyarin as yet another example of intertextuality in the midrashic process.

⁸⁴ David Stern, *Midrash and Theory* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 40.

Mashal was used to express political opinions and in response to polemical attacks, both of which would have been too dangerous to express openly.⁸⁵ It can also be said that the Gospel writers used this literary form, in the way that they depicted Jesus using parables as a means to argue with Jewish leaders who opposed him.⁸⁶ There were other less oblique motives and uses of *mashal*, including that of

a tactful instrument for smoothing over socially awkward situations as well as for praising the dead, either in eulogies or in the course of consoling grieving relatives... The most frequent use of the *mashal*, however, was the sermon in the synagogue or the lecture in the Rabbinic academy... The most common literary context in which *meshalim* are preserved in Rabbinic literature is that of midrash. It was midrash that determined the conventional two-part structure of the *mashal*, consisting of a narrative (the *mashal* proper) and a *nimshal*, the so-called explanation or application of the narrative. And it was midrash, too, that gave the Rabbinic *mashal* its explicit *raison d'être*, which was to be an exegetical tool, a device for interpreting Scripture and for arriving at its meaning.⁸⁷

The extent to and the manner in which these rabbinic exegetical tools, *peshat*, *derash* and *mashal*, were employed varied through the history of rabbinic literature and represent different stages of rabbinic exegesis. The time of *Qoheleth Rabbah*'s compilation falls into a transitional stage of rabbinic exegesis, where a period of "textual implication" was being replaced by a period of "awareness of the value of *peshat*".⁸⁸ In addition, *Qoheleth Rabbah* retains the early period of rabbinic exegesis where *peshat* was replaced by *derash*, by way of "reading in" to the text. The existence of these stages of rabbinic biblical exegesis in *Qoheleth Rabbah*, not only reaffirms and characterises its eclectic compilation, in that it drew on and borrowed heavily from earlier rabbinic literature, but it also draws attention to the specific textual challenges and problems that *Qoheleth* posed to rabbinic thought and theology.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 40. A good source of examples on the various uses of *mashal* within midrash is found in Stern's book *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

⁸⁸ Halivni, 33-34. Halivni notes that the direction of rabbinic exegesis towards *peshat* "meant not violating the integrity of the text, not necessarily getting closer to authorial intention. With respect to authorial intention, it is true, rabbinic exegesis displays a zigzag pattern of development".

E. Qoheleth Rabbah: Theological Discourse

In considering the reception of Qoheleth by the rabbis, as revealed through their compilation of Qoheleth Rabbah, a number of influential factors have been considered and along with these, the unique structural challenges that Qoheleth presents the rabbinic readers should also be taken into account. In reading Qoheleth Rabbah it is important to be faithful to its midrashic form, theological discourse (exegetical-propositional), and to trace thematic links, patterns of exegesis and contextual references without losing the textual integrity of Qoheleth. There is also a need to examine the reader's intention and interaction with the character of the text. By firstly identifying the patterns and themes that thread their way through the fabric of the book, these threads can then be tied together with the historical, social and religious context in which the text was compiled, to provide a more informed understanding of the text and the unique challenges it posed to rabbinic exegesis.

As was discussed in exegetical techniques, it is important to be aware of the different rabbinic modes of interpretation. In reading Qoheleth Rabbah, R. N. Sandberg identifies and imposes four modes of interpretation on the Midrash, which attempts to understand the process of rabbinic exegesis:

Reinterpretive Mode 1: Reading the text as symbolism

Reinterpretive Mode 2: Attaching added meaning to the text

Transitional Mode 3: Transforming generalizations into specifics

Mode 4: Accepting the literal text and its context⁸⁹

These modes of interpretation are helpful in approaching the complex textual nature of Qoheleth Rabbah, and they complement and underscore the tension that exists between *peshat* and *derash*. The use of allegory and symbolism are an important part of Qoheleth Rabbah, as is the rabbinic idea of interpreting what is *not* said and so adding what they understood as *implied*.⁹⁰ Qoheleth's general statements regarding futility, life's inconsistencies and others, present a challenge to the rabbis, who then transform and apply them to more specific situations and events but still attempting to accommodate some of Qoheleth's initial observations.⁹¹ The obvious reinterpretation of Qoheleth at times obscures the literal reading of text by the rabbis but interestingly, *peshat* is also employed

⁸⁹ Sandberg, 29-35.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 30-31.

⁹¹ Ibid., 33.

in the reading of considered problematic portions of Qoheleth. As noted earlier in exegetical techniques, two significant themes arise in the reading of Qoheleth Rabbah, those of the Solomonic persona and the Torah. These will be examined as the two main themes of the Midrash, where the reading of Solomon appears to be mostly *peshat* and the interpretation of the Torah, mostly *derash*. Additionally, the use of polemical language in the Midrash, and the ironical use of Qoheleth being used against heresy will also be considered.

1. Solomon

The identification of Qoheleth as Solomon – as one and the same person – was not questioned by the rabbinic authors of Qoheleth Rabbah. This assumption, though, does at times result in an apparently inconsistent reading of the text, one in which the signs and the referent become disjointed and the rabbinic equivalencies for Solomon seem in contention with the biblical text of Qoheleth culminating in the production of a new sign-system. The rabbis, through midrash, present a new system of signs through which their message can be transmitted.⁹² Through the process of midrash the rabbis read Qoheleth in a quest to seek knowledge of the text and God, redefining codes along the way to fit their ideology and suit their own agenda but also with the intent of restoring the original meaning to the text.

The rabbis, in their exegesis of Qoheleth 1:1, identify Solomon with Qoheleth by explaining that the name Qoheleth was one of several symbolic names for Solomon and ‘Qoheleth’ was the one that fitted Solomon’s role at the time:

Why was Koheleth’s name so called? Because his words were uttered in public (*hikkahel*), as it is stated, *Then Solomon assembled (yakhel) the elders of Israel (I Kings 8:1).*⁹³

Each one of Solomon’s names, which varied between three and seven according to different rabbis, had a significant meaning and described Solomon’s character in religiously symbolic terms:

He was called ‘Agur’ because he was stored (*agur*) with words of Torah. He was called ‘Jakeh’ because he discharged (*meki*) words [of wisdom] like a bowl that is filled at one time and emptied at another time; similarly did Solomon learn Torah at one time and

⁹² Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination*, 11. Fishbane states that “Biblical Scripture is a complex system of written signs”.

⁹³ Qoheleth Rabbah, 3.

forget it at another time. He was called Lemuel because he spoke against God in his heart, saying, 'I can multiply [wives] without sinning.' He was called 'Ithiel' because he said, 'God is with me (*itti el*).'⁹⁴

This addition to the text allows the literal reading of the text to remain, where Qoheleth is not removed from the reading, but further information and explanation is provided so enabling the rabbis to keep the sense of *peshat*, where the contextual meaning of the text is retained.

Once that Solomon is equated with Qoheleth, the rabbis now address the problems that Solomon, as Qoheleth, presents in the text. Qoheleth's persona is a problematic one and rabbinic exegesis reinvents Qoheleth, as Solomon, into a pious student and teacher of the Torah. This reinvention threads its way through Qoheleth Rabbah and is combined with the other major theme of the Midrash, the Torah. The rabbinic reading and interpretation of Qoh.1:3 introduce these themes and serves as a reminder of the still disputed and fragile nature of Qoheleth's position in scripture:

What profit hath man of all his labour wherein he laboureth under the sun (I, 3)? R. Benjamin said: The Sages sought to suppress the Book of Koheleth because they discovered therein words which savour of heresy. They declared: Behold all the wisdom of Solomon which he aims at teaching [in this Book] is, *What profit hath man of all his labour?* It is possible that the words may also be applied to man's labour in the Torah! On reconsidering the matter they declared: He did not say 'Of all labour' but *Of all his labour—In his labour* one should not labour, but one should toil in the labour of the Torah!⁹⁵

The exposé by the rabbis of the attempt by the sages to stifle the controversial message of Qoheleth and their subsequent relinquishment of this objective is to be expected. The rabbis have no reason to be coy concerning their exposure and acceptance of the problematic nature of Qoheleth, for it was well accounted for in earlier rabbinic writings. What is of interest here is the manner in which the generality of the text is specialised and so removing the corruption of the text and hence its troublesome meaning. The rabbis are casuistic, by drawing the distinction "all *his* labour", meaning not God's labour, and not "*all* labour". By particularising the text, the rabbis solve the problem raised by Qoheleth's

⁹⁴ Ibid., 3-4.

⁹⁵ Qoheleth Rabbah, 6-7.

question and their pedantic exegetical approach identifies the nuances of the question and its validity but again the literal meaning of the text is retained.

One of the key concepts of Qoheleth, הבל, presents a challenge to the rabbis, less because of its meaning but rather because of its application by Qoheleth. For Qoheleth makes what could be considered very broad and sweeping statements when referring to this very conceptual word. In attempting to define and understand *hebel* in their reading of Qoh. 1:2, the rabbis use imagery that retains one of the renderings of this key word.⁹⁶ A number of rabbinic comments are collected; all drawing similar interpretations to the meaning of *hebel* but also acknowledging the word's abstract and complex nature:

Vanity of vanities (1, 2). R. Huna said in the name of R. Aha: David used a phrase without explaining it and its exposition was given by his son Solomon; and Solomon used a phrase without explaining it and its exposition was given by his father David. David said, *Man is like unto breath* (Ps. CXLIV, 4). To what breath? If he were like the steam from an oven, there is substance in it; if like the steam of a stove, there is substance in it! His son Solomon came and explained it; for that is what is written, **Vanity of vanities, saith Koheleth** [is man]. R. Samuel b. Nahum in the name of R. Joshua B. Korah: It may be likened to a man who sets on the fire seven pots one on top of the other, and the steam from the topmost one has no substance in it, [and such is man].⁹⁷

The rabbis attempt to retain the simple, literal meaning of the text in their explanation of *hebel* and through their simile of a man and his pots an illustration and comparison is drawn. Further, by bringing David and Solomon into a dialogue to explain each other, the rabbis further reinforce the notion of scripture interpreting scripture and the totality of the written Torah. The problematic nature of Qoheleth's utilisation of the word *hebel* is encountered further in the text when he declares that even the enjoyment of pleasure is *hebel*:

I said in my heart: Come now, I will try you with mirth (II, 1).
R. Phinehas and R. Hezekiah in the name of R. Simon b. Zabdi commented on this. R. Phinehas said: [The text can be read as] *anassekah* (I will try thee) and *anuskah* (I will flee thee). I will make a test with words of Torah and I will make a test with words of heresy; I will flee from words of heresy to words of Torah. **And**

⁹⁶ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, revised edition, trans. and ed. M.E.J. Richardson (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 236-237. 'Steam,' 'breath,' 'vapour,' and 'vanity' are all considered meanings of the word הבל.

⁹⁷ Qoheleth Rabbah, 4-5. The seven pots refer to the seven 'vanities' in the verse, since הבלים denotes two 'vanities'.

enjoy pleasure: i.e. the pleasure of Torah. **And, behold, this also was vanity!** The verse should have stated nothing else than ‘And, behold, this also was *pleasure*’; but it declares, **And, behold, this also was vanity!** R. Hezekiah said in the name of R. Simon b. Zabdi: All the Torah which you learn in this world is ‘vanity’ in comparison with Torah [which will be learnt] in the World to Come; because in this world a man learns Torah and forgets it, but with reference to the World to Come what is written there? *I will put My law in their inward parts* (Jer. 31:33).⁹⁸

When the plain meaning of the text is considered unacceptable, it is abandoned and the rabbis are categorical in reading in what the text *should* have said. Here rabbinic *derash* is thought to restore the original meaning of the text, its *peshat*.⁹⁹ Qoheleth’s language and use of the word *hebel* left too many gaps for the rabbis, who were uncomfortable with its utilisation and possible inferences. They resolved this difficulty by particularising the text, and by reiterating and emphasising the pleasure found in the study of the Torah. Further, *hebel* is seen in relative terms, where in comparison to the study of the Torah in the world to come, the study the Torah in this world can be considered to be *hebel*.

The problematic nature of Solomon’s sweeping statements in regards to *hebel* and similar perceptions forced the rabbis, as noted in the previous midrash examples, to particularise the text. In the reading of Qoh.1:14 the rabbis firstly provide an allegory of an old man who sits at a cross road warning people of the differing conditions of the roads from which a comparison is made to Solomon but then it is followed with a literal reading of the text, ending with an important addition:

In like manner, ought not people to be thankful to Solomon who sits by the gates of wisdom and warns Israel, **I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind, except repentance and good deeds.**¹⁰⁰

The midrash on this text illustrates how rabbinic exegesis could adapt to the language of individual texts without always *reading in*. Clearly, the indiscriminate sentiments of Qoheleth were problematic but the rabbis allow the

⁹⁸ Qoheleth Rabbah, 51.

⁹⁹ Halvini, 132-133. Halvini proposes to solve these discrepancies between *peshat* and *derash* by understanding the corruption of the text through the historical process of *chate’u Yisrael* (“the people of Israel sinned”). “What this theory implies is that, in these instances, the uncorrupted Torah actually originally *did* say *derash*, and that the *peshat* of our current text is fallacious, a reality which necessarily prompted corrective, but essentially restorative, activity of midrash”.

¹⁰⁰ Qoheleth Rabbah, 42.

peshat of the text to remain and the additional clarification is what is considered already *implied* in the text. The attempt by the rabbis to restore Solomon, as Qoheleth, to his supposed position of moral and spiritual authority, though, is inconsistent with the biblical Solomon portrayed in I Kings but is consistent with the illustration of Solomon in II Chronicles, where he is described as being one whom God was with and as one who was faithful to God.¹⁰¹

As earlier observed, the pleasures of Qoheleth were interpreted by the rabbis as being ones confined to those of the Torah and here again, Qoheleth's specific pleasures are read as scriptural allegory:

I searched in my heart how to pamper my flesh with wine (II, 3). Solomon said, I searched in my heart how to pamper my flesh with wine – to pamper my heart with the wine of the Torah. And my heart conducting itself with wisdom – with the wisdom of the Torah.

Repetitions within Qoheleth Rabbah are not infrequent and the interpretation of eating and drinking, as signifying the Torah and good deeds, is applied as necessary.¹⁰² The process of restoration and trying to make the text meaningful created a problem of internal consistency. Therefore, the challenge that Qoheleth posed to the rabbis was to make the potentially heretical and seemingly non-rabbinic sentiments of Qoheleth, both relevant and one whose message fell into place with the unity of scripture. Clearly, the image that the rabbis wish to portray of Solomon is one that is compatible and sympathetic with their own ideological agenda but also one that reflected the Solomon of II Chronicles. The study of and devotion to the Torah was a virtuous preoccupation and not the egocentric indulgent pass times of a king with too much time on his hands, pleasuring himself with food and wine.

But the presentation of Qoheleth, as Solomon, as being not only a student of the Torah but also a teacher of the Torah is done through a radical re-reading of the text. In the midrash on Qoh. 2:8, where Qoheleth vividly describes his material wealth, the rabbis initially allow the *peshat* of the text to remain. The intertextuality of scripture supports this literal reading, as shown by their linking of Qoh. 2:8 to I Kings 10:27 and II Chron. 11:23. But then added meaning is attached to the text and Solomon's material wealth is connected with matters of

¹⁰¹ II Chronicles 1:1, 11-12, 9:22-23.

¹⁰² Qoheleth Rabbah 2:24; 3:13; 5:17; and 8:15.

the Torah.¹⁰³ The rabbis interpret the mansions built by Solomon as synagogues and houses of study, and the vineyards he planted as really referring to rows of disciples. The material possessions and accomplishments of Solomon during his reign, the enormous task of building the Temple in Jerusalem and the return of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, are well documented in both I Kings and II Chronicles. The rabbis, though, appear to favour the Solomon of II Chronicles and the midrash on Qoh. 2:8 diffuses Solomon's worldly endeavours and reads meaning into the text, sanctifying Solomon's persona as Qoheleth along the way. It may appear that in attempting to bring Qoheleth into line, the rabbis seem, at times, to over compensate for Solomon exegetically. But maybe their overzealous interpretation was necessary for a wayward Solomon. I Kings 11: 9 states that "The Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart turned away from the Lord..." After years of service and devotion to God, Solomon married numerous foreign women and built shrines to other gods and offered sacrifices to them.¹⁰⁴ The rabbis did seem to have reason indeed to protect Solomon's reputation and to recreate and reconfigure him into an image of their own likeness. But it could also be argued that the rabbis were restoring to these problematic verses the real *peshat*, which had been corrupted through *chate'u Yisrael*, in this case Solomon's sins.¹⁰⁵ This could therefore account to some extent for the discrepancies and inconsistencies between the persona of Qoheleth and the rabbinic Solomon, who is not necessarily equivalent to the biblical Solomon, at least not the one of I Kings.

This rabbinic Solomon is given a further dimension by means of paternal association, where the nature of the relationship between David and Solomon provide supportive exegesis.¹⁰⁶ By associating Solomon with David, the rabbis provide intertextual support while simultaneously safeguarding and preserving the image of both Solomon and David. As noted in the earlier midrash on Qoh. 1:2, Solomon and David are brought into dialogue in the very important interpretation of the word *hebel*. The linking of texts by Solomon and David not only united scripture but allowed any perceived problems, such as the application

¹⁰³ Ibid., 57-58.

¹⁰⁴ I Kings 11:1-8.

¹⁰⁵ Halivni, 133.

¹⁰⁶ Like Solomon, the biblical portrayal of David is not consistent. The wayward David of II Samuel contrasts with the faithful David of I Chronicles.

of *hebel* by Qoheleth, to be rendered safer.¹⁰⁷ David's likening of man to breath in Psalms 144:4 is used to explain Solomon's use of *hebel* and vice versa. Consequently, the rabbis' interpretation of Qoh. 1:2 retains one of the renderings of *hebel* as breath or steam by showing how scripture interprets scripture.

The importance of Solomon's association with David can be further understood by placing Qoheleth Rabbah in its historical and geographical context. In his book, "The Sage in Jewish Society of Late Antiquity"¹⁰⁸, Richard Kalmin carries out an exegetical study into the attitudes toward King David in rabbinic writings, and how distinct differences between Babylonian and Palestinian rabbis and in turn their relationship and interaction with non-rabbis, affected David's portrayal.¹⁰⁹ By placing the rabbinic writings in their historical context, he argues that the attitude towards David found in rabbinic writings can be explained. Focusing on his comments on the Palestinian rabbis (as is relevant to Qoheleth Rabbah and its Palestinian literary origin) is found a valuable observation for this present study:

Palestinian rabbis, we will argue, in keeping with their greater involvement with non-rabbis and their weaker position in society, tend to depict David as sinless and saintly. They portray him positively to defend him, and by extension themselves, against the scorn and criticism of non-rabbinic Jews...So Palestinian rabbis tend to praise David, to whitewash his sins, to make his behavior conform to rabbinic halakhah, and to portray him as a rabbi.¹¹⁰

Concentrating primarily on rabbinic literature from the Tannaitic period¹¹¹, Kalmin demonstrates how Palestinian rabbis tend to downplay David's sins or in some cases retell or re-reason a serious incident. A prime example can be shown in their statements concerning David's illicit relationship with Bathsheba, where Kalmin observes that:

R. Shimon ben Yohai claims that David committed adultery with Bathsheba only in order to show the way to penitents, to demonstrate that repentance was possible and effective.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ A similar example is found in Qoheleth Rabbah, 165 and the interpretation of Qoh. 6:12.

¹⁰⁸ Richard Kalmin, *The Sage in Jewish Society of Late Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 83-93.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 84. The Tannaitic period refers to the first two centuries CE and includes the works of the Mishnah and Tosefta.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 84. Statements concerning David and Bathsheba are found in b. Avodah Zarah 4b-5a, b. Shabbat 56a and b. Shabbat 56a.

In Qoheleth Rabbah we do not find such specific references to events in David's life but like Solomon, David is portrayed in a positive light and the mantle of a Torah teacher and a man of exemplary character is also bestowed upon him. The glossy and positive rabbinic portrayal of David is shown in the following statements in Qoheleth Rabbah, particularly in regards to his wisdom:

Another interpretation of **The wise man, his eyes are in his head:** i.e. David, king of Israel; **But the fool walketh in darkness:** i.e. the wicked Nebuchadnezzar.¹¹³

Another interpretation of **Wisdom is a stronghold to the wise man;** i.e. to David...¹¹⁴

It is interesting to note that it is David who is chosen as an example of a wise man, rather than Solomon who was famed for his wisdom.¹¹⁵ The wisdom of David is also the reason, according to the rabbis in their midrash on Qoh. 7:19, why the book of Psalms is named after him, even though it was composed by ten men and even God speaks up on David's behalf:

Similarly when the ten righteous men wished to compose the Book of Psalms, the Holy One, blessed be he, said to them, 'You are all pleasant, pious and worthy to utter hymns before Me, but let David utter them for all of you because his voice is sweet.' That is what is written, *The sweet singer of Israel* (II Sam. XXIII, 1).¹¹⁶

Along with wisdom, literary skills and a beautiful voice, the rabbis disclose other honourable traits of David. In the midrash on Qoh. 5:10 Simeon b. Eleazar recounts a conversation between David and God regarding the day on which David will die, in which David requests to die on the eve of the Sabbath. In response to this request God responds, curiously quoting scripture himself, portraying him in a manner very much in accord with the rabbis:

He replied, '*For a day in Thy courts is better than a thousand* (Ps. LXXXIV, 11), i.e. better to Me is one day in which you are engaged in Torah before Me than a thousand sacrifices which your son Solomon will offer before Me on the altar.' David used to sit and study every Sabbath throughout the day.¹¹⁷

David's life was so precious that God did not want to shorten it by even a day, especially seeing that if he died on the eve of the Sabbath he would not be able to study the Torah for one more day. In one very poignant revelation in the

¹¹³ Qoheleth Rabbah, 65.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 202.

¹¹⁵ I Kings 10:1-5 recounts the story of the queen of Sheba who hears of Solomon's fame and visits him to test his wisdom.

¹¹⁶ Qoheleth Rabbah, 203.

interpretation of Qoh. 9:18, the rabbis not only provide a saintly summary of David but also (re)claim their authority:

R. 'Azariah and R. Jonathan b. R. Haggai said in the name of R. Isaac b. Marion: It is to teach you that whoever hardens his face against the disciples of the Sages and the great [teacher] of the generation is as though he hardens his face against the king; so how much more so in the case of David who was king, sage, and a great [teacher] in his generation!¹¹⁸

David's moral lapses are not dwelt on but elements of his persona remain in the midrash and reflect a similarity to the rabbinic *derash* on Qoheleth as Solomon. If Kalmin's theory is accepted, then this whitewashing of father and son is a product of the context and climate in which the text was produced. Qoheleth Rabbah was compiled in Palestine by rabbis who interacted on a daily basis with non-rabbinic Jews and others. Whether real or imagined, there appears to be a conflict between rabbinic and non-rabbinic Jews regarding the character of David and Solomon.¹¹⁹ The need to respond and defend these two prominent biblical figures, and also re-establish their position in society, were reasons enough to explain away and ignore the immoral conduct of these two great kings.

2. Torah

Qoheleth Rabbah inextricably ties the emphasis on the study of the Torah to Solomon, for the book of Qoheleth is perceived as the conduit through which the message of Solomon, which is the Torah, is transmitted. It is in this regard that Qoheleth presents the rabbis with the most challenges. Verses that would apparently take a plain or simple meaning, are instead transformed through rabbinic *derash* into, what could be called, Torah propaganda. Even the few sentiments expressed by Qoheleth that seem to provide him comfort in a meaningless existence are interpreted by the rabbis in a manner that subdues the emotions. The midrash on Qoh. 2:24 illustrates this reality:

There is nothing better for a man than he should eat and drink (II, 24). R. Tanhuma in the name of R. Nahman, the son of R. Samuel b. Nahman, and R. Menahma said: All the references to eating and drinking in this Book signify Torah and good deeds. R. Jonah said: The most clear proof of them all is, *A man hath no better thing under the sun than to eat and drink, and to be merry, and that this should accompany him in his labour*—'amalo (Eccl.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 149.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 257.

¹¹⁹ Kalmin, 90.

8:15). The last word should be read as *'olamo* (his world)—in this world; All *the days of his life* (ib.) alludes to the grave. Are there, then, food and drink in the grave which accompany a man to the grave? It must then mean Torah and good deeds.¹²⁰

As mentioned in the previous section, repetitions within Qoheleth Rabbah are not infrequent and especially in reference to Torah. In most cases where Torah is the interpretative result, *derash* is employed to understand the text and to provide meaning. In the understanding of food and drink as always meaning Torah, the surface meaning or simple meaning of the text is rejected and instead meaning is *read into* the text.¹²¹ Further examples of *reading in* are found in the midrash on Qoh. 11:1, 3:

Cast thy bread upon the waters (XI, 1). R. Bibi said: If it is your desire to practice charity, bestow it upon those who labour in the Torah, because **the waters** means nothing else than words of Torah, as it is said, *Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye for water* (Isa. LV, 1).¹²²

If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth (XI, 3). If the disciples of the Sages are full of Torah, they empty it upon Israel who are called **earth**, as it is said, *For ye shall be a delightsome land* (Mal. III, 12).¹²³

In both midrashim, the plain meaning of the text appears to be rejected and replaced by another. But this understanding of reading in is dependent on a narrow understanding of *peshat* as being only the plain or literal sense of the text. The *peshat* of the text can also take the form of an allegory or metaphor.¹²⁴ Therefore, it can be argued that metaphors of bread and water, and clouds and rain, are actually the scriptural *peshat* and that *reading in* the meaning to be Torah is restoring the literal meaning of the text. It is also important to note the connecting of both interpretations with texts from elsewhere in scripture and therefore providing intertextual support. The reading of certain texts as an *implied* metaphor for Torah is not uncommon in Qoheleth Rabbah and along with continued references to anything related to food and drink meaning Torah,

¹²⁰ Qoheleth Rabbah, 72.

¹²¹ Halivni, 6. This differs to allegorising where the plain meaning of the text is preserved.

¹²² Qoheleth Rabbah, 284.

¹²³ Ibid., 292.

¹²⁴ Halivni, 19.

there are others, including interpreting the darkness of Qoh. 6:4 to mean *without* Torah and good deeds.¹²⁵

The need to particularise Qoheleth's general statements was an important part of the rabbinic use of *derash* and the midrashim on Qoh. 2:13 and 3:1 illustrate this hermeneutic technique:

Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly (II, 13). It has been taught in the name of R. Meir: As there is superiority of light over darkness, so there is superiority of words of Torah over words of vanity.¹²⁶

To every thing there is a season (III, I)...and a time to every purpose under the heaven. There was a time for the Torah to be given to Israel. R. Bibi said: There was a time for a certain thing to be found above the heaven, and now it was to be found beneath the heaven. What was it? The Torah, as it is stated, *And God spoke all these words saying* (Ex. XX, I).¹²⁷

By particularising the texts, meaning is added but the plain sense of the text remains unaltered, making the texts both meaningful and less ambiguous. Rabbinic midrash was seen as a way of continuing the legacy of God's revelation through the dual Torah and trying to understanding God's will through scriptural exegesis.¹²⁸ The rabbis' role in this process of continued revelation was critical and they draw attention to their unique position in regards to the Torah in the midrash on Qoh. 1:7:

Another interpretation of **All the rivers:** all the Torah which a man studies is only in his heart; **Yet sea is not full:** but the heart is not full nor the appetite ever satisfied...the Holy One, blessed be He, gave wisdom to the wise who sit and meditate upon it in Synagogues and Houses of Study.¹²⁹

Further, it was important to emphasise their sacred role in continuing the legacy of Moses and maintaining their revelatory authority:

Is there a thing thereof it is said: See, this is new (I, 10)?... if you have heard Torah from the mouth of a scholar, let it be in your estimation as if your ears had heard it from Mount Sinai.¹³⁰

Who is as the wise man (VII, 1)? This alludes to the Holy One blessed be He, of whom it is written, *He is wise in heart, and mighty*

¹²⁵ Qoheleth Rabbah, 160.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 63.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 74.

¹²⁸ Halivni, 150-151. Halivni contends that the theological premise underlying *chate'u Yisrael*, which accounts for any textual corruption, can be understood by noting that "Revelation made the Torah available to man and accessible to man, but also vulnerable to human exertion".

¹²⁹ Qoheleth Rabbah, 21-22.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 34.

in strength (Job IX, 4) **And who knoweth the interpretation of a thing?** [That is God] who expounded the Torah to Moses.¹³¹

In response to Qoheleth's open rhetorical questions the rabbis reaffirm their direct line of authority back to God and Moses by interpreting what is *not* said and so adding what they considered to be already *implied* in the text.

The reoccurring theme of the importance of the Torah as emphasised by the rabbis in Qoheleth Rabbah, can be read as a veiled warning, subtext, against the subtle influences of Islam and Christianity. Christianity and then to a lesser extent Islam, saw themselves as the true custodians of the traditions of the Torah, as it was interpreted and understood in their individual communities. The ownership of the written Torah, God's revelation, was intrinsically tied to the very identity of Israel, Judaism. This sentiment is clearly made in the midrash on Qoh. 1:4:

One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh (I, 4)...and the earth abideth for ever... R. Simeon b. Yohai said: It is written, *For as the days of a tree shall be the days of My people* (Isa. LXV, 22), and 'tree' means nothing else than Torah, as it is stated, *She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her* (Prov. III, 18). Now what was created for the sake of what? Was Torah created for the sake of Israel or vice versa? Surely Torah was created for the sake of Israel. Since, then, Torah which was created for the sake of Israel endures for all eternity, how much more must Israel, for whose sake it was created, [endure for all eternity]!¹³²

Through intertextuality and *reading in* the rabbis state plainly the meaning of the texts, that Torah and Israel cannot be separated, for one identifies the other.

In concluding, in part, the theme of the Torah as found in Qoheleth Rabbah, the emphasis on the Torah can not be seen as unique to the period of Qoheleth Rabbah's compilation. The Torah remained pivotal in Judaism throughout its religious and literary history. What is then notable is not whether the preoccupation with the study of the Torah in Qoheleth Rabbah may or may not reflect the historical climate of the day but what is even more striking is that such a book as Qoheleth could be read in this manner. Qoheleth challenged the rabbis through its indeterminate textual realities, through which sweeping general statements were made. Qoheleth's highly individualistic message, when judged against other biblical texts, forced the rabbis to respond through the midrashic

¹³¹ Ibid., 213.

¹³² Ibid., 14-15.

process to preserve the unity of scripture by making connections between Qoheleth and the rest of scripture, through intertextuality. Further, they had to particularise Qoheleth's textual generalisations, and reading, what were considered to be *implied* linguistic signs, to mean Torah.

3. Polemics and Parables

The overriding theme of the Torah affirms the status quo but it also serves to a certain extent as a symbolic polemic. In the reading of Qoheleth Rabbah are found mostly covert polemical messages directed towards Christianity and its adherents but also at Jewish heretics. The importance of the historical context and how it relates to Qoheleth Rabbah is especially significant when examining the polemical language in the Midrash. Further, the rabbinic understanding of divine activity and intervention in history is another important factor to be considered. The Jewish community read contemporary events and questioned God's part in them, and the rabbis responded, in part, through midrashic tradition and exegesis.¹³³ In rabbinic midrash tradition there are examples of God's paradoxical actions in history, as understood by the proverb, "The Holy One blessed be He, with the very thing with which He injures He heals" and it is particularly contextually relevant in the reading of certain polemical language.¹³⁴

When the reading of *hebel* was examined in relation to Solomon, the midrash on Qoh. 2:1 was given as an example of how the rabbis attempted to restore the plain meaning of the text by stating what *should* have been said. Prior to this claim, the rabbis' counsel and warn their audience of the dangers of heresy:

I said in my heart: Come now, I will try you with mirth (II, 1)... I will make a test with words of Torah and I will make a test with words of heresy; I will flee from words of heresy to words of Torah.¹³⁵

It is ironic that Qoheleth is here used against heresy while it is held to be potentially heretical itself, as acknowledged by the earlier midrash on Qoh. 1:3. It appears that to overcome the challenge of the perceived heretical position that Qoheleth held in certain quarters, the rabbis both particularise Qoheleth's

¹³³ Chernus, 126. Chernus notes that rabbinic literature of late antiquity evaluated events by the standard "Is it good or bad for Jews?" and asked whether these events affected the fulfilment of divine promises of redemption.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 127.

¹³⁵ Qoheleth Rabbah, 51.

language and *read in* to the text added meaning. It could be assumed that ‘words of heresy’ is a disguised polemic against Christianity and Islam but the rabbis could also be addressing religious factions within Judaism. The midrash on Qoh. 5:5 makes a further warning concerning the study of the Torah:

Suffer not thy mouth to bring thy flesh into guilt (V, 5). R. Benjamin interpreted the verse as alluding to those who make a pretence of knowledge of the Torah. *Suffer not thy mouth*: give not permission to your mouth, *to bring thy flesh into guilt*: to make your body sin in the matter of your study. *Neither say thou before the messenger*, i.e. the teacher, *that it was an error*: he makes himself out to be a Bible-scholar but is not one, or a Mishnah-scholar but he is not one.¹³⁶

Here R. Benjamin appears to be hinting, not to Christianity and Islam, but to students of the *yeshiva*, maybe even his own, who were pretending to be rabbinic scholars. Polemical language within Qoheleth Rabbah is not overtly invasive but it exists and certain significant examples will be considered.

In the interpretation of Qoh. 1:8 is found the following narrative that warns the reader of associating with questionable characters, and the serious consequences of doing so:

Another interpretation of **All things toil to weariness**: Words of heresy weary man. R. Eliezer was once arrested because of heresy, and the governor took him and made him ascend a dais to be tried... After R. Eliezer had left the dais, he was sorely grieved at having been arrested because of heresy. His disciples visited him to console him, but he would not accept [their words of comfort]. R. Akiba visited him and said to him, ‘Rabbi, perhaps one of the *minim* expounded something in your presence which was acceptable to you. He answered, ‘By heaven, you have reminded me! Once I was walking up the main street of Sepphoris when there came toward me a man named Jacob of Kefar Sekaniah who told me something in the name of So-and-so which pleased me, viz. “It is written in your Torah, *Thou shalt not bring the hire of a harlot, or the price of a dog, into the house of the Lord thy God for any vow* (Deut. XXIII, 19). What is to done with them?” I told him that they were prohibited [for every use]. He said to me, “They are prohibited as an offering, but is it permissible to destroy them?” I retorted, “In that case, what is to be done with them?” He said to me, “Let bath-houses and privies be made with them.” I exclaimed, “You have said an excellent thing,” and the law [not to listen to the words of a *min*] escaped my memory at the time. When he saw that I acknowledged his words, he adds, “Thus said So-and-so... On that account I was arrested for heresy. More than that, I transgressed what is written in the Torah...”¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Ibid., 132.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 26-28.

The historical contextualising of the text through a narrative is significant. By gentle prodding from R. Akiba, R. Eliezer was able to recollect the events leading up to his arrest for uttering words of heresy. In a moment of weakness he overlooked the law about conversing with *minim* and brought on himself avoidable consequences. *Minim* are thought to be of Jewish heritage, heretics, and are most likely to be Jewish Christians.¹³⁸ In the midrash on Qoh. 7:26 the nature of the *min* is made explicit and a *min* is equated with a sinner.¹³⁹ A more accurate profile of *minim* is difficult to compile but the rabbis warned against any contact with *minim* but yet acknowledged their skill as healers and the alluring nature of their words.¹⁴⁰ Jacob of Kefar Sekaniah is clearly a follower of ‘So-and-so’, Jesus, and subtly entraps the unsuspecting Rabbi with his shrewd questioning. In conversing with a *min*, R. Eliezer not only broke the law but transgressed the Torah and quotes Prov. 5:8 and Prov. 7:26. The narrative does not leave the reader in any doubt about the serious nature of associating with a *min*. Again the ironical use of Qoheleth against heresy through rabbinic midrash is notable.

The midrash on Qoh.1:8 is just one passage in a series of references to *minim* and *minuth*, *minuth* being the abstract noun of *min* and translated as heresy, where Christianity is the heresy.¹⁴¹ As seen in the previous narrative, Jesus is never mentioned directly by name in Qoheleth Rabbah but is instead introduced as another character, an imitator, often suggestive but never explicit. A concise example of this can be seen in yet another midrash on Qoh. 1:8:

Hanina, the son of R. Joshua’s brother, came to Capernaum, and the *minim* worked a spell on him and set him riding upon an ass on the Sabbath. He went to his uncle, Joshua, who anointed him with oil and he recovered [from the spell. R. Joshua] said to him, ‘Since the ass of that wicked person has roused itself against you, you are not able to reside in the land of Israel.’ So he went down from there to Babylon where he died in peace.¹⁴²

The story, though short, is brimming with details and assertions about the identity of its characters and their roles. The location, Capernaum, was a well-known Christian city from the time of Jesus and so it is not surprising that

¹³⁸ R. Travers Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash* (Clifton, New Jersey: Reference Book Publishers, 1966), 192.

¹³⁹ Qoheleth Rabbah, 210.

¹⁴⁰ Kalmin, 68.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

Hanina has an encounter with the *minim* there. The residents of Capernaum are referred to again later in Qoheleth Rabbah in a manner that may confirm its Christian notoriety. For in the midrash on Qoh. 7:26, the inhabitants of Capernaum are referred to as sinners and further, sinners are identified as the *minim*.¹⁴³ A spell, or a Christian miracle is cast on Hanina and he performs what could be understood as an imitation of Jesus.¹⁴⁴ The difference, though, lies in the day the episode takes place, for while Hanina was made to ride on an ass on the Sabbath, Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on an ass was on a Sunday. The fact that Hanina was made to ride the ass on the Sabbath further exaggerates the seriousness and maliciousness of the 'spell' that was cast on him. Jesus is once again alluded to when R. Joshua blames the event on the "ass of that wicked person". The notion of *minim* or followers of Jesus working spells or miracles is spoken of in the New Testament, where Jesus bestows powers to heal the sick and drive out demons, among others, upon his followers.¹⁴⁵

In the midrashim on Qoh. 1:8 we find a series of passages dealing with *minim* and Christian symbolism in general. A seemingly unprovocative text, Qoh. 1:8, "All such things are wearisome: No man can ever state them; The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear enough of hearing," becomes a compilation of comments and interpretations of which the theme is anti-Christian in nature. The law against associating with *minim* and listening to their counsel, as seen in the story of R. Eliezer, is further repeated in another midrash on Qoh. 1:8 in a rather tragic tale of a boy, Ben Dama, who dies from a snake bite before he is able to receive help from a *min*.¹⁴⁶ The assisting Rabbi rejoices at this outcome and exclaims:

Happy art thou, Ben Dama, that thou didst expire in a state of purity
and didst not break down the fence erected by the Sages!¹⁴⁷

Here the story claims that it is better off to be dead than to be healed by a *min*, a Christian. The healing powers of *minim*, as depicted by the rabbis, is in keeping with the New Testament version of events, where Jesus' followers continue his

¹⁴² Qoheleth Rabbah, 29.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 210.

¹⁴⁴ Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a donkey is found in Mt. 21:1-11, Mk 11:1-11, Lk. 19:28-44 and Jn. 12:12-15.

¹⁴⁵ Mark 16:18 and Luke 10:19.

¹⁴⁶ Qoheleth Rabbah, 28.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

miracle-working legacy. The importance of avoiding all contact with *minim* are expressed in quite a brutal account of R. Judah b. Nakosa's dealings with them:

The *minim* used to have dealings with R. Judah B. Nakosa. They used constantly to ask him questions which he was always able to answer. He said to them, 'In vain you bring your trifling arguments. Let us agree among ourselves that whoever overcomes his opponent [in debate] shall split his head open with a mallet.' He defeated them and rained blows on their heads until they were filled with cracks. When he returned his disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, they helped you from heaven and you conquered!' He replied to them, 'In vain! go and pray for me and for this bag which was full of precious stones and pearls but is now filled with ashes.'¹⁴⁸

The obliteration of his opponents was not sufficient penance for R. Judah to pay for dealing with the *minim*, for his mind still remained adulterated by his earlier actions. The grave consequence of interacting with *minim* was made explicitly clear. The authenticity or accuracy of the stories recorded is not of consequence in this reading of the text. These narratives are thought to be later versions of earlier texts, due to the historical setting of the stories and the people mentioned.¹⁴⁹ Their very inclusion and use, in this case the exegesis and interpretation of Qoheleth, confirms their validity in rabbinic circles. Though the historicity of the details of each account may be in doubt, it is clear that there was frequent contact between rabbis and *minim*, judging by the vehement prohibition by the rabbis. Kalmin articulates this reality accurately when he writes in regard to this issue that "the specific stories are not historical – some are plainly impossible – but they reflect a historical situation".¹⁵⁰

Thus far the focus has been on Qoh.1:8 but the references and allusions to Christianity are scattered throughout Qoheleth Rabbah. Already, in the interpretation of Qoh.1:9 we find a prophetic tone inserted into a *mashal*:

That which hath been is that which shall be (I, 9)...Once [the Roman] government dispatched a message to our Rabbis, 'Send us one of your torches.'... 'it seems to us that they want of us nothing else than somebody who enlightens faces with legal decisions.' They sent R. Meir to them, and they asked him many questions, all of which he answered. Finally they asked him why the pig is called [in Hebrew] '*hazir*', and he replied, 'Because it is destined to restore (*lehahazir*) the sovereignty to its owners.'¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 30.

¹⁴⁹ Herford, 210-215.

¹⁵⁰ Kalmin, 72-73.

¹⁵¹ Qoheleth Rabbah, 31.

That the Roman official enquired about the Hebrew etymology of the 'pig' seems a little peculiar but the paradoxical nature of such an inquiry is profound. The pig signifies Rome, which in turn represents Edom, and was a commonly used polemical device in rabbinic literature:¹⁵²

Just as the pig pretends to be a clean beast by showing the cloven hoof, but in fact is an unclean one, so Rome pretends to be just but in fact governs by thuggery. Edom does not pretend to praise God but only blasphemes. It does not exalt the righteous but kills them.¹⁵³

Rome, the very bastion of Christian power, was understandably an object of attack. R. Meir, in his reply to the Roman official, prophesied the downfall of Rome and the subsequent return to ascendancy of Israel.¹⁵⁴ The irony of the exchange and the complete naiveté on the part of the Roman official to his part is an illustration of humour and satire, tools well used by the Judaic writers. Though forbidden, it appears that contact with *minim* (in this case Romans) provided an opportunity for the rabbis to reveal the simple minds and heretical beliefs of the *minim*.

In considering the anti-Roman polemics, the idea of God's paradoxical actions in history need to be considered for they add another dimension to these seemingly straightforward theological polemics. When the proverb of "with the very thing with which He injures He heals" is applied in this political context, rabbinic tradition would have acknowledged the concept of God not only using Rome to injure Israel but also using Rome to heal Israel.¹⁵⁵ This understanding of divine intervention in history did not prevent the rabbis from using provocative polemical language, and in the following incident R. Meir once again exposes the stupidity of the Romans:

R. Meir was being sought by the [Roman] Government. He fled and passed by the store of some Romans. He found them sitting and eating swine's flesh. When they saw him they said, 'Is it he or not? Since it may be he, let us call him over to us; if he comes and eats with us [it cannot be he].' He dipped one of his fingers in the swine's blood and placed another finger in his mouth, dipping one finger and sucking the other. They said one to the other, 'If he were R. Meir, he would not have done so.' They let him go and he fled. The text was

¹⁵² Neusner, *A Midrash Reader*, 90-91. For designation of Rome as 'pig' refer to Leviticus Rabbah XIII, 5.

¹⁵³ Neusner, *What is Midrash?* 67.

¹⁵⁴ Qoheleth Rabbah, 31.

¹⁵⁵ Chernus, 132. Chernus comments that to look for another medium through which redemption would be fulfilled, like a Persian or independent Jewish government, would be to undermine paradoxical divine action in history.

therefore applied to him, **The excellency of knowledge is, that wisdom preserveth the life of him that hath it.**¹⁵⁶

The claim by the Roman Empire, now Christian, to be the true Israel was a source of great abhorrence and irritation on the part of the Jews and their use of the symbol of the pig concedes nothing to the tenets and ideology of Christianity. The pig, a symbol of all that is prohibited in Judaism, was the very antithesis of God's law and a parameter of obedience to that law. Even being associated with pigs was in itself a great insult, as vividly described in the midrash on Qoh. 8:1:

An idolater saw R. Judah b. R. Ilai, and, noticing that his face shone, exclaimed, 'This man is one of three things: he is either intoxicated, or a usurer, or a breeder of pigs.' R. Judah b. R. Ilai heard the remark and said, 'A curse upon you! I am none of these three things.'... 'Why then, is your face so bright?' he asked; and the Rabbi answered, 'My study of Torah brightens my face...'¹⁵⁷

The equal vileness of all three attributes is clear and that they could be assigned to R. Judah is only conceivable because the claimant was himself an idolater, very possibly a Christian. For only a non-Jew could find happiness, such that his face would shine in those three indecorous activities, while the pious Rabbi's joy is found in the study of the Torah. The symbol of the pig is once again used to convey all that is non-Jewish and evil. The intention though not explicit, would be clear to the reader and hearer of the text. The theological threat of Christianity to the very validity of Judaism was undeniable and rabbinic exegesis served as a reassurance of the continuation of God's plan for Israel now and in the future.

References and allusions to Christianity appear in Qoheleth Rabbah not only in symbolism but also through allegory¹⁵⁸ and literary imitation, parallels, and borrowings. Earlier it was observed how a possible imitation of Jesus riding on an ass was introduced as a *mashal* against *minim*. In the interpretation of Qoh. 9:7, "Go, eat your bread, and drink your wine in joy; for your action was long ago approved by God," is found a further possible imitation or parallel with Jesus. Throughout the Gospels are found examples of Jesus healing the sick or helping the needy on the Sabbath, and the rebuke and anger he faced by the

¹⁵⁶ Qoheleth Rabbah, 194.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 215.

¹⁵⁸ Halivni, 3.

Jewish leaders in response to such acts are also documented.¹⁵⁹ In the midrash on Qoh. 9:7 is found an interesting parallel to Jesus' conduct:

Abba Tahnah the pious was entering his city on the Sabbath-eve at dusk with his bundle slung over his shoulder, when he met a man afflicted with boils lying at the cross-roads. The latter said to him, 'Rabbi, do me an act of charity and carry me into the city.' He remarked, 'If I abandon my bundle, from where shall I and my household support ourselves? But if I abandon this afflicted man I will forfeit my life!' What did he do? He allowed the Good inclination to master the Evil inclination, and carried the afflicted man into the city. He then returned for his bundle and entered at sunset. Everybody was astonished and exclaimed, 'Is this Abba Tahnah the pious!' He too felt uneasy in his heart and said, 'Do you think that I perhaps desecrated the Sabbath?' At that time the Holy One, blessed be He, caused the sun to shine, as it is written, *But unto you that fear My name shall the sun of righteousness arise* (Mal. III, 20).¹⁶⁰

The consequence of Abba Tahnah's act of good will towards the sickly man resulted in him still carrying his bundle at sunset, when Sabbath commenced. The intervention of God, by making the sun to shine, absolved Abba Tahnah of this shortcoming. To try and draw comparisons with similar acts performed by Jesus in the Gospels may appear overly zealous but the subtlety and details of this story call for a closer examination. The apparent legalism and lack of compassion of Judaism, was a criticism presented by the Gospels, particularly when showing the gulf in ideology between Jesus, and the Pharisees and teachers of the law. In Luke 6:6-11 we find Jesus in the place of Abba Tahnah and this time the accusers are not 'everybody' in the city but the Pharisees and the teachers of the law:

⁶On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shrivelled. ⁷The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. ⁸But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the shrivelled hand, "Get up and stand in front of everyone." So he got up and stood there. ⁹Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?" ¹⁰He looked around at them all, and then said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was completely restored. ¹¹But they were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.

¹⁵⁹ Examples of Jesus healing on the Sabbath can be found in Matt. 12:9-14, Mark 3:1-6, Luke 6:6-11, and John 5:1-18.

¹⁶⁰ Qoheleth Rabbah, 233-234.

Jesus is found asking whether it is better to do good rather than evil on the Sabbath. In the same manner, Abba Tahnah questions himself and allows the “good inclination to master the evil inclination.” The difference arises after the good is committed, and Abba Tahnah still feels troubled by his actions and God intervenes. The image of the uncompassionate Jew is overturned by this story and throws doubt on the one-sided negative portrayal by the Gospel writers.

The use of *mashal* or parables within Midrash and other rabbinic literature is prevalent and the use of parables as a tool for communication was also employed by Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. This is unsurprising considering Jesus’ Jewish heritage and also Luke’s testament of Jesus being found at the Temple among rabbis.¹⁶¹ A striking resemblance to one of Jesus’ more popular parables is found in Qoheleth Rabbah. The parable of the wise and foolish virgins found in Matt. 25:1-13, is one that is told as a warning to be prepared at all times for the second coming of Jesus. In Qoheleth Rabbah is found a variation of this parable:

Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no oil (IX, 8)...R. Judah ha-Nasi said: To what may this be likened? To a king who made a banquet to which he invited guests. He said to them, ‘Go, wash yourselves, brush up your clothes, anoint yourselves with oil, wash your garments, and prepare yourselves for the banquet,’ but he fixed no time when they were to come to it. The wise among them walked about by the entrance of the king’s palace, saying, ‘Does the king’s palace lack anything?’ The foolish among them paid no regard to the king’s command. They said, ‘We will in due course notice when the king’s banquet is to take place, because can there be a banquet without labour [to prepare it] and company?’ So the plasterer went to his plaster, the potter to his clay, the smith to his charcoal, the washer to his laundry. Suddenly the king ordered, ‘Let them all come to the banquet.’ They hurried the guests, so that some came in their splendid attire and others came in their dirty garments. The king was so pleased with the wise ones who had obeyed his command, and also because they had shown honour to the king’s palace. He was angry with the fools who had neglected his command and disgraced his palace. The king said, ‘Let those who have prepared themselves for the banquet come and eat of the king’s meal, but those who have not prepared themselves shall not partake of it.’¹⁶²

As in the parable found in the Gospels, the host of the banquet does not tell his guests the exact time of the festivities but requests their readiness at all times.

¹⁶¹ Luke 2:41-51.

¹⁶² Qoheleth Rabbah, 235-236.

Similarly, the plot allows for a differentiation between the wise and the foolish guests or virgins. The wise are, of course, those who are prepared at all times and the foolish are those who are ill prepared and rather nonchalant about the impending festivities. In Matthew, the parable of the ten virgins is found in the midst of a series of parables and warnings of the end of times, judgement, and the coming of the messiah, and precedes the betrayal of Jesus. In Qoheleth Rabbah, the parable is part of the midrash on Qoh. 9: 8 and appears to have a less distinct message, one associated with “precepts, good deeds, and Torah.”¹⁶³ In the interpretative discourse that follows the *mashal* the message takes on a more sombre note, when further comparisons are made between those who were prepared for the king’s banquet and those who were not. For those who were prepared are invited to “recline and eat and drink” while the others “remain standing, be punished, and look on and be grieved.” In the elaboration of these bodily postures Mal. 3:18 is quoted “Then ye shall sit and discern between the righteous and the wicked.” The message of the *mashal* now becomes one of judgement and the need to be prepared for the world to come. In concluding their interpretation of Qoh. 9:8 the rabbis bring in death, a theme that is well covered by Qoheleth’s musings.

It has been taught: Repent one day before your death. R. Eliezer was asked by his disciples, ‘Rabbi, does any man know when he will die so that he can repent?’ He answered them, ‘Should he not all the more repent to-day lest he die the day after, and then all his days will be lived in repentance. For that reason it is said, **Let thy garments be always white.**’¹⁶⁴

The sentiments of the rabbis appear to be in sharp contrast to that of Qoheleth and his view of life and death. While the rabbis, as shown by the *mashal* and their comments, present a sense of urgency and the need to be prepared for death, Qoheleth sees the futility in such an exercise for “Alas, the wise man dies, just like the fool.”¹⁶⁵ Qoheleth takes a rather fatalistic approach to death and is not clear as to what waits in the after life, or if one even exists. Qoheleth does mention Sheol as the destination for all just a couple of verses on from Qoh. 9:8 but not as a warning to be ready for death but rather as an eventuality and an incentive for how one should live one’s life. God and repentance are not the

¹⁶³ Ibid., 235.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 236-237.

¹⁶⁵ Qoh. 2:16.

lessons to be learnt but rather seeking happiness, making the most out of life is the counsel given by Qoheleth.¹⁶⁶ His thoughts on life, death and the fate of man are interestingly compared to that of animals in Qoh. 3:17-22. Qoheleth's uncertainty regarding an afterlife is clearly voiced in verses 21 and 22:

²¹Who knows if a man's lifebreath does rise upward and if a beast's breath does sink down into the earth? ²²I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his possessions, since that is his portion. For who can enable him to see what will happen afterward?

There is a clear disparity between the fatalistic reflections of Qoheleth and the contrite admonition given by the rabbis to be prepared for the day of death and the subsequent judgement. It appears that by *reading in* the rabbis have rendered Qoheleth theologically safer, more palatable. The rabbis re-working of Qoheleth was set within exegetical parameters that allowed for a relevant, often new, message to be found within scripture, taking full advantage of the democracy of the text. Following the story of the king and his banquet, is found another rabbinic midrash on Qoh. 9:8 that would comfortably fit into the pages of the Gospels:

Bar Kappara and R. Issac b. Kappara said: It may be likened to the wife of a royal courier who adorned herself in the presence of her neighbours. They said to her, 'Your husband is away, so for whom do you adorn yourself?' She answered them, 'My husband is a sailor; and if he should chance to have a little spell of [favourable] wind, he will come quickly and be here standing above my head. So is it not better that he should see me in my glory and not in my ugliness?' Similarly, **Let thy garments be always white** [and unstained] by transgressions; **and let thy head lack no oil:** [let it not lack] precepts and good deeds.¹⁶⁷

Again this story looks familiar to those told by the Gospel writers. Both Mark and Luke tell a parable, told by Jesus to his disciples, concerning a man who goes away and leaves his servants in charge, telling them to keep watch for his return. Mark includes this parable within a chapter pointing to signs regarding the end of time and the return of Christ, the messiah, so giving a prophetic, apocalyptic interpretation to the parable.¹⁶⁸ Luke, though, also gives a prophetic tone to the same parable, inserts it along with Jesus' admonishment regarding the

¹⁶⁶ Qoh. 9:9-10.

¹⁶⁷ Qoheleth Rabbah, 236.

¹⁶⁸ Mark 13: 32-37.

value of human life, the futility of hoarding worldly possessions and the unnecessary need to worry about day to day things.¹⁶⁹

The resemblance of the midrash to the Gospel parable is uncanny but maybe not so remarkable. We cannot assume the Gospel rendition was the first and that such a *mashal* was not already known within Jewish circles. It is known that Qoheleth Rabbah borrows heavily from older Jewish literary sources and therefore it would seem highly unlikely that there would be any reason or need to borrow a parable from a Christian text and particularly one related by Jesus. The need, on the part of the rabbis, to borrow material from a Christian text is clearly unnecessary but the paradoxical and ironical use of such material confers onto the writers a sense of literary power and ascendancy over the Christian text and its claims. The spiritual power struggle is played with words and it leaves a conspicuous mark on both Jewish and Christian literature.

D. Conclusion

Qoheleth Rabbah, a continuation and result of rabbinic midrash tradition, reveals the specific challenges that the text of Qoheleth presented to the rabbis. In rabbinic exegetical tradition, there was no finality to the biblical text for it is always read and from it new meanings were to be found. Therefore in the reading of Qoheleth Rabbah it was important to remain sensitive to the ideological and historical fabric of the text but also to be open to the signs and codes that allow the text to diverge and be modified. Qoheleth Rabbah is a response to the problematic textual structure of Qoheleth, one that compelled the rabbis to react and confront the language and ideas of Qoheleth. The extensive collection of comments and interpretations found in Qoheleth Rabbah concerning many aspects of Rabbinic thought have not all been considered. The focus has rested on overlying themes and ones that reveal the dynamics of the religious and historical context of the Midrash.

The role and position of the rabbis, the authors and compilers of the text was highly significant in the reading of Qoheleth Rabbah. The rabbis were not only the bourgeoisie of Jewish society but also the heirs of divine revelation, through the continuing legacy of the dual Torah. The very nature of their title and role conferred on them distinguishing marks. They may well have been in

¹⁶⁹ Luke 12:1-40.

contact with the masses and did not view themselves as separatists but markers of academic learning, albeit that of a religious bent, but their religious and intellectual power gave them a unique station within Jewish society. Having established their privileged status in Jewish society, it is the rabbis who were the ones who were in the position to create new myths.

Fishbane's suggestion that rabbinic sages worked under a sign of myth is worth considering in the understanding of the Solomonic persona as portrayed in *Qoheleth Rabbah*.¹⁷⁰ Myths are the progeny of a religious system attempting to explain and justify its own beliefs and ideology. They are often the jargon of a sophisticated socio-religious society. To say that myths are the offspring of a religious system, though, is not exactly true. Myths are pre-existent and they create the religious system or society, which then embraces them and perpetuates them further. The cyclical nature of a myth means that it is reintroduced and modified to suit a particular reality. Solomon, the hero of this particular 'myth,' can not be said to be created by the rabbinic authors of *Qoheleth Rabbah* but previously existed in the pages of *Qoheleth*, and before that in narrative and poetic passages of II Samuel, I and II Kings, I and II Chronicles, Nehemiah, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon and Jeremiah. The Solomonic persona of *Qoheleth*, or at least the one alluded to in its text, was clearly a different signifier to the rabbinic Solomon of *Qoheleth Rabbah*. It can be proposed that the 'enemy' of this new Solomon myth is indeed *Qoheleth* the text. The themes of *Qoheleth* are combined with rabbinic ideology to create a new textual signifier that embarks on a mythic struggle with the enemy. Aristotle defines *mythos* as a "mimesis of an action" and it could be said that *Qoheleth Rabbah* is an imitation of rabbinic function and belief. *Qoheleth Rabbah*, therefore, could be perceived not as a lexical signified text (fully signified) but rather a departure from a code, where an implied code is open to reconstitution. What the rabbis achieved through *Qoheleth Rabbah* was to keep the signifying power of *Qoheleth*, the text, open.

The challenge of *Qoheleth* is not only found in its portrayal of its supposed subject, Solomon, but also its message, or lack of a coherent, rabbinical sound message. The genre of *Qoheleth Rabbah*, theological discourse, is not only

¹⁷⁰ Fishbane, 18.

qualified by its systematic examination of each verse of Qoheleth but also the existence of an underlying theme, in this case the Torah. The rabbinic understanding was that the text of Qoheleth, and scripture in general, held new meaning, one relevant to contemporary reality. Further, it was the role of the rabbis to restore, through midrash and other exegetical means, what was considered to be the original meaning and purpose of the text. Therefore, through *derash* the rabbis were able to *read in* to the text, adding meaning and particularising textual generalities to mean and to be understood as the Torah. The apparent discrepancies which arise from *derash* can be understood through the historical process of *Chate'u Yisrael*, textual corruption, where rabbinic *derash* was the process by which the *peshat* of the text was restored. The message of Qoheleth is also brought in line with rabbinic thought through intertextuality, whereby Qoheleth's inclusion into the scriptural canon is preserved and the unity of scripture is presented. The underlying premise remains throughout, that God's message for his people was to be found in the whole Torah, including Qoheleth, and the rabbis, building on earlier tradition, overcame any textual difficulties that Qoheleth presented by reading the linguistic signs of the text as the expressions of God.

Chapter Three

The Targum to Qoheleth

A. Aramaic Targums

The place of Targum within rabbinic exegesis and tradition, where for a long time it had been on the fringe of rabbinic literature, has to some extent confined the study of Targums to the periphery of Judaic literary studies in terms of importance and significance but their value as a unique body of texts within rabbinic Judaism continues to increase among modern scholars.¹

The Targum tradition, where *targum* means both “translation” and “explanation”, originated in light of the redundancy of Hebrew as the dominant language among the Jews.² Hebrew, though, always remained the holy language, the language of revelation, and therefore only Hebrew Scriptures rendered the hands unclean (i.e. are holy), a status that was never bestowed on the Aramaic translations of scripture.³ The tension between the divine Hebrew text and the attempt to convey its meaning through another language is emphatically stated in the Talmudic statement, “He who translates a verse literally is a liar; but he who adds to it is a blasphemer”.⁴ Traditionally, the process of translating the Hebrew text into Aramaic orally is believed to date back to the time of Ezra but evidence for the written Targums is not considered to be found, by some scholars, until the second century CE.⁵ Debate surrounds the dating of the earliest written Targums, increasing after the discoveries last century of Qumran Aramaic MSS and the MS Neophyti.⁶ The oldest Aramaic MSS come from Qumran, where Leviticus Targum, dated to about 100 BCE, and Job Targum, dated to the middle of the

¹ Philip Alexander, “The Targum of the Song of Songs,” in *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in their Historical Context*, eds. D. R. G. Beattie and M.J. McNamara, JSOT Supplement Series 166 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 52. Alexander contends that “traditional rabbinic bias” is reflected among modern rabbinic scholars in their undervaluing of the Targums.

² Paul V. M. Flesher, “The Targums” in *Judaism in Late Antiquity: The Literary and Archaeological Sources*, ed. Jacob Neusner (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 40.

³ The Mishnah *Yadain* 4.5 emphasises that Targumic texts should not be regarded as Holy Scripture.

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, *Kiddushin* 49^a; *Tosephta*, *Megillah* 4(3):41.

⁵ Jacob Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 613.

⁶ Díez Merino, “Targum Manuscripts and Critical Editions,” in *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in their Historical Context*, eds. D. R. G. Beattie and M. J. McNamara, JSOT Supplement Series 166 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 52.

first century CE were discovered.⁷ In support of the early dating of the Targum on Job is also its mention in early rabbinic writings from the first century CE.⁸ In addition, the Cairo Genizah has yielded a number of important Targum manuscripts, including the Palestinian Fragment Targum, targumic *toseftot* and targumic poems, dating between 640 and 1100 CE.⁹

The need for Aramaic versions of the Hebrew Bible came about when Aramaic became the official language of the Persian Empire and soon became widely used throughout the Near East.¹⁰ The Jews had little difficulty in adapting to and accepting Aramaic as their vernacular, since it was a cognate language and much of the vocabulary and grammatical structure was very similar to Hebrew.¹¹ Also, Hebrew was already in decline and many Jews in the Diaspora and in Palestine knew only Greek.¹² Even after the conquering of the Persian Empire by Alexander, Aramaic continued to be spoken, even though Greek was the new official language.¹³ Therefore, there was a real need to translate the Hebrew text of the Bible into the language understood by the majority of Jews and further, it is proposed that an Aramaic translation was also for non-Jews, during this period.¹⁴ During the time of Alexander and the Hellenistic rule of the Levant, which was continued by the Romans, the Greek language, as mentioned, remained the official language of government and bureaucracy but it is widely

⁷ Ibid., 61. There are two fragments of Leviticus Targum (4Q156) and three fragments of Job Targum (4Q157, 11QtgJob), two from Qumran Cave 4 and a roll from Qumran Cave 11. There are also considered to be other Targums from Qumran, which are yet to be identified and published.

⁸ John Bowker, *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 15. cf. B. Shab. 115a: "R. Jose said: 'My father Halafta was once visiting R. Gamaliel Berabbi at Tiberias. He found him sitting with Johanan the excommunicated holding the Targum on Job in his hand and reading it. He said, I remember R. Gamaliel, your grandfather, standing high up on the Temple Mount when the Targum on Job was brought to him...'"

⁹ Michael L. Klein, "Cairo Genizah Targum Texts: Old and New," in *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in their Historical Context*, eds. D. R. G. Beattie and M. J. McNamara, JSOT Supplement Series 166 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 18.

¹⁰ Bowker, 3. The Persian Empire lasted from 539-332 BCE.

¹¹ Martin McNamara, *Targums and Testament: Aramaic Paraphrases of the Hebrew Bible* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1972), 54-62. McNamara succinctly outlines the evolution of Aramaic: *Old Aramaic* (ca. 950-700 BCE), *Official Aramaic* (ca. 700-300 BCE), *Middle Aramaic* (ca. 300 BCE – 200 CE), *Later Aramaic* (ca. 200-700 CE) which includes both *Western Aramaic* (Syro-Palestinian Christian Aramaic, Samaritan Aramaic and Palestinian Jewish Aramaic) and *Eastern Aramaic* (Syriac, Babylonian Jewish talmudic Aramaic and Mandaic).

¹² Bowker, 3.

¹³ Flesher, 41.

¹⁴ Bowker, 4-5. Bowker notes the discussion concerning proselytism and proselytes within Judaism at this time but questions its extent.

accepted that Aramaic remained the language of the general population. Arabic, a cognate Semitic language, replaced Aramaic after the Islamic conquest in the seventh century but this linguistic conquest was not total and universal since some villages in Syria still speak an Aramaic dialect today.¹⁵ Therefore, along with the demise of Aramaic as the main spoken language among the Jews, the need for Aramaic Targums gradually became redundant over time.¹⁶ The tradition, though, was preserved as evidenced by the Targums from the Middle Ages.¹⁷

The sequence in which the books from Hebrew Scripture were translated into Aramaic largely reflects the hierarchical structure within the Tanakh.¹⁸ Thus, the earliest Targums, which are those on the Pentateuch and Prophets, illustrate the primary place of these books within synagogue worship and study.¹⁹ The Pentateuchal Targums are thought to have been composed first and this process is believed to have extended between the second and fourth centuries CE.²⁰ The Palestinian Pentateuchal Targums include Targum Neophyti, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, the Fragmentary Targums, the Targum fragments from the Cairo Genizah, and the targumic *toseftot*. Targum Onqelos is the only Babylonian Pentateuchal Targum.²¹ Though labels have now been assigned to each work, it is difficult to draw clear lines between the compositions. Targums evolved over a long period of time and the very character and nature of their compilation points to a developmental process rather than to distinct texts that can be easily categorised.²²

The Targums to the Prophets are thought to have developed, like the Pentateuchal Targums, over a number of centuries, taking shape between the

¹⁵ Alger F. Johns, *A Short Grammar of Biblical Aramaic* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1966), 2-3.

¹⁶ Wilhelm Bacher, 'Targum,' at www.JewishEncyclopedia.com (2002), passim. From the dicta of two third century Palestinian amoraim (Ber. 8a, 8b), which were significant in authorising the custom of reciting the Targum, Bacher asserts that this practice continued to be observed as a religious duty in later centuries even after Aramaic ceased to be the vernacular of the Jews but "strict observance of the custom ceased in the days of the first geonim".

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, passim.

¹⁸ As mentioned in the discussion regarding the earliest Aramaic Targums, there is evidence that the Job Targum was one of the first written Targums.

¹⁹ Bowker, 15.

²⁰ Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, 613.

²¹ Bowker, 22. It is commonly thought that Targum Onqelos is an official Babylonian version of the Palestinian Targum, reflecting their common literary tradition.

second and fifth centuries CE.²³ Also, like the development of the Targums on the Pentateuch, the Targums to the Prophets were not initially a single Targum but evolved over a process of “targum-interpretation” into an official Targum.²⁴ Targum Jonathan dominates these works and became the official authoritative translation among Babylonian Jewry.²⁵ As with Targum Onqelos, Targum Jonathan had its origins in Palestine but was revised and compiled into its final form in Babylonia.²⁶ Palestinian Jewry used the Palestinian Targum to the Prophets but this soon gave way to Targum Jonathan as the sole prophetic Targum.²⁷

The Targums to the Writings differ from those to the Pentateuch and Prophets in that there is not one single Targum that encompasses all the Writings but instead each book has its own Targum. Only Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel do not have their own Targum since their texts already contained substantial portions in Aramaic.²⁸ The Targums to the Writings vary considerably in the periods in which they were written and it is believed from literary evidence that most of the Targums to the Writings were compiled some time between the sixth and ninth centuries.²⁹ Examination of the literary sources from which the Targums borrowed, namely the Babylonian Talmud and other rabbinic texts have provided valuable dating information.³⁰ Apart from the Babylonian Talmud, the Targums to the Writings also shared material from their corresponding Midrash Rabbah for the Megillot, and were also influenced by older Targums, namely the Palestinian Targums to the Pentateuch and Targum Onqelos.³¹

All the Targums vary in the style of translation, from strict adherence to the Hebrew text to extreme paraphrastic translations. However, the Targums to the Pentateuch and the Targums to the Prophets can be said to be the closest to a true literal translation of the Hebrew text, where any additions are modest and are

²² See Avigdor Shinan, “Midrashic Parallels to Targumic Traditions” in *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, Vol. VIII, No. 2, 185-191, where he observes the midrashic parallels to the targumic tradition on Genesis.

²³ Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, 617.

²⁴ Bowker, 27.

²⁵ Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, 617.

²⁶ Bleddyn J. Roberts, *The Old Testament Text and Versions* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1951), 208.

²⁷ Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, 617.

²⁸ Bowker, 14.

²⁹ Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, 618.

³⁰ Flesher, 50.

introduced inconspicuously into the text, often only discernible by the careful reader.³² There are some exceptions, especially Pseudo-Jonathan, which can be quite expansionary in places, drawing from a number of rabbinic sources and incorporating Jewish exegesis from various periods and summarising earlier interpretations.³³ The expansions in the Targums to the Writings on the other hand are blatant and overt, with no attempt made to try and disguise them. The differences in translation styles between the Targums to the Pentateuch and Prophets and the Targums to the Writings could be explained by the latter's late compilation date and the fact that the Targums to the Writings never became authoritative or enjoyed an official standing within the Targums.³⁴

The purpose of Targum was not only to translate the Hebrew text into Aramaic so that it could be understood by a wider audience, but it was also an exercise in hermeneutics, attempting to make the text more meaningful and allowing interpretation of the text to stand alongside a direct translation of the text. The process of translating the text into Aramaic was intended to be more than just a literal translation but one that would aid in the understanding of Scriptures and provide added meaning to the text.

B. Targum Tradition and Context

The Targum tradition has its oral origins in the synagogue, where it was a means for the immediate translation of Hebrew scripture into Aramaic for the worshipper, the listener, in the regular synagogue worship and can be referred to as "liturgical renderings".³⁵ The order of synagogue services would have meant that the reading of scripture, and its translation into Aramaic, would have followed the *Tephillah*, the Prayer, and preceded the homily.³⁶ The Targums reveal not only the dynamic relationship between text and synagogue and the development in rabbinic exegesis but also, the postulate that Targum was part of

³¹ Roberts, 209-210.

³² Flesher, 40.

³³ Bowker, 26.

³⁴ Etan Levine, *The Aramaic Version of Qohelet* (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, Inc., 1978), 11.

³⁵ McNamara, 36.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 36-54. McNamara outlines in detail the parts of the synagogue service, including the cycle of scripture readings and fixed readings.

oral law that was to be communicated orally.³⁷ The translator, *methurgeman*, used both peshat and derash, combining both the literal meaning and a more interpretative meaning, to expound the meaning and understanding of scripture to his audience.³⁸ The ritual reading of the scripture in the synagogue produced a unique set of rules governing the translation process. In M. Megillah iv. 4 these rules are described:

The reader of the Torah is not to read less than three verses. He is to read to the *methurgeman* not more than one verse at a time, or in a reading of the Prophets not more than three. If the three form three separate sections he reads them one by one.

But it was also the role of the translator to transmit the traditional understanding of the text, as already laid down in the Mishnah.³⁹ The very nature of the targum process or targum-tradition, the reading aloud and translation of the Hebrew text into Aramaic,⁴⁰ encouraged interpretative individuality and so, the eventual rise of written Targums are thought to illustrate the different traditions and ideologies that developed at various points in the process.⁴¹

The origin of the later written Targum, as interpretative translation, is intrinsically tied to the synagogue and to the continuing development of the oral law and tradition.⁴² The transition from oral to written Targum is described by John Bowker:

The *targum* was thus part of the process through which scripture was expounded and taught in synagogue week by week. As the centuries went by, a traditional, though very loose, body of interpretation, a kind of 'targum-tradition', began to form, always extending and developing, but always having its roots in the past. The written targums can best be understood as a sort of cross-section of that process, a point at which the developing tradition has been frozen for a moment and committed to writing.⁴³

³⁷ Ibid., 49. McNamara suggests that Targums were already viewed as a "form of fixed tradition" at this time.

³⁸ Bowker, , 13. The actual process of translation was closely monitored and is described in M.Meg. iv.4.

³⁹ McNamara, 49. Examples of censorship are found in the Mishnah, *Meg.* 4,9 where it is stated how Lev. 18:21 should be translated.

⁴⁰ William S. Vorster, "Readings, Readers, and the Succession Narrative," in *Beyond Form Criticism*, ed. Paul R. House (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 397. Vorster draws attention to the difference between "reading aloud" and "reading" the Hebrew text in Aramaic and states that "something is added to the text, that is the reader's reading of the text, his presentation which is at the same time his reception of the text".

⁴¹ Bowker, xi.

⁴² Ibid., x. Bowker notes that even before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE the synagogue was primarily a place for the reading and exposition of scripture.

⁴³ Ibid., xi.

The evolutionary process of written Targums, when and how the first written translations were used, before becoming 'official' Targums continues to be debated and queried.⁴⁴ The Jerusalem Talmud prohibited the use of written translations during a synagogue service but did not oppose the use of written translations in principle.⁴⁵ The preservation of the sanctity of the Hebrew Bible was paramount, and suspicion surrounded the acceptance of the written Targums and their intended use. As observed in the midrashic process, the authority and position of the sage in the targumic process was also important. Targum was presented as a continuation of the oral tradition, which originated with Moses and the sages were the transmitters and heirs of this tradition.⁴⁶

The evidence regarding the extent and manner in which written Targums were used is not forthcoming. Their place and significance within rabbinic literature continues to be considered, for it is difficult to narrow down and place limits on what should or should not be classed as Targums in the first place. Also, questions remain concerning who was the Targums' target audience and how broad was its reach. From the Mishnah, Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, are found references to the use of Targums in synagogue worship, education in schools, and in private study but it is unclear whether they denote written Targums or to the actual process of translation.⁴⁷ These suggested social contexts of Targums probably apply to varying degrees among Targums, where real public exposure was reserved for only a chosen few Targums.⁴⁸ Torah reading was a central part of synagogue worship and so the need for the Pentateuchal Targum is obvious. Both Targum Neophyti and Targum Onqelos became authoritative, with Targum Onqelos later superseding Targum Neophyti as the official Targum to the Pentateuch. The status conferred on Targum

⁴⁴ McNamara, 82-85.

⁴⁵ *Megillah* 4.1. The Talmudic prohibition was perhaps because the Septuagint (LXX) had virtually become the Bible of many diaspora Jews.

⁴⁶ Michael S. Berger, *Rabbinic Authority* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 84.

⁴⁷ Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, 627. "The Mishnah (M. Meg. 4:4-6) states that in the synagogue worship the weekly readings of the Torah and the *haftarah* should be read in Hebrew and then translated into Aramaic. Later, the Talmud of the Land of Palestine (Y. Meg. 4:1, 74d) forbids the use of written texts in service" but does not prohibit their preparation. The Babylonian Talmud (B. Ber. 8a-b) instructs individuals to study the weekly Scripture portion twice in Hebrew and once in translation.

⁴⁸ S. D. Fraade, "Rabbinic Views on the practice of Targum and Multilingualism in the Jewish Galilee of the Third-Sixth Centuries" in *Studies on the Galilee in Late Antiquity*, ed. L. I. Levine (New York: JTSA, 1992), 253-85. Fraade argues that Targums probably played a greater role in and were designed for schools, rather than the synagogue.

Onqelos is clear from its relatively stable textual tradition, which shows that a *masorah* was devised by the Babylonian sages to ensure accurate copying of the text.⁴⁹ Targum Jonathan, the Targum to the Prophets, shared a similar status to that of Targum Onqelos and became the sole authoritative prophetic Targum. Both were kept under close rabbinic supervision and show evidence of extensive editing and revisions, so that the translations appear to be as faithful to the Hebrew text as possible, testifying to their position and utilisation within Jewish religious life. In contrast, the Targums to the Writings reflect a literary freedom that includes lengthy midrashic and haggadic expansions and paraphrase. The Writings were never an essential part of synagogue worship and so it is understandable that their translations were firstly, not a priority nor were their translations controlled like that of Targum Onqelos.⁵⁰

A notable feature of all the Targums is that, unlike midrashic and talmudic literature, they try and incorporate additions seamlessly.⁵¹ There is no identification of rabbinic authority or acknowledgement of external sources in the text. In Midrash we find interpretations credited to specific individuals and there is no attempt to conceal the identity of the contributor. In the Targums the translation is presented as a reproduction of sacred scripture, where human authority is not the source but rather divine intervention.⁵² The Targums are presented as an axiom and the work's significance, especially in the Targums to the Writings, is such that it appears to alienate the very text that it is supposedly preserving and venerating.

Further, in regards to specific Targum hermeneutics, M. L. Klein identifies and notes three targumic techniques: translational convergence, translational divergence and converse translation.⁵³ Klein defines 'translational convergence' as when a number of Hebrew roots are "made to converge into a single theological instructive root in the Aramaic target language", in order to

⁴⁹ Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, 615.

⁵⁰ Levine, 11.

⁵¹ Flesher, 40. Targum Neophyti of the Pentateuch exemplifies the interweaving of interpretative material with a highly literal translation.

⁵² Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, 627.

⁵³ Michael L. Klein, "The Aramaic Targums: Translation and Interpretation," in *The Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Jože Krašovec (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 321-323.

stress “God’s ubiquitous revelation in the world”.⁵⁴ ‘Translational divergence’ is the reverse of translational convergence, and ‘converse translation’ is when the targum gives an opposite meaning to the *peshat* of the text, in order to render the text safer.⁵⁵ The need to employ these exegetical tools and the motivation of the *methurgemanim* in altering the meaning of the original Hebrew text in the translation process was in response to, as already suggested an already established rabbinic theological tradition and was also a response to the religious needs of the reader/listener.⁵⁶ A. Rofé further notes and identifies examples of a trend in the Targums to replace allegorical and metaphorical language with factual statements.⁵⁷ Questions remain over the genre classification of Targum. The obvious differences between the various Targums make it difficult to impose one label for all, but yet their collective uniqueness is recognised. There is resistance to confine the targumic genre to either translation, midrash or a formal revision of the Hebrew text.⁵⁸

C. Targum Qoheleth

In contrast to the well-documented and researched Targum Onqelos for the Pentateuch and Targum Jonathan for the Prophets, the Targums to the Writings have been largely overlooked. Targum Qoheleth still remains a largely unknown entity in terms of its historical and literary background and origin. The late date generally ascribed to its production is understandable and obvious given its place in the scheme of ascendancy, not only in targumic tradition but rabbinic literature in general. Noticeably, the hierarchy that exists in the books within the

⁵⁴ Ibid., 321. Klein illustrates this technique by showing how the Sinai theophany in Exod. 19:20 is translated.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 321, 323. Klein notes that Targums differ from plain sense of the text mostly “in poetic and prophetic passages that lend themselves to eschatological and messianic interpretations”.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 329.

⁵⁷ Alexander Rofé, “Biblical Antecedents of the Targumic Solution of Metaphors (Ps 89:41-42; Ezek 22:25-28; Gen 49:8-9, 14-15),” in *The Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Jože Krašovec (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 333-338. He notes that origins of the technique of interpreting figurative speech are to be found in Biblical poetry, and further notes that in the oral beginnings of Targum “the metaphor was read in Hebrew, immediately followed by its reference in Aramaic.

⁵⁸ Alexander Samely, *The Interpretation of Speech in the Pentateuch Targums: A Study of Method and Presentation in Targumic Exegesis* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1992), 158. Samely proposes that the use of “Aramaic paraphrase” instead of “translation” would be less open to misunderstanding.

Hebrew Bible generally crossed over into the sequence of their translation and the subsequent composition of the Targums.

As mentioned, while extensive scholarly work has been carried out on the Targums to the Pentateuch and the Targums to the Prophets, the Targums to the Writings have been largely ignored until recently.⁵⁹ Like the other Targums to the Writings, it is impossible to fix an exact date and location to Targum Qoheleth but it is generally accepted to have been composed in the eastern Mediterranean region between the sixth and ninth centuries.⁶⁰ There is evidence that Targum Qoheleth was used by the *Pesiqta Rabbati*⁶¹ in the ninth century and the *Sheiltot*⁶² in the eighth century and so it was probably compiled by then.⁶³ Targum tradition perpetuates this uncertainty in that the very nature of its literature is one that is revised, altered, amended and evolves and is compiled over a lengthy period of time. Targum Qoheleth and the other Targums to the Writings are considered the most midrashic in the literary genre of the Targums.⁶⁴

The issue regarding the audience and the place of Targum Qoheleth within rabbinic tradition is an intriguing one. The avant-garde nature of Qoheleth has meant that it has always remained on the fringe of rabbinic literature and any attention given to the book was an attempt to sequester and defuse the provocative content of the book from the reader or listener. Traditionally, Qoheleth has been read during Succoth but there is no evidence that Targum Qoheleth was ever used during festivals, like Succoth, or was ever a part of the synagogue liturgy.⁶⁵ But this does not mean that the synagogue can be discounted as the forum in which Targum Qoheleth was utilised. In late

⁵⁹ Some of the more recent works include, M. Taradach and J. Ferner, *Un Targum Qoheleth: Ms. M-2 de Salamanca. Editio princeps: Texte arameen, traduction et commentaire critique*. *Le monde de la Bible* 37 (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1998). R.B. Salters, *Observations on the Targum to Qoheleth*, *JNWSL* 23 (1998), 12-24.

⁶⁰ Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, 618. From the linguistic evidence, Neusner dates the Targums to the Writings to during the seventh century or later. Levine fixes the *terminus a quo* as 500 CE and the *terminus ad quem* at 1101 CE of Targum Qoheleth.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 434-463. *Pesiqta Rabbati* is an example of rabbinic philosophical discourse, where propositional compositions are arranged topically rather than exegetically.

⁶² "Aha (Ahai) of Shabha" in www.jewishencyclopedia.com (2002). Aha of Shaba was an eighth century Babylonian Talmudist who wrote his treatise, *Sheiltot* (questions), most probably in Palestine. It was written for contemplative laymen and was based upon biblical and rabbinical precepts, with an emphasis on moral duties, and ordered according to the weekly readings from the Law, the *parashot*.

⁶³ Levine, 68.

⁶⁴ Roberts, 210.

antiquity, the period of Targum Qoheleth's compilation, rabbinic tradition was conveyed by both written and oral means. The importance of the oral tradition was upheld and continued through preaching, study and debate in schools and synagogues.⁶⁶ The synagogue remained the primary venue for the reading and study of the Torah. Therefore the audience of the Targum Qoheleth would most probably have been the participants in the exposition of scripture in both the synagogue and schools, making Targum Qoheleth more of an exercise, effectively a genre for homiletic midrash, where the biblical text and rabbinic theology were not separated.⁶⁷ The late date for the compilation of Targum Qoheleth also suggests that the need for the translation was less liturgical and more an ongoing endeavour at bringing Qoheleth into line with rabbinic teaching, thus making it more an exercise in literary eisegesis than a translation for the masses.

Targum Qoheleth is similar to Qoheleth Rabbah, in that the same rabbinic hermeneutical principles apply. Both peshat and derash are employed but derash is not presented as an additional interpretation but incorporated into the text in the same way as the plain or literal meaning. Expansive paraphrase, allegorisation and eisegesis further prompt the text, responding to the specific challenges of Qoheleth and reading into the text a theology acceptable to and in accordance with rabbinic tradition. As will be observed, there is a concerted attempt on the part of the targumists to fuse rabbinic and biblical theology into a single text in a manner that overwrites the Hebrew text of Qoheleth to create a new text; Targum Qoheleth.

The hermeneutical challenges that Qoheleth offered to Targumic theology include a number of issues, namely the implied Solomonic persona, lack of prophetic implications, injustice and questions regarding the existence of an after life, and the absence of the centrality of the Torah in the message. It is how and why the Targum addresses these issues through its reception of Qoheleth and how two different theologies intersect that will be considered in the reading of

⁶⁵ Levine, 70.

⁶⁶ Alexander, "The Targum of the Song of Songs", 322. Alexander notes that the use of written and oral means complicates the identification of sources of the Targum.

⁶⁷ Bowker, 49. The *bet sefer* was the elementary school where knowledge of written Torah was acquired and *bet haMidrash* was the advanced school, where traditional exegesis and interpretation was studied.

Targum Qoheleth. Qoheleth undergoes a paradigm shift and Solomon is once again the focal point and the axis around which these other themes revolve.

1. Solomon: Author and Prophet

Targum Qoheleth is open and candid in its portrayal of Solomon as both author and prophet. The opening words of the book set the prophetic tone that remains on the surface throughout the Targum. Clearly, the portrayal of Qoheleth as a prophet is an important element in the theological message of the Targum, for the very first two verses of Chapter 1 introduce Qoheleth both as Solomon the King of Israel and as one who speaks words of prophecy:

*Hebrew Text*⁶⁸

¹The words of Koheleth son of David, king of Jerusalem. ²Utter futility!-said Koheleth-Utter futility! All is futile!

*Targum Qoheleth*⁶⁹

¹The words of prophecy which Qoheleth, that is, the son of David the King who was in Jerusalem, prophesied. ²When Solomon the King of Israel foresaw, by the spirit of prophecy⁷⁰ that the kingdom of Rehoboam his son would be divided with Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that Jerusalem and the holy temple would be destroyed, and that the people of Israel would be exiled, he said by the divine word, "Vanity of vanities is this world! Vanity of vanities is all which I and my father David strived for. All of it is vanity".

In its attempt to portray Solomon as a prophet the Targum expands the plain meaning of the Hebrew text, providing an interpretative translation, and so dramatically altering the wording of the original text but still judiciously retaining the surface meaning of the text. The obvious absence of any mention of prophecy or the presence of any prophetic undertone in the Hebrew text of Qoheleth makes the Targum all the more overt in its presentation of a prophetic Solomon.

Assigning Solomon prophetic attributes is not a targumic creation but is one that can be traced back to earlier rabbinic writings from which it draws.⁷¹ In the Babylonian Talmud Sotah 48B, Solomon is grouped along with David and

⁶⁸ All Hebrew translations are from the *Tanakh. A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

⁶⁹ All translations of Targum Qoheleth are from Etan Levine, *The Aramaic Version of Qohelet* (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, Inc., 1978).

⁷⁰ Peter S. Knobel, "The Targum of Qoheleth," in *The Aramaic Bible. Vol. 15, The Targum of Job, the Targum of Proverbs and the Targum of Qohelet*, eds. Celia Mangan, John F. Healey and Peter S. Knobel (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clarke, 1991), 20. Knobel translates the Aramaic text as "holy spirit" and not "spirit of prophecy".

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

Samuel as one of the former prophets. The Targum to I Kings continues this tradition and states in VI, 3 that:

He (Solomon) prophesied concerning the kings of the House of David who were destined to rule in the world, and in the world-to-come of the Messiah.⁷²

Though the literary tradition of the prophetic Solomon is not a new one, the frequency with which it appears in Targum Qoheleth is notable and appears to be an attempt to deal with the problematic nature of Qoheleth's alias, Solomon, who seems to lack a clear identity and religious role within the Hebrew text of Qoheleth. Initially Qoheleth presents himself as a king, strongly identifying himself with Solomon, but the remainder of the work presents Qoheleth, the sage.⁷³ Qoheleth's inconsistent self-portrayal is problematic in itself and in his subsequent message, and therefore, it can be suggested that the rabbinic association of Qoheleth as Solomon with a prophetic role attempted to address this problem by defusing the text and imposing a more defined and authoritative role on Qoheleth.

Bestowing such prophetic qualities upon Qoheleth may appear less forced if the pedestrian understanding of a prophet as a kind of holy fortune-teller is not accepted. A. Graeme Auld and Robert P. Carroll have proposed that the Hebrew prophets were poets who through later community acceptance and individual redactional activity were elevated to the position of prophets.⁷⁴

The canonical reading of a text is very much a process of narrowing down meaning until it is limited to the redactors' intention and ideology. The original poets were free spirits, poets of the imagination, denouncing the social structures of their own time, but through redactional transformation have become conventional 'prophets', a fixed form of institutional activity, and thereby made to serve purposes which they themselves might well have despised (even denounced on occasion)! Such a process deprives them of much of their force because it serves ends other than their own.⁷⁵

⁷² The Targum to the Song of Songs (1:1, 17; 7:2; 8:5, 13) makes similar statements regarding Solomon as a prophet. Cf. a new translation of the Targum of Song of Songs by Philip S Alexander, *The Aramaic Bible*. Vol. 17A, *The Targum Canticles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003).

⁷³ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Sage, Priest, Prophet: Religious and Intellectual Leadership in Ancient Israel* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 58.

⁷⁴ See the articles by A Graeme Auld and Robert P. Carroll in Philip R. Davies, ed., *The Prophets: A Sheffield Reader*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996). "Prophets through the Looking Glass: Between Writings and Moses," 22-42, and "Poets not Prophets: A Response to 'Prophets through the Looking Glass'," 43-49.

⁷⁵ Robert P. Carroll, "Poets not Prophets," in *The Prophets: A Sheffield Reader* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 47.

Though in Targum Qoheleth the canonisation of Qoheleth is not dealt with directly, the proposed “poets not prophets” hypothesis helps in understanding the possible process that Qoheleth underwent and the subsequent acceptance of Solomon as a prophet. Qoheleth, the original free spirited poet, has been transformed by the rabbinic community through written texts, namely Midrash and Targum, to fit conventional praxis and an ideology that was in line with the rabbinic thought and practice. Qoheleth’s paradoxical and figurative language, one that questioned the accepted norms and social realities, appears to have been restrained by a process of affirmation and transformation on the part of the rabbinic community. Even after being accepted into the canon Qoheleth remained problematic and a process of censorship continued, initiated by the biblical redactors, continued by the early translators and prolonged by later rabbinic literature.⁷⁶ In their attempt to suppress the volatile message of Qoheleth by free paraphrase and derash, the rabbis have unknowingly created more gaps within the text of Qoheleth, leaving the reader open to the pre-existing textual indicators; in this case Qoheleth, as Solomon, is the free thinker beneath the conventional prophet.

2. Prophecy

The prophetic language found in Targum Qoheleth forms part of a rabbinic literary tradition concerning the character of Solomon. The Targum describes Solomon as a prophet⁷⁷ who speaks words of prophecy⁷⁸ by means of the spirit of prophecy⁷⁹ and the holy spirit.⁸⁰ The frequency with which these prophetic terms appear is conspicuous when it is recalled that there is no direct mention of prophecy or any allusions of a prophetic nature found within the text of Qoheleth.

The portrayal of Solomon as a prophet in Targum Qoheleth and its place within a rabbinic literary tradition was introduced in the previous section. The manner in which the term the ‘spirit of prophecy’ is employed in the Targum creates a further dimension to this prophetic Solomon, for it modifies and elaborates what was originally Qoheleth’s own reflections and creates a new

⁷⁶ Levine, 66.

⁷⁷ Targum Qoheleth 1:1; 4:15.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 1:1.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 1:4; 3:11, 14; 4:15; 9:7, 10.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 1:2; 2:13; 8:12, 14 and Knobel, 5.

message for the Solomon of the Targum by means of the spirit of prophecy and the holy spirit. This modification is noted in the Targum to Qoh. 4.15, where Solomon now sees the future of his kingdom and the fate of his son:

Hebrew Text

I reflected about all the living who walk under the sun with that youthful successor who steps into his place.

Targum Qoheleth

King Solomon said, By the **spirit of prophecy** from the Lord, I **foresaw** all the living who would act in their folly rebel against Rehoboam, my son, under heaven, and would divide his kingdom, to give it to Jeroboam, son of Nebat, except the tribes of Benjamin and Judah, whose heart was loyal to the boy, that is, Rehoboam my son, who, second in my kingdom, is to rise and reign in Jerusalem, the place of his inheritance.

Examples of Solomon foretelling the future, in particular to the fate of Israel, by the ‘spirit of prophecy’ are found on other occasions in the Targum. In the Targum to Qoh. 3.11 and 10.7, the doom that awaits Israel is seen by Solomon by the spirit of prophecy, whereas the same verses in the Hebrew text of Qoheleth make no reference to such matters but speak instead of God’s omnipotence, the virtue of wisdom and injustice, and most notably, without any divine guidance or inspiration. At times, the additions to the text add to and complement the sentiments of Qoheleth’s words without drastically altering their flow, and here in the Targum to Qoh. 10.7 Solomon addresses contemporary issues like Qoheleth:

Hebrew Text

I have seen slaves on horseback, and nobles walking on the ground like slaves.

Targum Qoheleth

King Solomon said by the **spirit of prophecy**, “I saw nations who were before subject to the people of the house of Israel, now prosperous, and riding on horses like princes, while the people of the house of Israel and their nobles walk on the ground like slaves.”

In allowing Solomon to observe the same as Qoheleth, the Targum attempts to retain the surface meaning of the text and also to particularise the text historically. But it is interesting to note that not only is Solomon made a prophet but much of what he says is also made to be *predictive*. This removes Qoheleth’s sharp critique of *present* life and in so doing the irony of his thoughts is removed entirely. In the Targum to Qoh. 10.9 Solomon is described as a prophet and he once again *predicts* the calamities that will befall Israel:

Hebrew Text

He who quarries stones will be hurt by them; he who splits wood will be harmed by it.

Targum Qoheleth

King Solomon the **prophet** said, "It is revealed to me that Manasseh, the son of Hezekiah, will sin and worship idols of stone. So he will be delivered into the hand of the King of Assyria, and he will fasten him with halters. For he made void the words of the law which are written on the tables of stone originally. He will suffer for it. And Rabshakeh, his brother, will worship an image of wood and forsake the words of the Law kept in the ark of shittim wood. So he shall be burned in a fire by the angel of the Lord."

Other passages that ascribe to Solomon the spirit of prophecy do not show Solomon predicting the future but rather speaking of the present and confronting the existing social and religious climate. By the spirit of prophecy Solomon addresses issues that concern righteous/wicked, good/evil, the Law, wisdom, and Israel's future. In the Targum to Qoh. 2:13 the spirit of prophecy/holy spirit⁸¹ is needed for Solomon to acknowledge the seemingly obvious:

Hebrew Text

I found that wisdom is superior to folly as light is superior to darkness.

Targum Qoheleth

And I saw by the **spirit of prophecy** that there is an advantage to wisdom over folly, more than the advantage of the light of the day over the darkness of night.

It is peculiar that Solomon now needs the spirit of prophecy/holy spirit to see the benefits of wisdom, when he was able to see this by himself in the Hebrew text of Qoheleth. In early rabbinic thought, wisdom was usually identified with Torah and the identification of Qoheleth with prophecy in this connection may reflect a wider need, on the part of the targumist, to eschatologise the text but still attempting to retain the *peshat* of the text.⁸² To distinguish between the righteous and the wicked is a virtue that the Targum is keen to identify with and maybe to emphasise the earnestness and importance of the task the spirit of prophecy is once again brought into a role, previously not required. The Targum to Qoh. 1:4 reads:

Hebrew Text

⁸¹ Knobel, 26. Knobel translates the Aramaic text as 'holy spirit' rather than 'spirit of prophecy'.

⁸² Roy A. Stewart, *Rabbinic Theology* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1961), 35.

One generation goes, another comes, but the earth remains the same forever.

Targum Qoheleth

King Solomon declared by the **spirit of prophecy**, The good generation of the righteous departs from the world because the sins of the wicked generation that is to follow them, but the earth abides for ever, to reserve the punishment which is to come upon the world, on account of the sins of the children of men.

The targumist's need to clarify and particularise the general and apparently ambiguous references in Qoheleth to the nature of people and judgement, is a conscious and deliberate one. In the Targum to Qoh. 9.7 the expansions and additions by the targumist go far in placing the righteous in a suitable position and again, the text is eschatologised:

Hebrew Text

Go, eat your bread in gladness, and drink your wine in joy; for your action was long ago approved by God.

Targum Qoheleth

Solomon said, by the **spirit of prophecy** from the Lord, The Lord of the world will say to all the righteous in their face, go eat with joy the bread which has been laid up for you, for the bread which you have given to the poor and needy that were hungry. And drink with a good heart the wine which has been reserved for you in paradise; for the wine which you poured to the poor and needy that were thirsty.

The verses preceding this verse are Qoheleth at his most fatalistic and pessimistic. He notes that the same fate is in store for all, the righteous and the wicked, but then continues by pointing out the advantages of being alive to being dead. When Qoheleth abbreviates his thoughts into "Go, eat your bread in gladness, and drink your wine in joy; for your action was long ago approved by God," the object of this counsel remains vague. The Targum in contrast is direct and clears up any doubt as to whom the Lord's favour will be shown. The spirit of prophecy only adds to the strength of the message and allows Solomon to see into the after-life and the rewards that await the righteous. The keeping of the Law is clearly a distinguishing mark of a righteous person and the Targum again emphasises that it is the spirit of prophecy that empowers Solomon to see this truth. In an obvious rewriting of the text the Targum modifies Qoheleth's realisation in Qoh. 3.12 concerning the joys of man. Where Qoheleth speaks of man in general and not specifically the righteous, the Targum alters the appeal of this sentiment by inserting added meaning to the text, to one that completely

changes the tone of the verse, and renders a text that is hardly recognisable as a translation at all:

Hebrew Text

Thus I realized that the only worthwhile thing there is for them is to enjoy themselves and do what is good in their lifetime.

Targum Qoheleth

King Solomon said by the **spirit of prophecy**, I know that there is nothing good for the children of men, but that they rejoice in the joy of the Law, and do good in the days of their life.

The children of men now find satisfaction in the Law and not in personal enjoyment, and Solomon again gains this virtuous insight by the spirit of prophecy. The use of the term “spirit of prophecy” is intriguing, for it is not used in the Hebrew Bible. The expressions “spirit of the Lord” and “spirit of God” are used on numerous occasions in the Tanakh but “spirit of prophecy” is absent.⁸³ The frequent use of the term ‘spirit of prophecy’ in Targum Qoheleth indicates a development of the term in earlier rabbinic literature. In classical Judaism the term “Holy Spirit”, *Ruah Hakodesh*, is used to refer to the Spirit of Prophecy and is, of course, linked to the activity of prophets, and its action was believed to have ended when the role of the prophets ceased.⁸⁴ In the context of rabbinic theology the term Holy Spirit is used to denote another manifestation of God and R. A. Stewart states that:

The Rabbinic Holy Spirit is simply the gift of prophecy or divination, regarded as deriving from God. According to one authority, this disappeared in large measure with the last of the canonical prophets, but was replaced by the Bath-Qol, or voice from Heaven – which is also a manifestation of God.⁸⁵

Stewart further states that the rabbinic Holy Spirit bears no relation to, and holds far less significance than, its Christian counterpart,⁸⁶ and also its chief prophetic characteristic is used in a fluid manner.⁸⁷ It is therefore interesting the manner in which it is used in Targum Qoheleth, in a way that bestows authority and

⁸³ Examples of where the term “spirit of God” is used are Gen. 41:38, Num. 24:1 and Job 27:3. A few places where the “spirit of the Lord” is used are Jdg. 3:7, Sam. 9:27 and 1 Kgs 18:12.

⁸⁴ Daniel Patte, *Early Jewish Hermeneutic in Palestine* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), 119.

⁸⁵ Stewart, 42. The “authority” which Stewart refers to is Song of Solomon Rabbah VIII.9, 3.

⁸⁶ In the New Testament the expression “spirit of prophecy” is used only once in Revelation 19:1.

credence to Solomon and to the rewriting of the text of Qoheleth by the rabbis that were to be read as the words of Solomon.

3. World to Come: One versus Two

Eschatological and apocalyptic are not terms that are often associated with the popular view of the literary style and message of Qoheleth. One of the few scholars that has considered this aspect of Qoheleth is A. A. Fischer in his paper "Kohelet und die frühe Apokalyptik: Eine Auslegung von Koh 3, 16-21",⁸⁸ in which he first examines the arguments surrounding the dating of the book and depending on a given pre- or post-exilic date, whether Qoheleth can be viewed as an apocalyptic book.

Great caution is required when using such terms as eschatological and apocalyptic in the context of the Hebrew Bible. Both terms are loaded with Christian hermeneutical and theological connotations. Gerhard von Rad questions the narrow definition of eschatology and in turn apocalyptic literature and its problematic application to the Hebrew Bible.⁸⁹ He cautions that before such terms are used an understanding of Israel's concept of time is to be explored. The inseparable link between time and events is a fundamental premise.⁹⁰ Qoheleth himself testifies to this assumption when in 3:1-8 he gives his eloquent speech that "A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven." Time was not viewed as an abstract entity devoid of circumstance but one that had a natural order and rhythm. Sabbaths, festivals, mourning, and fasting all fed the cyclical nature of time as portrayed in the Hebrew Bible. Qoheleth refers repeatedly to the cyclical and dynamic character of time and in 1:4-7 he points out its many facets:

⁴One generation goes, another comes, but the earth remains forever.

⁵The sun rises, and the sun sets and glides back to where it rises.

⁶Southward blowing, turning northward, ever turning blows the wind; on its rounds the wind returns. ⁷All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full; to the place from which they flow the streams flow back again.

⁸⁷ Stewart, 42-43. Stewart cites Pes. 87^b as an example of the term's fluidity, where its prophetic attribute is associated with Shekinah, "the outward manifestation of God Himself, endowed with something of His power".

⁸⁸ A. A. Fischer, "Kohelet und die frühe Apokalyptik: Eine Auslegung von Koh 3, 16-21." Paper in "Qoheleth in the Context of Wisdom" ed. A. Schoors. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 339-356.

⁸⁹ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*. Vol. II (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965), 114.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.

The natural world order and man are integrally linked together in time and space, and seem to provide some sort of balance and equilibrium to an otherwise disordered and inexplicable world that Qoheleth appears to inhabit. It is therefore of interest how a term like eschatology, dealing with the end of this world's time, fits into this understanding of time and space in the context of Qoheleth and in particular Targum Qoheleth.

Qoheleth is noticeably free of eschatological language. The only occurrences that could allude to the end times are the references to judgement in Qoh. 11:9 and 12:14 where a warning is given that God will call each person to account but when this judgement will take place is not stated. These references are in fact generally recognised as secondary. No reference is made to a specific time or event and no mention of God bestowing judgement at the end of this world's time but rather the text seems to suggest an on going process with no beginning and no end; cyclical in nature and in real time. Indeed, earlier in Qoh. 8:11-12, Qoheleth questions God's logic behind what appears to be a postponed judgement on the evil:

And here is another frustration: ¹¹the fact that the sentence imposed for evil deeds is not executed swiftly, which is why men are emboldened to do evil – ¹²the fact that a sinner may do evil a hundred times and his punishment still be delayed...

When or where, earthly or heavenly, the punishment of the wicked and the reward for the righteous will take place is left open for speculation. No mention is made of heaven or hell or any cataclysmic event when judgement will be pronounced and all will be revealed. For Qoheleth is silent on this issue and is not vocal about any belief in the existence of an after-life, a world to come or aware of anything that follows this present world/life. This uncertainty of what happens next (if anything) is pondered in Qoh. 3:17-22 where the fate of man and beast are compared and Qoheleth concludes that:

²⁰Both go to the same place; both came from dust and both return to dust. ²¹Who knows if a man's lifebreath does rise upward and if a beast's breath does sink to down into the earth?

In contrast to Qoheleth, Targum Qoheleth has strong eschatological overtones. In Qoheleth, the language of fate and judgement overlap and they are more often alluded to than spoken of directly. Targum Qoheleth on the other hand, refers to judgement frequently, specifically and as a keyword within a

phrase. Other indicators within Targum Qoheleth suggest an introduction or an augmentation of an eschatological hermeneutic. The primary indicator of this orientation is the liberal uses of the phrase “the world to come”. The absence of this eschatological formula in Qoheleth is conspicuous, making its appearance in the Targum Qoheleth all the more intriguing and contradictory. The absence of “the world to come” is indeed obvious in the rest of the Hebrew Bible.⁹¹

This belief in the world to come, along with subjects of death, life-after-death, and resurrection as approached by Judaism in Late Antiquity, is discussed extensively in a collection of essays edited by A.J. Avery-Peck and J Neusner.⁹² Though Targum Qoheleth is not dealt with directly, it is interesting to note the development of the concept of after-life within rabbinic literature and Targums in particular. When Targum Pseudo-Jonathan is compared to earlier versions of the Palestinian Targum, it is shown that the former presents a particular concept of the end of time and the events surrounding that time; one where resurrection takes place in this world during the final judgement instead of later on in the world to come.⁹³ The developmental process and interest in the world to come within rabbinic literature is vague and it is difficult to chart a clear evolution of the concept.

The significance of the world to come within Targum Qoheleth reveals its importance in targumic theology and the subsequent need to integrate it into the original text of Qoheleth. How the concept of the world to come is introduced and developed within Targum Qoheleth is what is of interest here and the significance that it adds to the text. It further embellishes the doomsday feel of the Targum and in turn enhances its eschatological flavour, where Qoheleth’s one world is turned into two.

⁹¹ Only in the Psalms do we find an extremely loose connection to the eschatological sense that is provided by the references to judgement and the world to come. In Ps. 96:13 we find the words ‘judgement’ and ‘world’ strung together, with the emphasis placed solely on God’s role in the whole judgement process: “He will judge the world with righteousness”. Similar constructs are found in Ps. 9:8 and 98:9.

⁹² Alan J. Avery-Peck and Jacob Neusner, eds. *Judaism in Late Antiquity: Part 4: Death, Life-after-Death, Resurrection and the World-to-Come in the Judaisms of Antiquity*. Handbuch der Orientalistik, Erste Abteilung: Der Nahe und Mittlere Osten # 49, (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

⁹³ See Leonard V. Rutgers, “Death and Afterlife: The Inscriptional Evidence,” in *Judaism in Late Antiquity: Part 4: Death, Life-after-Death, Resurrection and the World-to-Come in the Judaisms of Antiquity*. Handbuch der Orientalistik, Erste Abteilung: Der Nahe und Mittlere Osten # 49, (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

The, at times, nebulous nature of the world to come in Targum Qoheleth raises questions regarding the underlying views and beliefs concerning death, judgement and the after-life as held by the targumists, and whether they themselves shared common definitions of this world to come. In the Targum to Qoh. 6:9 the world to come is described as a place where both the good and the evil were destined to go but the reward or punishment they would receive distinguished between them and the preceding anticipation of their fate:

Hebrew Text

Is the feasting of the eyes more important than the pursuit of desire?
That, too, is futility and pursuit of wind.

Targum Qoheleth

It is better for a man to rejoice about the world to come, and to do righteousness, and to see a good reward for his labors in the days of great judgement, than to go into that world with an afflicted soul.

There appears to be little, if any, relation between the original Hebrew text and the Targum. What the Targum seems to be doing is responding to Qoheleth's rhetorical question or even deliberately contradicting his doubts. In answering Qoheleth's question the Targum obliterates and silences text. The dual nature of the world to come is clearly shown in the Targum to Qoh. 7:15:

Hebrew Text

In my own brief span of life, I have seen both these things;
sometimes a good man perishes in spite of his goodness, and
sometimes a wicked one endures in spite of his wickedness.

Targum Qoheleth

For there is a righteous man perishing in his righteousness in this world, and his merit is kept for him in the world to come. And there is a wicked man who prolongs his days in his guilt, and the account of his evil doings is kept for him for the world to come, to be requited for it in the day of great judgement.

The positive side of the world to come is clearly the preferred image that the Targum wishes to portray. The image is of a world that is waiting to reap its rewards on those that have lived a righteous life and kept God's law. The principle of cause and effect is encountered in the first mention of the world to come in the Targum to Qoh. 1:3:

Hebrew Text

What real value is there for a man in all the gains he makes beneath the sun?

Targum Qoheleth

What value is there to a man, after his death, from all his labor which he labored under the sun in this world, other than if he studied the

word of God, to receive a good reward in the world to come before the Lord of the world?

Here it is clearly suggested that those who study the word of God, the Torah, will receive a good reward in the world to come. This belief in the faithful and good being rewarded in the world to come arises frequently throughout the Targum. The reward can be received for a number of worthy virtues including; study of the word of God (1:3), finding joy in the law (2:10), good works (2:11), labours (4:9), by keeping the commandments (8:5), and doing charitable works (10:19-20, 11:1-2). These qualifications mentioned are in close accordance with rabbinic theology, where those virtues related to the study of the Torah and those of a more ethical nature, like charitable works, were required to secure immortality and bestow eligibility for Paradise.⁹⁴ The nature of this Paradise evoked two contrasting views within rabbinic thought:

According to the first or stricter view, the things which men particularly enjoy in the flesh have no place or significance in the world to come. In that higher life there will be no eating, drinking, or propagating, and all the baser human emotions will be entirely eliminated.⁹⁵ Also to be found is the opposite opinion, namely, that Paradise is a place of heavenly banqueting, with table delights far surpassing those of earth.⁹⁶

There are few specific references to paradise in Targum Qoheleth, most being implied in the context of the world to come, but they appear to favour the latter rabbinic idea of paradise and place the targumist's theology in the more carnal view of paradise. The Targum to Qoh. 9:7 in the context of a preceding text concerning the world to come reflects this notion:

Hebrew Text

Go, eat your bread in gladness, and drink your wine in joy; for your action was long ago approved by God.

Targum Qoheleth

Solomon said, by the spirit of prophecy from the Lord, The Lord of the world will say to all the righteous in their face, go eat with joy the bread which has been laid up for you, for the bread which you have given to the poor and needy that were hungry. And drink with a good heart the wine which has been reserved for you in paradise, for the wine which you poured to the poor and needy that were thirsty.

⁹⁴ R. A. Stewart, 149. Also, in order to secure immortality a person must normally be a Jew (146).

⁹⁵ Ber. 17a. Cf. Gen. R. XLVIII.14. Cf. Mt. XXII.30.

⁹⁶ Stewart, 161. The more carnal view of Paradise is found in Esther Rabbah II.4, 5. Cf. Ruth Rabbah v.6.

Targum Qoheleth is representative of a rabbinic tradition where certain virtues are required to obtain a reward in the world to come and these virtues are transformed into pleasures and rewards in paradise. The fate of those who fail to live by these virtuous requirements and so attain paradise is made clear by the Targum to Qoh. 1:15:

Hebrew Text

A twisted thing cannot be made straight, a lack that cannot be made good.

Targum Qoheleth

A man whose ways are perverted in this world and who therefore dies, and who does not repent, has no power to be exonerated after his death. And whoever departs from the law and the precepts during his life, has no power to be numbered with the righteous in paradise after his death.

The Targum's legalistic approach to serving God, in the hope and desire of a good reward in the world to come, appears to be in direct response to the challenge of Qoheleth, who anguishes over and sees only the futility in the pursuit of such pious objectives. For he realises that the same fate awaits everyone, whether wise or foolish⁹⁷ or righteous or wicked⁹⁸ and so his conclusion in the Hebrew text, Qoh. 3:22 is fitting after such observations:

I saw that there is nothing better for man than to enjoy his possessions, since that is his portion. For who can enable him to see what will happen afterwards?

What Qoheleth was unable to see, the Targum appears to be able to see all too well. Qoheleth could not or did not want to see beyond his present existence but the targumists' views extended much further beyond the confines of this world, to the world to come. The resignation of Qoheleth to a life of pleasure of the senses is overturned by the Targum by its introduction of textual indicators that are in accordance with the targumists' own theology and belief system. The concept of the world to come, as portrayed by the Targum, defines and views two worlds, as opposed to Qoheleth's one world. There are, though, some grey areas within the Targum as to the actual function and purpose of the world to come. It has been shown that good rewards are received by the righteous and the wicked also receive their dues in the world to come but there remain some questions over the dual nature of this world in the Targum to Qoh. 8:12-13:

⁹⁷ Qoh. 2:13-16.

⁹⁸ Qoh. 3:17.

Hebrew Text

For although I am aware that “It will be well with those who revere god since they revere Him, and it will not be well with the scoundrel, and he will not live long, because he does not revere God”.

Targum Qoheleth

And I know that it will be well in the world to come with those that fear the Lord, that fear before him, and do his will; and that it shall not be well with the wicked, and there shall be no space for him in the world to come; and in this world the days of his life shall be cut off.

In both the Hebrew text and the Targum the wicked are noted by their short lives but in the Targum the prospect of judgement is also implied. In the Targum to Qoh. 6:9 it was shown that one can enter into the world to come with an “afflicted soul” but to receive a good reward one must be righteous. Also, in the Targum to Qoh. 7:15 we noted that there is something kept for the wicked man in the world to come. But in the Targum to Qoh. 8:12-13 it is implied that there is no space for the wicked in the world to come and that it will be in this world that they will complete his final days and be judged. The proceeding Targum to Qoh. 8: 14 raises further issues:

Hebrew Text

Here is a frustration that occurs in the world: sometimes an upright man is requited according to the conduct of the scoundrel; and sometimes the scoundrel is requited according to the conduct of the upright. I say that all is frustration.

Targum Qoheleth

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 the sinners in this world is not for their merits, but to render them a reward for their small merit they have acquired, that they may eat their reward in this world, and to destroy their portion in the world to come.

This explanation by the Targum, in response to Qoheleth’s frustration as to why an upright man receives the treatment of a wicked man and in turn why a wicked man receives the rewards that should justly go to the righteous, is an apologetic that is a useful and important attempt to accommodate Qoheleth’s problem. It is further important to note that once again Qoheleth’s individual perception is replaced by the Holy Spirit, a further rewriting of the text. The accommodation, on the part of the Targum, requires further elaboration of the nature of the world to come and its role in judgement. It appears that the righteous are further

perfected by enduring the consequences of evil in the world and the wicked are compensated for their non-reward in the world to come by being rewarded a little in this world. This provides an alternative explanation of the phenomenon of why it often appears that the wicked prosper more than the good. The belief in an after life is clearly held by the targumists but there are some contentions over the exact dynamics of the inter-play between life, death, judgement and the world to come. What is clear from rabbinic theology is that an individual's conduct in this mortal life had a direct effect on his destiny in the world to come, whether he was righteous or wicked, and this theology is used in an attempt to accommodate Qoheleth's existential issues.⁹⁹

4. Judgement

In looking at the idea of judgement in more detail and references to judgement as found within Qoheleth, there are only two occasions when judgement (or 'being called to account') is referred to directly, both strategically inserted in the concluding verses of the book. The identity crisis of Qoheleth is never more apparent than in Qoh. 11:9-10 where he encourages the young to follow their passions and desires and make the most of their life. But then for a moment Qoheleth is reminded of his audience and his position as a sage and offers a sobering thought before returning again to the real crux of his message:

Hebrew Text

⁹O youth, enjoy yourself while you are young! Let your heart lead you to enjoyment in the days of your youth. Follow the desires of your heart and the glances of your eyes – but know well that God will call you to account for all such things –¹⁰and banish care from your mind, and pluck sorrow out of your flesh! For youth and black hair are fleeting.

Targum Qoheleth

Rejoice, O young man, in the days of your youth, and let your heart be cheerful in the days of your childhood. Act humbly in your heart, and be careful with the looking of your eyes. And do not look upon evil, and know that for all this the Lord will bring you to judgement. And put away anger from your heart, and bring no evil upon your body. For youth and the days of black hair are vanity.

Targum Qoheleth amplifies and reiterates Qoheleth's admonitions. No longer is one to follow the desires of the heart and the glances of the eye but rather the heart is to be humbled and the eyes are to be restrained in their glances. Evil is to be avoided at all costs for judgement is waiting for all. Qoheleth's warning

⁹⁹ Stewart, 162-163.

regarding God's omnipresence and his taking account of all our actions becomes the central message.

The concluding verse of Qoheleth, thought by many to be a later emendation, is the only other occasion that the subject of judgement is broached in the chapters of Qoheleth. The tone of Qoh. 12:13-14 is distinctly different to that of Qoh. 11:9-10 and the lightness and frivolity of the advice previously given is now replaced by an altogether more restrained and austere message:

¹³The sum of the matter, when all is said and done: Revere God and observe His commandments! For this applies to all mankind: ¹⁴that God will call every creature to account for everything unknown, be it good or bad.

The significance of these verses in the whole picture or message of Qoheleth can be argued. What is obvious is that judgement and the proposed acceptable life in preparation for that judgement, is clearly not the essence or the dominant portion of the book. The shift in Targum Qoheleth is marked, where judgement is not reserved for a few well chosen verses towards the closure of the book but rather it is an integral part of the Targum from beginning to end. The most conspicuous usage of the term is found in the image conjuring clause "the great day of judgement". The initial use of the phrase sets the tone for its consequent usage and the flavour of the Targum. The Targum to Qoh 2:25, reveals a Qoheleth that is burdened and dejected with his duty and his prospects:

Hebrew Text

For who eats and who enjoys but myself?

Targum Qoheleth

For who is occupied with the words of the law, and who is the man that has anxiety about the great day of judgement which is to come, besides me?

Qoheleth has been known to be anxious about many things and questions are a significant portion of his repertoire but impending judgement is an unexpected addition to this inquisitive persona. This "great day of judgement" appears to haunt the Solomon of the Targum and the act of judgement as the final resolution to a life lived consumed with moral and social contradictions and dilemmas. But in the Targum to Qoh. 9:4 judgement is not the welcome deliverance that is hoped for but is yet more of the same:

Hebrew Text

For he who is reckoned among the living has something to look forward to – even a live dog is better than a dead lion.

Targum Qoheleth

And after the end of man it is reserved for him, to be reprov'd with the dead in the judgement of the guilty. For who is the man that adheres to all the words of the law, and has hope to acquire the life of the world-to-come? For a living dog is better than a dead lion.

It appears to be an almost hopeless situation, for Qoheleth accepts that no man is sinless and therefore questions who has the opportunity to enter the next life. Not only does judgement appear to be a foregone conclusion but it also seems to be a rather drawn out ordeal, one which the Targum to Qoh. 11:8 describes vividly:

Hebrew Text

Even if a man lives many years, let him enjoy himself in all of them, remembering how many the days of darkness are going to be. The only future is nothingness!

Targum Qoheleth

For if the life of man is many days, it behooves him to rejoice in all of them, and to study the Law of the Lord; let him remember the days of darkness of death, and not sin, for many are the days wherein he shall lie dead in the grave to receive the judgement from heaven for the life he loved, all the time punishment comes upon him for the vanity he has done.

The Targum attempts to retain the surface meaning of the text but instead rewrites the text through seamless additions and by judiciously integrating the importance of the Law in this present life and then dismissing Qoheleth's notion of a future devoid of substance by reminding its audience of judgement that extends even to the grave. The prevalence and ominous nature of judgement in this life is vividly described by the Targum to Qoh. 12:5-7:

Hebrew Text

But man sets out for his eternal abode, with mourners all around in the street. ⁶Before the silver cord snaps and the golden bowl crashes, the jar is shattered at the spring, and the jug is smashed at the cistern. ⁷And the dust returns to the ground as it was, and the lifebreath returns to God who bestowed it.

Targum Qoheleth

And the angels that seek your judgement walk about like mourners, walking about the street, to write the account of the judgement. Before your tongue is dumb from speaking, and your head dashed in pieces, and the gall at the liver emptied, and the body hastens into the grave, and the flesh which is created from the dust returns into the earth as it was, and your breathing spirit return to stand in judgement before the Lord who gave it to you.

Here the Targum attempts to provide a plain meaning to the allegorical language of Qoheleth, an accepted rabbinic solution to figurative language, as noted by A.

Rofé.¹⁰⁰ The great day of judgement is clearly not a day to be welcomed by the sinful or any person (none are sinless according to the Targum), for both body and spirit are subjected to such prolonged misery. Judgement is passed and according to the Targum to Qoh 5:5 the sentence cannot be questioned or shown to be false:

Hebrew Text

Don't let your mouth bring you into disfavor, and don't plead before the messenger that it was an error, but fear God; else God may be angered by your talk and destroy your possessions.

Targum Qoheleth

For in the day of the great judgement you will not be able to say before the avenging angel who exercises dominion over you, that it is an error.

The need to avoid such a calamity is obvious and so once again the Targum appeals, via Qoheleth, to men to live a life that is according to God's law and so elude such a terrible fate as noted in the Targum to Qoh.6:9:

Hebrew Text

Is the feasting of the eyes more important than the pursuit of desire? That, too, is futility and pursuit of wind.

Targum Qoheleth

It is better for a man to rejoice about the world to come, and to do righteousness, and to see a good reward for his labors in the day of great judgement, than to go into that world an afflicted soul. And this is vanity, and a breaking of spirit to a guilty man.

By particularising Qoheleth's general question and statement, the Targum attempts to provide a more substantive meaning to the text and render a safer reading and understanding of the text. It is here in the context of the "day of great judgement" that the "world to come" is connected. In this targum the world to come is seen as a place where good works and a righteous life are rewarded but there is also a dark side to it, for you can also "go into that world an afflicted soul". The duality of the world is actuated according to and depending on the lives of each individual and their subsequent judgement. The rabbinic concepts of judgement and the world to come are read into the text of Qoheleth in a manner that accommodates between the Targum and the Hebrew text and so providing explanations to any apparent contradictions between the differing worldviews.

¹⁰⁰ Alexander Rofé, "Biblical Antecedents of the Targumic Solution of Metaphors (Ps 89:41-42; Ezek 22:25-28; Gen 49:8-9, 14-15)," in *The Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Jože

5. History of Israel

Israel's history does not feature prominently in the text of Qoheleth, except to place Qoheleth within it as the son of David and the king in Jerusalem ruling over Israel.¹⁰¹ Qoheleth makes no other mention or reference to historical events or patriarchal figures, other than his own position and status. The absence of such details is neither striking nor apparently necessary to the overall significance and appeal of Qoheleth's literary composition. Targum Qoheleth in contrast is padded out with historical trivia from Israel's past and future, relative to the time of Solomon. The need for these additions is arguable, other than to provide emphasis to particular teachings and to clarify any arguments or problems created by the text of Qoheleth.

Though there are references to a number of patriarchal figures, Targum Qoheleth deals mainly with one specific character and the events surrounding his life; namely Rehoboam, the son of Solomon. Rehoboam is introduced by the Targum to Qoh. 1:2, and his consequential fate and that of Israel is returned to and retold throughout the Targum on various occasions:

Hebrew Text

Utter futility! – said Koheleth – Utter futility! All is futile!

Targum Qoheleth

When Solomon the King of Israel foresaw, by the spirit of prophecy that the kingdom of Rehoboam his son would be divided with Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that Jerusalem and the holy temple would be destroyed, and that the people of Israel would be exiled, he said by the divine word, "Vanity of vanities is this world! Vanity of vanities is all which I and my father David strived for. All of it is vanity."

This memorable episode in the changing fortunes of Israel is recounted in a manner that places Solomon in the position of a victim, rather than that of the direct cause of the calamity that was to befall Israel, as previously told in I Kings. For according to I Kings 11 the fate that was to transpire was a direct consequence of Solomon's self-indulgent and idolatrous lifestyle. This displeased God greatly that he first warned Solomon of his behaviour but when no change took place, God exacted his punishment on Solomon and told him of what would be the result of his behaviour:

And the Lord said to Solomon, "Because you are guilty of this – you have not kept My covenant and the laws which I enjoined upon you –

Krašovec (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 333-338.

¹⁰¹ Qoh. 1:1, 12.

I will tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your servants. But, for the sake of your father David, I will not do it in your lifetime; I will tear it away from your son..."¹⁰²

Obviously, Solomon's prophetic foretelling of such an event, as observed by the Targum, seems to be redundant when it is known that God himself warned Solomon of the dire consequences of his actions and lack of obedience to the law. It appears, as observed in Midrash Qoheleth, that Solomon is undergoing a type of sanctification process but fears of a total rabbinic whitewash are put at rest, as further on in the Targum to Qoh. 1:12 a more realistic portrayal of Solomon is given but yet one with many gaps and additions to the picture:

Hebrew Text

I, Koheleth, was king in Jerusalem over Israel.

Targum Qoheleth

When King Solomon was sitting upon the throne of his kingdom, his heart became very proud of his riches, and he violated the word of God, by gathering many horses, chariots and riders, and amassing much gold and silver. And he married from foreign nations, whereupon the anger of the Lord was kindled against him, and he sent to him Ashmodai, king of the demons, who drove him from his kingdom's throne, and took away the ring from his hand, in order that he should roam and wander about in the world to reprove it.

Though a more pragmatic version is given here of Solomon's later worldly reign, the fact that this directly led to the division of Israel and the consequent turmoil is again not given as the reason. Also, in this version Ashmodai, the king of the demons, takes the place of God in delivering judgement on Solomon. This fantastical solitary mention of Ashmodai in the Targum is very interesting in its inclusion. Ashmodai (also known as Asmodeus) is a late, probably Hellenistic, Hebraic term for demon and plays a particularly prominent role in the Book of Tobit.¹⁰³ The Ashmodai of the Targum probably found its origins in the Book of Tobit, continuing and developing a demonology tradition in Judaic literature. It is interesting to note that as the study of demons developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a demonologist named Binsfield compiled a list in 1589 where he listed a number of major demons and their characteristic evils. Among demons like Lucifer, whose particular evil was pride, Ashmodai or Asmodeus'

¹⁰² I Kings 11:11-12.

¹⁰³ L. H. Brockington, *A Critical Introduction to the Apocrypha*, 1961. The Book of Tobit is a book in the Old Testament Apocrypha and is thought to be written between 200-170 BCE in Hebrew or Aramaic. It is constructed as a didactic romance where the demon, Asmodeus, plays an important role.

evil trait is that of lechery.¹⁰⁴ This classification seems highly appropriate in the context of the Targum narrative and Ashmodai's role in the judgement of Solomon. For it seems only fitting that the demon of lust and carnality should bestow due punishment to Solomon for a life of lasciviousness. But it could also have been used to explain Solomon's low view of life, his despair. It is indeed a bold innovation and response to the textual structure and conditions of Qoheleth.

Though the not so perfect life of Solomon is conceded by the targumists, it is still not given as the underlying reason for the fate that would befall Israel. Instead, this apparent injustice on Israel and his son in particular, as viewed by Solomon, is allowed to manifest itself in bitterness and resignation in the Targum to Qoh. 2:18:

Hebrew Text

So, too, I loathed all the wealth that I was gaining under the sun. For I shall leave it to the man who will succeed me.

Targum Qoheleth

And I hated all my labor which I labored under the sun in this world. For I must leave it to Rehoboam my son, who comes after me. And Jeroboam his servant will come and take away out of his hands ten tribes, and will possess half the kingdom. And who knows whether wise or foolish will be the king who is to be after me, and who will reign over all my labor which I labored in this world, and over all which I accomplish in my wisdom under the sun in this world?

In the Targums to Qoh. 3:11 and 4:15-16, Solomon through the spirit of prophecy sees and describes in more detail the events surrounding the whole Rehoboam/Jeroboam saga, again with a note of understandable acrimony and concludes that all that will happen is a vanity and heartbreak for his son, Rehoboam. Here is found a second accommodation between the Targum and the biblical text, where Rehoboam is used as a device for interpreting Qoheleth's bitterness as related to a *particular*, not a *general* outcome. The final mention of this episode is found in the Targum to Qoh. 10:16-18, where Jeroboam is contrasted with Hezekiah, in a desire to further emphasise the difference between the wise and the foolish. Though Solomon's indiscretions are not directly linked with the future Rehoboam/Jeroboam conflict, it is brought to attention when the rabbinic Solomon compares himself to a prominent figure in his father's past in the Targum to Qoh. 2:15:

¹⁰⁴ *The Columbia Encyclopedia*. Sixth Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), s.v. "Demon".

Hebrew Text

So I reflected: "The fate of the fool is also destined for me; to what advantage, then, have I been wise?"

Targum Qoheleth

And I said in my heart, "A destiny like that of Saul, the son of Kish, the king, who turned, and did not keep the commandments given to him about Amalek, and the kingdom was taken from him, will also befall me. So why am I wiser than he?"

It is additions like this that distinguish Targum Qoheleth, from just another literary attempt to stifle or censor Qoheleth, to one that goes a step further and actually rewrites the text, removing the universality and irony of the book. The Targum removes Qoheleth's generalities and concretises Qoheleth's realisation that the same fate awaits both the wise and the foolish by equating it with the Saul narrative.¹⁰⁵ The higher ground held by the wise over that of the foolish is returned to in Qoh. 4:13 where it is said that "Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king..." and the targum to this text again returns to history to illustrate this insight:

Better, like Abraham the poor youth in whom was the spirit of prophecy from the Lord and to whom the Lord was known when he was three years old, and he would not worship an idol, than the wicked Nimrod, who was an old and foolish king. And because Abraham would not worship an idol, he threw him into the burning furnace, and a miracle was performed for him from the Lord of the world, and he delivered him from it.

The patriarch, Abraham, appears to be an obvious choice in portraying the virtue of wisdom over foolishness, regardless of material goods and position. But in this fictional tale, Abraham undergoes a conversion and becomes an "exemplaristic defender of the faith".¹⁰⁶ Abraham is cleared of his devious past and the legend of the mighty warrior Nimrod is further exaggerated. Abraham the martyr is a far cry from the man who disclaimed his own wife to save his life. A response of conversion, usually reserved for Solomon, as particularly observed in Midrash Qoheleth, is now extended to other figures, including Abraham. The importance placed on wisdom is undeniable in Qoheleth and the targumists continue to illustrate this vividly with the use of familiar and significant figures in Israel's history. Along with Abraham, Joseph is held up as an example of wisdom¹⁰⁷ but

¹⁰⁵ Qoh. 2:13-16.

¹⁰⁶ Levine, 69.

¹⁰⁷ Targum Qoheleth 7:19.

Abraham is the one held in high regard not only for his wisdom but also for his righteousness, as observed in the Targum to Qoh. 7:28:

Hebrew Text

As for what I sought further but did not find, I found only one human being in a thousand, and the one I found among so many was never a woman.

Targum Qoheleth

I have not found, namely, a perfect and just man, without any corruption, as Abraham; from the days of the first Adam till the righteous Abraham was born, who was found faithful and just among the thousand kings that gathered together to build the tower of Babel; and a woman, as Sarah, among all the wives of those kings, I have not found.

The Targum is able to find what Qoheleth was unable to and Sarah now joins the ranks of her husband as the epitome of a righteous person and thus completely reversing the meaning of the text. For in response to Qoheleth's seemingly categorical remark and challenge, the Targum responds by producing Sarah as a woman who is not "more bitter than death"¹⁰⁸ but a woman set apart from other women. In harking back to Israel's history and personages, Sarah and Eve are the only women the Targum chooses to include. Sarah, as has been shown, is viewed in the highest of terms but Eve, as would be expected is not portrayed in such a positive light but is only referred to as the woman who "seduced" Adam.¹⁰⁹

Fictional inclusions and suggestive folklore are used once again in a strange superstitious tale involving Elijah and the angel Raziel in the Targum to Qoh. 10:20:

Hebrew Text

Don't revile a king even among your intimates. Don't revile a rich man even in your bedchamber; for a bird of the air may carry the utterance, and a winged creature may report the word.

Targum Qoheleth

Even in your mind, in your heart privately, curse not the king, and in your bed chamber revile not a wise man. For the angel Raziel proclaims every day from heaven upon Mount Horeb, and the sound thereof goes into all the world, and Elijah the high priest continually hovers in the air like an angel, the king of the winged tribe, and discloses the things that are done in secret to all the inhabitants of the earth.

The essence of the Hebrew text is retained but to it is added an imagery that is vivid and graphic, making the thought of Elijah floating around reading people's

¹⁰⁸ Qoh. 7:26.

most private thoughts, observing their most private actions, and sharing it with the rest of the world, most disturbing. The “bird of the air” and the “winged creature” of Qoheleth are replaced by Raziel and Elijah in the Targum. The significance of Mount Horeb is clear, for it is the mount on which the covenant between God and Israel was established and many other significant events in Israel’s history took place.¹¹⁰

The inclusion of these peculiar tales, Solomon and Asmodeus, Abraham and Nimrod, and Elijah and Raziel, gives the Targum a creative edge and an added dimension. Levine suggests that legends like that of Abraham and Nimrod can be read as an anti-Christian polemic.¹¹¹ For Abraham is martyred for refusing to worship idols, in the same manner Jews were dealt in Christendom for refusing to convert to Christianity. Also, the thousand kings who built the Tower of Babel, as related in the Targum to Qoh. 7:28, could also be representative of Christendom. This may be possible but it could also be a continuation of a normative midrashic tradition where such tales are told. The use of historical characters ends with Moses. Moses is referred to as the “rabbi of Israel” and a “prophet” and is grouped with the “rabbis of the Sanhedrin, the masters of the Halachot and Midrashim”.¹¹² Moses and the other wise teachers are the “goats” whose purpose it is to provoke people to seek wisdom and teach them the correct path to follow. The use of ‘historical’ legends in the Targum is indeed significant and could be viewed as a further way of concretising the text of Qoheleth and reducing supposed textual threats. By historicising the text the Targum particularises Qoheleth’s universal message and rewrites the text.

6. The Law and Torah

As in Qoheleth Rabbah, the study and observance of the Torah is a prominent theme in Targum Qoheleth. Like the Midrash, the Targum reads and interprets Qoheleth to suit a particular rabbinic theology and ideology. There is no question that the Torah remained central to the Jewish faith and its profuse and lavish use within the Targum is not unexpected. Torah was both God’s revelation as given to Moses and also a tradition of laws and teachings as

¹⁰⁹ Targum Qoheleth 7:29.

¹¹⁰ Ex. 3:1, 17:6, 33:6; Deut. 1:2, 1:6, 1:19, 4:10, 4:15, 5:2, 9:8, 18:16, 29:1; I Kg. 8:9, 19:8; II Ch. 5:10; Ps. 106:19 and Mal. 4:4.

¹¹¹ Levine, 74.

¹¹² Targum Qoheleth 12:10-11.

developed through the Oral Torah. Torah was also synonymous with the concept of wisdom in rabbinic tradition, which was related to the concept of the “creative *Logos*” and the act of creation.¹¹³ Stewart summarises the rabbinic view of Torah as follows:

The Torah meant for the Rabbis more than a law code – rather the sum-total of human knowledge, wisdom, and philosophy. To this may be added pre-existence, a share in the task of creation, and intercessory powers between God and man. Though not in itself divine, the Torah was one of the holiest things God created, a projection of His Own mind into the spatio-temporal realm, not to be worshipped by men, but requiring from them a high degree of reverence.¹¹⁴

The Torah was the expression of God’s will and it was the occupation of the student of the Torah to discover, examine and interpret this divine expression.¹¹⁵ As with *Qoheleth Rabbah*, the remarkable thing is that *Qoheleth*, a book that never refers to the Torah, except indirectly in closing by imploring its readers to “Revere God and observe His commandments”,¹¹⁶ can be interpreted in such a manner.

References to the Torah and the law in general include written law, oral law, and Talmudic law. In many cases specific legislation are directly referred to by the Targum, endorsing them and modifying them in some cases. Levine draws special attention to the fact that the Targum stresses Torah study rather than Torah practice.¹¹⁷ This emphasis may also be an indicator of the Targum’s audience and it being directed at scholars, learned, educated individuals, who could be in danger of being seduced by *Qoheleth*’s common sense. Hence, the emphasis placed on *study* over *practice*. It is true that the emphasis may be directed towards Torah study and the rewards that are gained, mostly in the world to come, but there is also a humanistic side to the Targum, where compassion and charity to the poor is encouraged and favourably viewed.

To show the importance of Torah study in the Targum it is necessary to begin at the end of the text. The redactor’s addition at the close of *Qoheleth*, that

¹¹³ Stewart, 35.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹¹⁵ S. Schechter, *Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1909), 134-135. Schechter describes the Torah as being “all things to all men”.

¹¹⁶ *Qoh.* 12:13.

¹¹⁷ Levine, 77.

warns people against the making of too many books and excessive study, is converted by the Targum into a contrary invocation in the Targum to Qoh. 12:12:

Hebrew Text

A further word: Against them, my son, be warned! The making of many books is without limit and much study is a wearying of the flesh.

Targum Qoheleth

And more than these, my son, take care, to make many books of wisdom without end; to study much the words of the Law, and to consider the weariness of the body.

Qoheleth's words are completely reversed by the Targum and his warning is changed into an endorsement to produce books limitlessly, with criteria of them being "books of wisdom". By changing the original intent of the text the Targum rewrites the text and imposes an altogether different agenda. Targum Qoheleth clearly asserts an independence and autonomy that Qoheleth Rabbah avoids due to the very nature of its rabbinic exegetical tradition. The midrash on Qoh. 12:12 shows the trend of Qoheleth Rabbah, despite some provocative interpretations, of being a book that is traditional at heart:

And furthermore my son be, admonished (XII, 12): of making many books there is no end: [Read the word as] mehunah (confusion), because whoever brings into his house more than the twenty-four [of the Bible] introduces confusion into his house, as e.g., the book of Ben Sira [Ecclesiasticus] and the book of Ben Tagla.¹¹⁸

This warning against reading apocryphal books by the Midrash is in accordance with the autocratic feel of the book. The Targum, though often no less conservative in its instruction, is clearly less conventional and normative than the Midrash. This may be due to the fact that the targumists were aware that their translation would never replace Qoheleth in the public forum, even if the premise behind its translation may have been otherwise, and so had a freer hand to rewrite Qoheleth as how they understood the text or what they thought it should have said. There is no evidence that Targum Qoheleth was ever part of synagogue tradition and it is the Hebrew text of Qoheleth that continues to be read during Sukkot. It is through the radical overwriting of the Hebrew text that

¹¹⁸ Ben Tagla is thought to be another name for the apocryphal book Ben La'nah' which is mentioned in Jer. Sanh. 28 which states, 'Such as the books of Ben Sirach and of Ben La'nah', in the context of apocryphal books (www.ccel.org/e/edersheim/lifetimes/html/IIICHAPTERIITHE.htm).

Targum Qoheleth transforms Qoheleth into a text that is theologically conservative and thus in accordance with the ideology of its writers.

The importance of Torah study is a key feature in the Targum and as seen in 12:12 it is encouraged to the extent that Qoheleth is revised to fit in with this conviction. Study of the Torah and judgement are invariably tied together. Whereas Qoheleth talks about the futility of life, in that a man cannot enjoy his own wealth and so is never fully satisfied with life, the Targum to Qoh. 6:6-9 speaks instead about the study of the Torah and the rewards that are gained by devoting your life to such a worthy occupation:

And if the days of the life of this man were two thousand years, and he had not studied the Law, and had not done judgement and justice by the oath of the word of the Lord, in the day of his death his soul will go to Gehenna, to the same place whither all sinners go... For what advantage has the wise man in this world over the fool, because of the wicked generation by which he is not accepted. And what is this poor man to do but to study the law of the Lord, that he may know how he will have to walk in the presence of the righteous in paradise.

It is the study of the Torah that is emphasised rather than its practice, for it is the study of the law that assures the man a place in paradise. But the benefits ascribed to the study of the Torah are not all reserved for the world to come. For such a preoccupation brings great joy in this world, one that supersedes the external pleasures and wealth that Qoheleth finds so agreeable and this notion is found in the Targum to Qoheleth 2:10:

Hebrew Text

I withheld from my eyes nothing they asked for, and denied myself no enjoyment; rather, I got enjoyment out of all my wealth. And that was all I got out of my wealth.

Targum Qoheleth

And I did not keep my heart from the joy of the law, because I had the inclination to enjoy the wisdom given me by God more than any man, and rejoiced in it more than in all my labor. And this was my good portion assigned to me, so that I might receive for it a good reward in the world to come, more than for all my labor.

Qoheleth's enjoyment comes from his wealth and by not denying himself anything or any pleasure, as revealed in the Hebrew text. There is an acknowledgement by Qoheleth at moments that this lifestyle of self-indulgence is futile and is meaningless when seen in a wider perspective but his answer or remedy to this is not the Torah but a resignation and disillusionment with life.

The Targum provides a safer reading of the text, one that is in keeping with rabbinic theology and one that particularises the text. The joy of the Torah is repeated on a number of occasions in the Targum and it is often in response to Qoheleth's notion that due to life's injustices and inconsistencies that all man can do is eat, drink and be happy.¹¹⁹

Wisdom is at the heart of Qoheleth's teachings and is referred to on no fewer than twenty-five separate instances.¹²⁰ The Targum, in contrast, embellishes changes and incorporates a more acceptable face of wisdom into the text. For Qoheleth, wisdom is like an animate object, one that you search out,¹²¹ experience,¹²² benefit from,¹²³ and is something you strive to acquire.¹²⁴ There appears to be an almost indulgent preoccupation with wisdom on the part of Qoheleth and his motives behind seeking wisdom are often egotistical in nature.

To redress this imbalance the Targum connects wisdom with the Torah, in keeping with rabbinic tradition, and shows that wisdom of the Torah is equal to and more important than wisdom in itself and one used for other purposes. Qoheleth sees wisdom like an inheritance and equates it with the security of money.¹²⁵ The Targum, though not wholly disagreeing with this sentiment, inserts a reminder in the Targum to Qoh. 7:11-12 of what kind of wisdom is actually beneficial and places the focus on future gain than on a momentary one:

Hebrew Text

¹¹Wisdom is as good as a patrimony, and even better, for those who behold the sun. ¹²For to be in the shelter of wisdom is to be also in the shelter of money, and the advantage of intelligence is that wisdom preserves the life of him who possesses it.

Targum Qoheleth

Good is the wisdom of the law, along with the inheritance of money, yet better still for a man to humbly conduct himself with men...And the advantage of knowing the wisdom of the law is that it raises its possessor from the grave for the world to come.

The message of the Targum continues along these lines; that wisdom alone may result in riches in this world but wisdom of the law results in a reward

¹¹⁹ Targum Qoheleth 3:13, 8:15, 11:7-8.

¹²⁰ Qoh. 1:13, 1:16, 1:17, 1:18, 2:3, 2:9, 2:12, 2:13, 2:19, 2:21, 2:26, 7:10, 7:11, 7:12, 7:19, 7:23, 7:25, 8:1, 8:16, 9:10, 9:13, 9:15, 9:18, 10:1 and 10:10.

¹²¹ Qoh. 1:13.

¹²² Qoh. 1:16.

¹²³ Qoh. 2:21.

¹²⁴ Qoh. 8:16.

¹²⁵ Qoh. 7:11-12.

in the world to come. Qoheleth is proactive in his pursuit of wisdom and invests both his time and emotions in this quest. To devote so much of one's life in the search for something so abstract in nature is not seen to be appropriate for a former king of Israel and a sage. According to the Targum to Qoh. 8:16, being occupied with the wisdom of the Torah is the true work of an individual:

Hebrew Text

For I have set my mind to learn wisdom and to observe the business that goes on in the world – even to the extent of going without sleep day and night.

Targum Qoheleth

So I gave my heart to know the wisdom of the Law and to see the business which is done upon the earth, for even the wise who desire to be occupied with the Law and to find wisdom must toil.

In an open rebuke against the materialism of Qoheleth, the Targum continues Qoheleth's comparative analysis of the difference between the characteristics of the wise and those of the foolish, by placing the Torah as an identifiable sign of a wise person in the Targum to Qoh. 10:2:

Hebrew Text

A wise man's mind tends toward the right hand, a fool's toward the left.

Targum Qoheleth

The heart of the wise is to acquire the Law which was given by the hand of the Lord, and the heart of the fool is to acquire riches of silver and gold.

The Targum shares much with Qoheleth Rabbah and their use of common sources shows a significant borrowing or adoption in terms of the Torah, in that all references to eating and drinking by Qoheleth actually refer to Torah and good deeds. The approach in the Targum is more understated and does not directly insist that all references to eating and drinking refer to the Torah but instead, as shown in the Targum to Qoh. 5:17-18, it gives a reason and motive behind such behaviour, rather than dismissing it altogether:

And behold that which I have seen good for the children of men, and that which is proper for them to do in this world, that they eat and drink from their effort, in order not to put forth the hand to oppression and robbery, and to keep the words of the law, and to have compassion on the poor.

Eating and drinking is a means to an end and not an end in itself. What is consumed and drunk is from personal effort and this sustenance is needed to

avoid evil and to do good. Similarly in the Targum to Qoh 2:24, eating and drinking is an instrumental part of keeping the law and living a righteous life.

The importance given in the Targum to the study and the observance of the Torah is unmistakable. But though the stress is placed on the study aspect, the implementation or the practice of the Torah is not completely ignored. As seen in the previous quote regarding eating and drinking, the Targum speaks both of keeping the words of the law and having compassion on the poor. Qoheleth's commentary on the injustices he observes in the world is more of an indictment on the inconsistency of God's equity in dealing with the righteous and the wicked, rather than one that really questions the establishment. There is a hint of rebuke of those in high position when Qoheleth speaks of the "oppression of the poor and suppression of right and justice" by those in power.¹²⁶ There are other occasions where Qoheleth refers to the poor but usually highlighting the context of their status rather than drawing attention to their miserable existence and the virtue in helping them. The Targum, though stressing the importance of Torah study and obedience to the law, also encourages Torah practice especially in regard to the poor and showing them charity, as observed in the Targum to Qoh. 5:9:

A merchant who loves to acquire money, and men of business, shall not be satisfied in amassing money: and he who loves to heap up great wealth has no praise in the world to come, unless he has done charity with it, because he has not deserved to profit.

The motivation behind the Targum's occasional charitable tendencies is not altruistic in nature but rather one driven by reward; reward in the world to come:

I saw, therefore, that there is no good in this world, but that man should rejoice in his good part in this world, to acquire thereby the world to come, so that no man should say in his heart, "Why am I distributing money to do charity? I had better leave it to my son after me, or be nursed for it in my old age." Because who can bring him to see what will be after him?¹²⁷

Qoheleth finds some solace in life by enjoying his material possessions, for what lies after him is a mystery. This is no mystery to the Targum for everything in this life, this world, is leading to one ultimate goal, the world to come. You do not do good or charitable works solely for the reason of doing good but for the reward that will be received. This ulterior motive is suggested in all references to

¹²⁶ Qoh. 5:7-8.

Torah practice and provides the reader with an egocentric motive rather than a benevolent one to do charitable works.¹²⁸

Other references to the Torah in the Targum are to specific laws from both the written and oral law. These include observance of rituals concerning menstrual purity,¹²⁹ ritual immersion,¹³⁰ and prohibition of sexual intercourse during the seven days of mourning.¹³¹ Levine also points out a few examples of Talmudic law found within the Targum.¹³² There is mention of issuing a bill of divorce to rid a man of a troublesome wife,¹³³ and the need for repentance and a change of behaviour must accompany sacrifices.¹³⁴

7. Prayer and Repentance

The practice of prayer in Judaism is thought to have come into its own after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE as a vehicle of atonement.¹³⁵ Rabbinic prayers on the whole were liturgical but there is evidence of free prayer from the Talmud.¹³⁶ Repentance was an integral part of prayer as a mode of atonement and the rabbinic view of repentance held that God not only created repentance but also instructs man in its use.¹³⁷ Neither prayer nor repentance is mentioned on any occasion in the book of Qoheleth. These motifs, foreign to Qoheleth, are adopted and used extensively by Targum Qoheleth as the tools to solicit mercy from God in the context of impending judgement:

³And in the time of anger of the Lord do not cease to pray before him, tremble before him, go and pray and seek mercy for him because you cannot withstand evil... ⁵The man who keeps the commandments of the Lord shall not know any evil in the world to come; and the time of prayer, and judgement, and truth, is known in the heart of the wise.¹³⁸

Prayer is a redundant act to Qoheleth, for what is the point of petitioning a God who is shown to be unjust, unapproachable, and who appears to be absent

¹²⁷ Qoh. 3:22.

¹²⁸ See also Targum Qoheleth 2:11-12 and 4:8-9.

¹²⁹ Targum Qoheleth 5:18.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 2:8.

¹³¹ Ibid., 3:5.

¹³² Levine, 78.

¹³³ Targum Qoheleth 7:26.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 4:17.

¹³⁵ Stewart, 124. Stewart suggests that prayer became one of the substitutes for animal sacrifices. It is also declared to be better than sacrifice in the Talmud, Ber. 32^b.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 125. Evidence is found Berkhoth, Tractate in First Order of the Talmud, Ber. 12^b, 16^b-17^a, IV.2, 29^b.

¹³⁷ S. Schechter, 314.

¹³⁸ Targum Qoheleth 8:3,5.

in the daily affairs of the individual? The Targum on the other hand sees a judgmental but listening God who requires obedience and a meaningful response in all things. Prayer is tied into the very theology of the Targum, that of adherence to the Torah, judgement and the world to come. Prayer is the act of the wise and it is only their words that are accepted by God.¹³⁹ It is the wise and the righteous that pray and repent, while the foolish and wicked destroy themselves by their stubbornness and lack of repentance. The Targum insists that it is only through repentance that a man can escape death and his fate.¹⁴⁰ Qoheleth muses that the same fate comes to both man and beast but according to the Targum to Qoh. 3:18-19 this fate can be averted by repentance, which leads to forgiveness and healing:

Hebrew Text

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

Targum Qoheleth

I said in my heart concerning the children of men, as to the punishments and evil events which come upon them, God sends these to try and prove them, to see whether they will return in repentance and be forgiven and healed. But the wicked who are like beasts do not repent, so they are punished by it, to their own hurt...and as the unclean beast dies, so dies he who does not return in repentance before his death.

God's role as observed by Qoheleth, is as one who provides food and drink that is to be enjoyed in this life,¹⁴¹ gives wisdom to those who please him and work to the sinner,¹⁴² is an authoritarian figure and is to be feared and respected but is not one to whom you bare your soul and request absolution from your sins. God is judge and his presence is unfathomable according to Qoheleth, and so the idea that one can change God's ordained plan by prayer and petition is a foreign and illogical one. Qoheleth's resignation to the fate that awaits each man is overturned by the Targum, where a person's destiny can be altered by factors within his control; obedience to the Torah, prayer, and repentance or atonement.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 9:17.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 1:15.

¹⁴¹ Qoh. 2:24.

¹⁴² Qoh. 2:26.

The Targum returns a certain amount of control to the individual, so modifying the pre-destination tendencies of Qoheleth.

D. Conclusion

Targum Qoheleth clearly goes beyond a literal translation, if it can even be called a translation, of Qoheleth. For the Targum appears to replace Qoheleth, overwriting the Hebrew text and creating a new text. The targumist's own understanding of Qoheleth, one that addresses the problematic issues and conditions raised by the Hebrew text of Qoheleth, supersedes and rewrites the text. In a 'traditional' translation process it is to be expected that the translator transfers his own inflections and stresses into the translation and so altering it from the original (clearly obvious in oral translations). But in the supposed translation of Qoheleth that Targum Qoheleth proposes to offer, the integrity of the original text is thought to be retained by excluding the Hebrew text of Qoheleth. It should be remembered that Targum Qoheleth was intended for the non-Hebrew reader and so it was possible to replace one work effectively by another. But it should also be noted that most Targum manuscripts present both the Hebrew and Aramaic texts together, giving the reader access to both simultaneously.¹⁴³ The Targum is able to overwrite the text of Qoheleth in a way that Midrash does not because the Midrash retains the form of commentary and preserves the text separately from comment. Though a number of voices and older textual traditions are drawn upon, they are integrated seamlessly and remain anonymous in the Targum. Unlike Qoheleth Rabbah, the Targum does not acknowledge or name its different voices but allows its contributors to speak through the supposed translation and so providing a rich discourse. Further, Targum Qoheleth displays an interpretative freedom that is absent in Qoheleth Rabbah probably due to the fact that it is written in Aramaic and so distancing it from the Hebrew text in a linguistic sense, which rendered the hands unclean. Thus, Aramaic could be used in a way that Hebrew could not and therefore, allowed the Targum writers to overwrite the Hebrew text and turn Qoheleth into what they would have liked it to have said. The targumists, the readers of

¹⁴³ In the Codex Urbinates the Hebrew text of Qoheleth is followed by the Aramaic paraphrase.

Qoheleth, go beyond a reception of the text and create instead a new text of Qoheleth.

The function of Targum Qoheleth, especially considering its late date, appears to be a continuation of the midrash exegetical tradition, where there is an attempt to combine rabbinic and biblical theology into one text, an exercise confined to the schools and synagogues. The interpretation and searching out of the Torah remained and continued to be central to the Jewish system of faith, and Targum Qoheleth could be considered to be an extension and practice of an already well established and developed genre of exegesis. It could be further proposed that the Targum scholar, knowing both Hebrew and Aramaic, turned the translation process into a type of scholarly 'game', where the creation of a new Aramaic text of Qoheleth, one that rewrote the Hebrew text, was the objective.

In examining some of the main themes in the Targum, a pattern has emerged that can tie all these disparate themes together. The Targum's theology is a simplistic one, that of living a life in devotion to God and in accordance to his law that you may be rewarded in the afterlife, the world to come. This theology is in contrast to the complex and abstract philosophy that is Qoheleth's signature. These themes of law, afterlife, judgement and the Solomonic persona which are addressed by the Targum are also those which present the most challenges to the targumists. The problems they pose, as in the case of judgement, prophecy and the world to come, are made all the more conspicuous by their absence in the original text of Qoheleth. The response by the targumists to these problems is to present a belief system that is a type of accommodation between the Targum and the Hebrew text, as found in the notion of a partial punishment and partial reward in this life. This bridges the gap between Qoheleth's one world concept and the Targum's two worlds. The Targum also overcomes textual challenges by particularising Qoheleth's general statements concerning vanity and life's inconsistencies and it also attempts to return the plain meaning of the text by replacing Qoheleth's figurative language with more reality based and understandable statements. Throughout the Targum, Qoheleth's generalities, his universal thought, are concretised and particularised, and so defusing the text. This was particularly notable in the connection of the spirit of

prophecy with Solomon, where the contrast between Qoheleth's individual perception and received wisdom is removed and a complete reversal takes place.

By bringing the Torah to bear heavily on Qoheleth, the Targum creates a clear delineation between the fate of the wicked and the righteous. The fight between good and evil, the righteous and the wicked, is waged in the pages of the Targum. These labels are an inherent part of Qoheleth's frustrations with the world but whereas his lines are blurred between these opposing forces, the Targum is free of ambiguity and is able to identify between the fates of the two. In so doing the Targum provides hope to the righteous and tempers the despair that surfaces throughout Qoheleth. The Targum is at pains to distinguish between what is of this world and what is of the world to come. Work which is done to gain material possessions with the intention to enjoy this life is what is futile or vanity but the labour that is done to revere God, study and practice of the Torah, is a worthy one that reaps rich rewards. The Targum disentangles the seemingly chaotic perceptions of Qoheleth and categorises them according to rabbinic theology and ideology. The esoteric nature of Qoheleth's world is given boundaries and an apparent clarity by the Targum.

By attributing authorship of Qoheleth to Solomon, the Targum restricts its own interpretation of the book to one that is faithful and in accordance with Jewish Law and faith. By historicising the text of Qoheleth the Targum concretises the text and attempts to reduce its supposed ideological threat. The obviously prejudiced reading of Qoheleth by the targumists results not only in a pared down, de-secularised version of Qoheleth but a complete overwriting of the Hebrew text of Qoheleth, where many of the incongruities found within the text are removed and replaced with a new normative text. The reception of Qoheleth by the Targum scholars is both a historically conditioned experience of the text and to a greater extent a responsive recreation of a supposed original intent. The Targum does not appear to attempt to remain within Qoheleth's pre-structured codes and perspectives and its response to these textual structures and frame of reference produces a highly individualistic actualisation of the text, one where the Hebrew text of Qoheleth is filtered through established rabbinic

theological tradition creating a new text, differing both in language and response-inviting structures.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Iser, 34.

Chapter Four

Gregory of Nyssa

Homilies on Ecclesiastes

A. Patristic Tradition

Patristic theology was a continuation of an already well established tradition within the history of ideas of the early Christian Church. The Church saw its role firstly, as developing dogma and doctrines and then secondly, actively debating with and defending these same beliefs against its heretical or pagan opponents.¹ Patristic theology was built on this premise and had an important place in the development of Catholic doctrine. The history of doctrine in the Church is synonymous with the history of exegesis, where the interpretation of specific passages of scripture were made in response to particular needs and considered heretical attacks.² As is found with Rabbinic works, earlier Greek and Latin scholarly traditions were passed on, perpetuated and modified by later ecclesiastical thinkers. It is difficult to narrowly define Patristic theology, as there appears to be no single system or approach; it appears to be more eclectic in nature, drawing from a number of philosophical schools of thought. Patristic tradition was greatly influenced by Neo-Platonism but also built its speculation on the earlier Church Fathers and thinkers.³ The Cappadocian Fathers fall into a whole succession of thinkers – Eastern, Orthodox and Latin – including the Gnostics, the Apologists (St. Justin Martyr⁴ and Tertullian⁵), the Alexandrians (Clement and Origen⁶), Irenaeus,⁷ and St.

¹ Julian Marias, *History of Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1967), 108.

² Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: An Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 1.

³ Neo-Platonism position changed from an elitist one to one that was forced into a conflict with Christianity between the third and sixth centuries. Neo-Platonism presented itself as a new philosophical religion in measured response to the popular rise of Christianity.

⁴ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, vol. 1 of *Writings of the Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, n.d.), 159-161. Justin (A.D. 110-165), a Greek philosopher, defended the Christian faith and argued that *logos* or divine reason was the eternal Word of God and so the true goal of Greek philosophy. His principle writings include the two *Apologies* and the *Dialogue with Trypho*.

⁵ Marcia L. Colish, *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 6-29. Tertullian (ca. 155-220) a Latin apologist, attempted to re-express Christian

Augustine,⁸ who all played a significant role in the formulation of Church doctrine and dogma and its subsequent defence.⁹

Gnosticism was the main philosophy to challenge the Church in the first and second centuries. The Gnostic philosophy had elements of Neo-Platonism, Philo and also contemporary Oriental religions, and focused on the intellectual aspect of Christianity.¹⁰ The threat that Gnosticism posed to the early Church was substantial and was one that would influence the interpretation of scripture by the early Church Fathers. The Gnostics held a dualistic belief, the struggle between the divine and the material, and the ultimate restoration of all things, and salvation through *gnosis*.¹¹ Their rejection of the material world was intertwined with their rejection of the authority of the Old Testament, for that was the revelation of the God of creation and the God of Israel, the Demiurge.¹² The New Testament in contrast was viewed as the revelation of the only good, supreme and ultimate God. In response to the Gnostics, the Church reinterpreted the Old Testament in a radical typological sense, so attempting to restore its authoritative status. The *typos*, meaning form, figure or symbol, was used early on by Paul, who regarded 'typos' as synonymous with 'allegory' in his

theology in the context of Latin culture and philosophy. He adopted philosophical reason in his writings but was also an opponent of its heretical influences.

⁶ Richard A. Norris, *God and World in Early Christian Theology: A Study in Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origin* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1966), 106-129. Origin (ca. 186-254) is attributed with creating a new Christian Platonism, where "the Platonist idea of the soul's intellectual quest for union with intelligible Reality" shaped his Christian teaching (109).

⁷ Roberts and Donaldson, 309-313. Irenaeus (A.D. 120-202) was Bishop of Lyons and played an important role in the fight against Gnosticism and "demonstrated its essential unity with old mythology, and with heathen systems of philosophy" (310). His writings include the important works, *Against Heresies* and *On Schism*.

⁸ Christopher Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 219. Augustine (A.D. 354-430), the greatest of the Latin Church Fathers, was greatly influenced by Neo-Platonism and to a lesser extent Stoicism. Three of his most important works are the *Confessions*, the *De Trinitate* and *The City of God* (221-222).

⁹ Marias, 108-109.

¹⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame. The Rise and Progress of Christianity from its First Beginnings to the Conversion of the English* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 214. The Gnostics considered themselves the possessors of *gnosis*, real knowledge, and the intellectual elite, for whom a higher truth was available than the ordinary orthodox Christian.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 247. One of the main schools of Gnosticism was Valentinus, "whose system was embodied in a myth which told of the fall and deliverance of Sophia, Divine Wisdom, in terms of the characteristic Gnostic cosmology".

¹² Simonetti, 14-15. Though rejecting the authority of the Old Testament, the Gnostics still used the Old Testament in developing ideas on their origins and nature. In general the Gnostics interpreted the Old Testament in a literal manner and the New Testament allegorically.

interpretation of scripture.¹³ Typological interpretation became the mainstay of the Christian way of reading the Old Testament, in which the Old Testament was interpreted in christological terms and so in keeping with the revelations of the New Testament.¹⁴ Christological symbolism was discovered within and throughout the Old Testament, complementing the beliefs and doctrines of the Church and in keeping with its Christ-centred theology.

The Apologists, Justin and Tertullian both responded to the heretical threat of Gnosticism through their exegesis, often selectively choosing passages for typological interpretation. Though their threat was a common one, Justin and Tertullian's hermeneutics and philosophy, and in turn their retort to Gnosticism differed greatly due in part to their opposing attitudes towards Greek culture. Justin's Greek background made him naturally sympathetic to Hellenistic philosophy, which he blended with Christian theological ideas. Tertullian on the other hand was openly hostile to Hellenic thought and was basically a literalist in his approach to scripture. His famous question "*Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolmis; What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?*" from *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, warned against using philosophical methods of enquiry when addressing scriptural authority and teaching.¹⁵ Though he cautioned against allegorical interpretation as practised by the Gnostics, he often reverted to allegory when it came to the typological interpretation of the Law in terms of Christ, like Justin.¹⁶ Tertullian fought passionately against the alliance between Christianity and philosophy and preached a gospel of irrationalism, using the words of St. Paul in I Corinthians 1 as the basis for his own gospel.¹⁷

Irenaeus was one of the Greek Fathers who also played a significant role in the conflict with Gnosticism. He was instrumental in returning the Church to the cloistered tradition of revelation, using faith, *pistis*, to oppose the special knowledge or illumination, *gnosis*, of the Gnostics.¹⁸ Though Irenaeus, Tertullian

¹³ Ibid., 12. Examples of Paul's use of *typos* to distinguish between two levels of meaning are found in Rom. 5:14 and I Cor. 10:6.

¹⁴ Ibid. Paul in Gal. 4:24 interprets the sons of Hagar and Sarah as pre-figurations of Jews and Christians.

¹⁵ Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* (On the Prescription of Heretics), chapter 7, 9. (www.tertullian.org).

¹⁶ Simonetti, 22-24.

¹⁷ Stuart George Hall, ed. *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on Ecclesiastes*. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), 9. In I Cor. 1 Paul speaks of the "foolishness of God" in contrast to the "wisdom of the world."

¹⁸ Marias, 110-111.

and Justin's approaches differed from that of Gnosticism, their interpretation of scripture was not controlled by exegetical rules and freely alternated between literal and allegorical interpretation, depending on their individual circumstances and the specific problems they were addressing, oftentimes more polemical than exegetical in nature.¹⁹

Towards the latter part of the fourth century Patristic speculation and exegesis began to reach prominence and maturity. Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa, brought Cappadocia back from near cultural and ecclesiastical oblivion and restored it as one of the centres for theological thought and tradition within the Church. They, along with Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, were crucial in the battle against Arianism, which was acute during that time period.²⁰ The role of Eusebius of Caesarea was an important one in the propagation and controversy regarding Arian theology, and the developing doctrine of the Trinity.²¹ Arianism centred on the debate over the triune God and held the view that Christ the Son was inferior in divine terms to God the Father.²² Further, the realm of the divine was not incomprehensible but could be understood by logic.²³ Thus, the battle with Gnosticism in the first and second centuries gave way, gradually, to arguments about Trinity; both connected by the issue of the nature of God.

Heretical challenges frequently provoked periods of intense exegetical activity within the Church and Patristic speculation reflects this interaction. Cappadocia was home to a number of considered heretics, including Eunomius, the Arian. Gregory of Nyssa, along with Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus, engaged in the theological refutation of Eunomius and wrote an important catechism, explaining foundational Christian beliefs in the unity of God and the oneness of the divine act.²⁴ The Arian belief in the accessibility of God and assumption that his nature could be defined was repudiated by the Cappadocians,

¹⁹ Simonetti, 24-25.

²⁰ David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 1. Brakke provides a very useful chronology of events pertaining to Athanasius and the Eastern Church. Athanasius (A.D. 298-373) attempted to integrate the philosophy and politics of asceticism into the wider Christian Church, and used it in his fight against Arianism.

²¹ Colm Luibhéid, *Eusebius of Caesarea and the Arian Crisis* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1978), 1. Eusebius had been a close ally and friend of Arius, the founder of Arianism.

²² *Ibid.*, 6.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7. Luibhéid provides a succinct summary of the main ideas of Arianism (9-10).

²⁴ Anthony Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa* (London and New York: Routledge), 12.

who through Basil and Gregory of Nyssa asserted the absolute absurdity of attempting to define God's inner nature.²⁵ Though not new, the idea was compelling and had a precedent in the philosophy and writings of Plato. In both *Timaeus* and the *Republic* Plato insisted that the nature of God and the idea of Good were beyond comprehension and being.²⁶ This assertion by the Cappadocians continued a tradition in the development of the idea of apophaticism, the belief in the incomprehensibility of God. The Cappadocians followed Philo and Clement of Alexandria in the theological debate regarding apophaticism, one that also included those who held heretical views. Gregory of Nyssa's position in the debate was non-traditional and deviated from those taken by both Origen and Plato. Gregory put forward the notion of the infinity of the perfect being and thus departed from the position of received wisdom.²⁷ His belief in divine incomprehensibility was dependent on this belief in the divine infinity.²⁸ The claim that God cannot be known and is beyond comprehension reflected the inadequacy of the human mind and its inability to grasp the divine makeup. Gregory strengthened this claim by insisting that a created being cannot circumscribe the inherent mysterious nature of the divine, for the divine is the source of all and is limitless. Applying a dimension of infinity and boundlessness to God was a departure from Platonic thought which saw the absence of limit and form as a failure or a defect.

Gregory of Nyssa's theology and exegetical methodology may be regarded as eclectic but his writings reveal an individualism that places him among the profound thinkers of the early Church. His writings reveal a person whose views and ideas changed through the course of time, making it difficult to define or to elicit the essence of his thoughts by selecting and studying random texts. Gregory borrows theological language and concepts from Platonism and other philosophical sources but the result is not a reconstruction of Christian doctrine or theology or a revision of tradition.²⁹ Scripture remained central to Gregory's thought and ideas but he used philosophy to express, explain and

²⁵ Hall, 12-13.

²⁶ *Timaeus* 28C states that "it was hard to know and difficult to declare to all the nature of god." Plato speaks of the enigma of the idea of Good in book vi of the *Republic*.

²⁷ Hall, 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ A. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition from Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 78.

conceptualise them. Gregory's concern was more with spiritual man than with the intelligible world or with general metaphysics.³⁰ The contemplative character of Gregory's theology became the basic and defining feature of Byzantine theology of the fourth century, and its characteristic speculative thinking and debate differentiated Eastern theology from Western theology of that time.³¹

B. Philosophical Trends

Philosophical influences on early Christian thought, as seen by the Church Fathers and on the later works of Patristic writers were considerable. Christianity itself presented its faith as a 'new philosophy' in response to the different philosophical schools of thought and the ecclesiastical community was drawn into debate with and drew from them.³² There are a number of philosophical trends that characterise writings in the Patristic tradition, and Gregory of Nyssa in particular. Though a variety of genres are present in Gregory's body of literary works, there are fundamental elements that pervade it and provide a cohesive philosophical framework for his writings. The central 'doctrine' was that of divine infinity and the consequent belief in the incomprehensibility of the nature of God.³³ From this understanding developed the doctrine of *epektasis*, which viewed the soul as continually yearning for the divine, God, and seeking knowledge of Him. But there is a gulf between the soul and God that cannot be bridged; this leads to disillusionment in this quest for knowledge and melancholy sinks the soul into further darkness.³⁴ There is no satiety in the soul's experience of God but the answer is not complacency but to strive for perfection of the soul, the pursuit of virtue, another belief that is intrinsic to Gregory's writings.³⁵

Gregory's writings were clearly influenced by pagan philosophy and in particular Platonism. In regards to the image of the soul, Gregory adopts Plato's depiction of the soul's goal, combining moral and intellectual effort, to rise to

³⁰ Karsten Friis Johansen, *A History of Ancient Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998), 586. Jerome (347-420) exemplifies Western theology in the fourth century, contributing greatly to Latin Christendom (Bruce, 332-333).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 587.

³² Christopher Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), ix.

³³ Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 87.

³⁴ Louth, 89-91.

God.³⁶ Gregory incorporates his understanding of Platonism with his Catholic orthodoxy and develops the idea that human involvement must be progressive and perpetual in the grace of the infinite God. Gregory's writings reveal an openness to pagan philosophy and a willingness to enter into a dialogue with pagan intellectuals, like Libanius, and an understanding of Hellenistic culture that is found wanting in the writings of other Cappadocians. Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus often counselled and cautioned Gregory in regards to his disposition to the study of rhetoric and pagan philosophy. Though deeply influenced by classical writers, Gregory rarely quotes them directly but rather borrows and integrates ideas into his own philosophy and theology. In his treatise *De anima et resurrectione*, Gregory reflects the form, setting and subject-matter of Plato's *Phaedo*.³⁷ He also draws on later Platonists, in particular Plotinus and his mysticism. His writings also show the influence of Neo-Platonist exegetical theory.³⁸

Anthony Meredith assigns three of Gregory's basic theological and philosophical principles to a Platonic source.³⁹ Firstly, the belief in the goodness of God is an intrinsic one. The Idea of Good is Plato's theology and it is regarded as the worthiest and highest Idea and became a doctrine in and of itself.⁴⁰ From Platonic texts it appears that Good can be equated with God, and this interpretation was first articulated by the Neo-Platonists and then by St. Augustine. This Idea of Good or God is considered the source of all true being. This principle is expressed in the following manner in Plato's *Republic*:

...the good may be said to be not only the author of knowledge to all things known, but of their being and essence, and yet the good is not essence but far exceeds essence in dignity and power.⁴¹

When God is equated to Good, this principle can be interpreted in the sense that all being has its cause in the being of good, which is God, the highest being.⁴² The highest being embodies beauty, truth and goodness, and the Good or

³⁵ Morwenna Ludlow, *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 23.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ludlow, 23.

³⁸ Ibid., 24.

³⁹ Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 7-8.

⁴⁰ Marias, 53.

⁴¹ Plato, *Republic* vi, 509.

⁴² Thorlief Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1960), 54.

God is both true and beautiful. The idea of evil does not exist in the same manner as the idea of the good. Rather, evil exists in a nebulous form in the experience of human freedom. Plato qualifies this position in the tenth book of the *Republic* where he states that “The cause (sc. of evil) is the chooser; God is guiltless”.⁴³ Central to the Christian-Platonist tradition is the need to absolve God from all responsibility for the existence of evil and instead place responsibility for evil solely on humans. Both Origen and Plotinus shared Plato’s belief that evil acts are entirely dependent on the persons who perpetuate them.⁴⁴ The conclusion of this Christian-Platonist belief is that God is blameless, just, wise and powerful and it is only because of human choices that evil exists.

The second principle of Gregory that has its roots in Plato is the belief in the beauty of being and of God. This belief is clearly evident in both Gregory’s dialogue *De anima et resurrectione* and Plato’s dialogues *Symposium* and *The Phaedrus*. Unlike the *Republic* where goodness is the outstanding feature, in these dialogues it is beauty that is portrayed as the symbol of the divine nature or ultimate reality. In *De anima et resurrectione* (MPG 46, 89D) Gregory’s thoughts resemble those of Plato when he writes:

For Beauty has its own nature and attractiveness for everyone who looks at it. So, if the soul becomes clean of all evil, it will exist entirely in beauty. The divine is beautiful by its own nature. The soul will be joined to the divine through purity, adhering to that which is proper to it.

To achieve a life of purity a person must strive for beauty/the Divine and then only by embracing the Divine nature will life be fulfilling and lovely. The desire for beauty, as is the existence of evil, is dependent on freedom and the individual’s choice to actualise the desire.

The third principle of Gregory based on Platonic belief is that “the way upward is both demanding and, at the same time, a return to origins”.⁴⁵ Plato speaks of “always keeping to the upward path” at the end of the *Republic* (621C) and St. Paul speaks of a similar journey when in Philippians 3:14 he says, “I press onward to the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” Gregory combines these two ideas to create his own concept and adopts similar

⁴³ Plato, *Republic* x.

⁴⁴ In *Contra Celsum* 4.3 Origen speaks of the freedom of choice and its importance in being virtuous. Plotinus in *Ennead* 3.2.7 cites Plato in stating that the source of evil is human who choose to do evil acts.

imagery to that of Paul and Plato in his treatises, *On the Life of Moses* and *Homilies on the Song of Songs*.

In Gregory's *Homilies on the Song of Songs* he speaks of three stages in the soul's progress to God. He visualises the soul moving through three successive phases, entering into light, cloud, and darkness: *phos*, *nephele*, and *gnophos*.⁴⁶ The same three stages of the Light, the Cloud, and the Darkness are also found in Gregory's *On the Life of Moses*.⁴⁷ The first stage, the way of Light, is when the soul turns from false reality to the only true reality, which is God. Gregory views the second stage, the way of the Cloud, as the time when the soul understands the vanity of created things. He shares this view with Origen, who also sees this stage in a positive manner. The second stage is a concept that is discussed in Qoheleth at length: the awareness of the interaction between vanity and materialism and the person or soul. Gregory sees the soul as not only learning the vanity of created things in this stage but the soul also learns to see in these things the manifestation of the goodness of God. It is comparable to the realm of Platonic *theoria*, the realm of genuine reality, of the Forms.⁴⁸ This intermediate stage leads into the final way and the entry into darkness. This third stage is at the core of Christian Platonist philosophy, the stage where the soul passes into darkness and into an acknowledgement of the incomprehensibility of God. "Here there is seeing by not seeing, knowing by unknowing. And the reason is the absolute unknowability of God".⁴⁹ This apophatic vision of the mystery of God and creation is at the heart of Neo-Platonic philosophy. Apophatic theology expresses the belief that though the intellect cannot comprehend God, the individual can still experience the grace and love of God.

During the fourth century, when heated theological discourse was taking place, the Cappadocians used apophaticism to counter Eunomius' claim that it is possible to know and comprehend the essence and being of God. Apophatic theology protected the absolute transcendence of God against those that misrepresented God in terms of human analogies and made false claims in their

⁴⁵ Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 8.

⁴⁶ Louth, 83.

⁴⁷ In *On the Life of Moses*, Gregory views the mystic as one who is led beyond the supposed reality of the knowledge of God to an unknowing of him in darkness, just as Moses first encountered God in the burning bush, then in the cloud and then finally in dense darkness.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

perception of God. This theology was developed in the *Enneads* of Plotinus.⁵⁰ Plotinus had a substantial influence on Gregory and his writings show a familiarity with Plotinus, even though he does not cite or refer to him directly. Plotinus combined Platonism, Aristotelian⁵¹ theology, and Stoic⁵² 'vitalism' creating a 'philosophy of reflection' in which the absolute and the infinite, the One, is reflected in the finite.⁵³ In the spiritual realm "the One" is shrouded in mystery and is beyond thought and being but a rationalist is able, dialectically, to rise to that realm.⁵⁴ Gregory sees the journey towards the One, the infinite God, as progressive and never-ending, one where the Pauline emphasis on grace is less but the role of the divine is more marked than that of Platonic thought.⁵⁵

Though Gregory of Nyssa is often considered the most speculative and mystical writer among the Cappadocian Fathers he is not a mystic in the class of Plotinus or even Augustine. Though deeply influenced by and sympathetic to Greek philosophy, Gregory was predominantly Origenistic in his approach to and interpretation of scripture and his theological thought in general. Origen's impact on biblical hermeneutics had a profound effect on all subsequent Patristic exegesis and he is considered by some patrologists to have been a mentor to Gregory.⁵⁶ Gregory's close association with Origen is found not only on an academic level but also a personal one even though they were not contemporaries. Gregory Thaumaturgus (210-270) was a pupil of Origen and he was later a teacher to Macrina the Elder, the grandmother of Basil and Gregory

⁵⁰ Marias, 98-99. Plotinus (c.205-70) founded Neo-Platonism in the third century. His collection of writings, *Enneads*, had a great influence on later Christian theology and thought.

⁵¹ Ibid., 65. Aristotle stated that the highest entity is the divine, which is god, θεός.

⁵² Ibid., 90-94. "According to the Stoics, philosophy is the *practice* of an *art*, the aim of which is the proper governing of one's life" (88). Stoic philosophy is divided into logic, physics and ethics, the centre of which is the wise man. God is identified with the world, where God is substance and in turn, the world is the substance of God. The Stoics emphasised 'reason' and identified it with the Deity.

⁵³ Johansen, 532.

⁵⁴ Michael Azkoul, *St. Gregory of Nyssa and the Tradition of the Fathers* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), 60.

⁵⁵ Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 8.

⁵⁶ Azkoul, 139. Simonetti (41) outlines Origen's role in Patristic exegesis. Origen of Alexandria's (185-255) impact on early Christian exegesis was great. He drew attention to the study of the whole of scripture and approached exegesis in a scientific manner. Origen's exegetical works include 'Scholia', 'Homilies' and 'Commentaries'. Scholia is a collection of explanations for selected passages from various texts. The Homilies were sermons preached at Caesarea and are characterised by a systematic study of important incidents occurring in entire Books. The Commentaries represent the exegetical activity of Origen and show in depth, exhaustive study that resembles the commentaries of Philo and those of the Greek philosophical schools.

of Nyssa, and was instrumental in her conversion.⁵⁷ Macrina the Elder played a significant role in the life of the brothers and it is through her that Origen's ideas came to be known to and adopted by the Cappadocians.

Origen's hermeneutics did not limit him to viewing scripture as a book divinely inspired but he identifies it with Christ, the *Logos*, the word of God. In so doing Origen sees sacred scripture as the permanent incarnation of the *Logos*.⁵⁸ Origen's hermeneutical approach also adopts Platonic thought in the interpretation of scripture, and he delineates between the literal sense, the sensible reality, and the spiritual sense, the intelligible reality of scripture.⁵⁹ Origen departs from his predecessors in his belief that salvation lies in the intellectual coalition of the mind or rational soul with the rational element of the universe.⁶⁰ Gregory perpetuates Origen's reliance on allegorism in his own approach to scripture. He does not limit himself to the purely literal interpretation of scripture but instead finds an allegorical interpretation of scripture as the one most favourable to and in line with his ideology. Gregory's Origenistic leanings and allegorical stamp are clearly visible in one of his earlier treatises *On the Titles of the Psalms*. In retaining their traditional subdivisions, Gregory interprets the Psalms in terms of a progressive narrative in the journey of man from his repentance to his final nirvana, which is attaining the likeness of God.⁶¹ Gregory's allegorical faith regards scripture's role as one of edification rather than that of solely increasing an individual's knowledge.

Gregory tends to uncover a mystical type of meaning in his interpretation of scripture and this tendency was increasingly developed in his later works, as observed in *On the Life of Moses* and the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. A contradiction also exists in Gregory's supposed mysticism, for though he looked for mystical meanings beneath the text, he was also vocally critical of those who confused the literal or historical sense of the text in order to find them. Gregory's draw in different exegetical directions exists due to both his obvious Origenistic sympathies but also to the preliminary and instrumental influence from his theologically conservative brother Basil, who was critical of many of Origen's

⁵⁷ Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 2.

⁵⁸ Simonetti, 41.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶⁰ Azkoul, 166.

⁶¹ Simonetti, 65.

interpretations and resistant to theological speculation in general.⁶² This struggle between literal and allegorical interpretation of scripture was a continuing one for Gregory. His *Commentary on the Song of Songs* shows a strong allegorical interpretation, following the soul's ascent to and love of God, the Logos. *On the Life of Moses* shares similar themes but there is a more conscious consideration of the text of Exodus and Numbers which chronicle the life of Moses. Both of these exegetical works developed from an older literary tradition, *Song of Songs* firstly by Hippolytus and later Ambrose, and Exodus and Leviticus by Philo, who was also a strong influence on Gregory's work on Moses.⁶³ Philo presented Moses both as an authoritative teacher and a Platonist philosopher.⁶⁴ This representation of Moses is found in his work *De Plantatione*, where his use of imagery reflects that found in Plato's *Republic*.⁶⁵ Philo dismissed the anthropomorphic image of God and believed in the transcendence and mystery of his nature.⁶⁶

Although Gregory owed much to Origen for his theological thought, he did not agree with him on all points. Gregory rejected Origen's idea of the pre-existence of souls and his notion that the created spirit has a "face to face vision" with the Mind, God in this world and in the world to come.⁶⁷ He also distinguishes much more sharply than Origen between faith and knowledge.⁶⁸ While both Origen and Augustine believed that man was made for absolute understanding of God, Gregory believed that only faith could legitimise a rudimentary understanding of the world and could demonstrate God's existence from His work that is through His word of creation, Logos, and His power, the Holy Spirit.⁶⁹

⁶² Ibid., 66. Basil, in his work the *Hexameron*, considered Origen's interpretation of waters of the firmament too allegorical when it should be taken literally.

⁶³ Jean Danielou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd), 258.

⁶⁴ Stead, 57. Philo (A.D. 25-45), like Origen and Clement, was an Alexandrian and they shared a common tradition. Philo, like Clement, believed in the incomprehensibility of the Divine.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 58. Philo finds that Moses has access to the "system of Platonic Forms, which Philo tells us are themselves the conceptions of the supreme God conjoined in his reason, the Logos, and acting as 'seals' or patterns for his work in creation".

⁶⁶ Ibid. Philo referred to God as 'He who is' and believed that God acted mainly through his reason, Logos, and his Wisdom.

⁶⁷ Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 137.

⁶⁸ Johansen, 585.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

C. The Cappadocian Fathers

The Cappadocian Fathers have provided a distinguished, though perhaps a lesser recognised contribution to the theological and philosophical development in the history of the Eastern Church. Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa, were a dominant impetus in the acceptance of the Athanasian position and confirmation of the faith of Nicaea at the Council of Constantinople in 381.

Basil, the most ecclesiastically and politically astute of the three, rose steadily through the ranks of the clergy and became archbishop of Caesarea in 370. Basil is known for his theological conservatism, monastic lifestyle and aptitude as both a leader and legislator. He benefited from an extensive education, instructed first by Libanius in Constantinople and later by Himerius in Athens, both renowned 'rhetors' of the day.⁷⁰ His influence over his younger brother, Gregory of Nyssa, was immense and he continued to act as a father figure and mentor throughout Gregory's life. Basil's friend, Gregory of Nazianzus, a fellow student with him under the tutelage of Himerius at Athens, remained a prominent figure in the lives of both Basil and his brother.⁷¹

In distinct contrast to his brother Basil, Gregory of Nyssa did not undergo any formal religious or philosophical education and was completely reliant on Basil for his initial instruction in these areas. Though Gregory's nascent interests were secular in nature, his family and Basil in particular encouraged him to pursue an ecclesiastical vocation. Basil's patriarchal influence extended past his immediate family to his close friend Gregory of Nazianzus. Though as equally well-versed and trained in rhetoric and philosophy as Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus' ambitions were not to gain ecclesiastical position but rather he sought a monastic and ascetic life. But against his will, Basil appointed him Bishop of Sasima in an attempt to strengthen his ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the whole province of Cappadocia.⁷² The same fate befell Basil's brother, Gregory, who was appointed as Bishop to the See of Nyssa. Gregory of Nyssa was an equally resistant appointee and like Gregory of Nazianzus, his term was a turbulent and contentious one that led to his premature unseating. Basil's unquestionable

⁷⁰ Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 2-3.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

political aptitude, but somewhat misled, aspirations for those closest to him, led to a lasting rift between Basil and his brother, and also between him and Gregory of Nazianzus.⁷³

The Eastern Church during the fourth century was in a period of turmoil, both in theological and political terms. Early in the fourth century, Arius, a priest of the Bishop Alexander, caused controversy with his Trinitarian view of God the Father being superior to the two other deities, the Son and Holy Spirit.⁷⁴ From this belief, he developed his doctrine of Logos, where he taught that the Word of God was not truly divine in the same sense as God the Father.⁷⁵ Arius was excommunicated by a synod of Egyptian bishops but the controversy did not end.⁷⁶ Arius' following had grown and he had allies among certain bishops not only in Alexandria but also Asia Minor, Syria and Palestine, including Eusebius of Caesarea.⁷⁷ The Council of Nicaea in 325, which was called for by Emperor Constantine, attempted to address this heresy and upheld Alexander's position, one that preserved the unity of the Godhead and refuted Arianism.⁷⁸ When Athanasius became bishop of Alexandria in 328 he continued the policy against Arianism that was begun by Alexander.⁷⁹

During the reign of the Arianising Emperor Valens (A.D. 364-378) the province of Cappadocia was divided in two, and Caesarea and Tyana were made the capitals.⁸⁰ Under Valens a legislated form of religious tolerance was practised. Basil at this time (A.D. 370) was made Bishop of Caesarea and

⁷² D. O. Hunter-Blair, "St. Gregory of Nazianzus," in Catholic Encyclopedia, Online Edition.

⁷³ Anthony Meredith, "Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa on Basil", in *Athanasius and his Opponents, Cappadocian Fathers, other Greek Writers after Nicaea* Elizabeth A. Livingstone ed. Studia Patristica Vol. XXXII (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 163-169. Meredith looks at the relationship between Basil and his brother and Gregory of Nazianzus by examining the content of their respective orations on Basil's death.

⁷⁴ J. W. C. Wand, *A History of the Early Christian Church to A.D. 500* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd), 149. Arius raised his controversial ideas sometime between 318 and 321.

⁷⁵ Brakke, 6.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ B. H. Warmington, "Eusebius of Caesarea and Some Early Opponents of Athanasius", in *Athanasius and his Opponents, Cappadocian Fathers, other Greek Writers after Nicaea* Elizabeth A. Livingstone ed. Studia Patristica Vol. XXXII (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 61.

⁷⁸ Wand, 156. The Creed of Nicaea was created and used to test the orthodoxy of bishops and to counteract false teachings.

⁷⁹ Brakke, 6. Athanasius faced great opposition from the Melitians, some Christians in Alexandria who thought he was too dogmatic, and also some Eastern bishops who were sympathetic to Arius' views.

⁸⁰ Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 4. By creating the new Sees of Sasima and Nyssa, Basil tried to compensate for his depreciation in authority by the division of Cappadocia.

Metropolitan of Cappadocia.⁸¹ The proliferation of theological disputes within the Church during this time was great, especially with the continued menace of Arianism, which appeared to be fracturing the very fabric of Christendom. Though Basil died before the Council of Constantinople in 381,⁸² he was partially instrumental, albeit by way of Gregory of Nazianzus, in the acceptance of the faith of Nicaea: the development of the doctrine of the Trinity while preserving the Unity of the Godhead. By attempting to remain autonomous from the State and maintaining doctrinal independence, Basil's episcopate would be his legacy.

In 380 Theodosius was appointed Emperor of the East and occupied the seat of his empire in Constantinople.⁸³ Christians in Constantinople had been in disarray for nearly three decades previous to Theodosius. Arianism had all but taken over the Church in Constantinople under the Arian prelate, Demophilus.⁸⁴ The few non-Arian Christians that remained implored Gregory of Nazianzus to take leadership of them and reorganise their disparate group. Though reluctant, Gregory of Nazianzus finally agreed and began his mission in Constantinople in 379. The chapel of the Anastasia, in which Gregory delivered many an eloquent oration, became a cloister for the faithful but attracted much expected hostility from the many Arian believers that continued to abound in the city. It was during this time that Jerome became the pupil and disciple of Gregory of Nazianzus. An ecclesiastical power struggle, a conspiracy of sorts between Peter, Patriarch of Alexandria and certain Egyptian bishops, led to the consecration of Maximus as Bishop of Constantinople but his reign would prove to be very short lived as Theodosius refused to recognise him and he retreated to Alexandria.

The baptism of Theodosius in 380 initiated a chain of events that saw the restoration of Catholic unity to Constantinople and the instatement of Gregory as Bishop of Constantinople.⁸⁵ All churches were now restricted in use to adherents

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Basil died 1 January, 379. Gregory of Nazianzus wrote a letter of condolence to Gregory of Nyssa and also composed one of his greatest works, a collection of twelve exquisite epitaphs in honour of his dear friend.

⁸³ Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 4. Though Constantine was the first Christian emperor, a Christian empire cannot be claimed until Theodosius.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid. Theodosius issued the edict of Thessalonica that commanded adherence to the faith of St. Peter and the Nicene creed. The Arian bishop, Demophilus, refused to subscribe to the creed and was banished from Constantinople. Gregory was enthroned in St. Sophia.

of the Catholic faith⁸⁶ and Arians and other heretics were prohibited from gathering publicly. The restitution of the Catholic faith and reestablishment of ecclesiastical authority in Constantinople led to a significant episode in the life of the Eastern Church and Gregory of Nazianzus in particular. In May 381 one hundred and fifty bishops convened for the Council of Constantinople. The main purpose of the council, which was called on the insistence of Theodosius, was to affirm the faith of Nicaea and to subjugate any remaining Arian or other heretical sympathies that were present among a minority of the bishops.⁸⁷ The Council also proved to be the premature end of Gregory of Nazianzus' reign as Bishop, when he was forced to resign over allegations of contravening the bishopric code.⁸⁸ Controversy seemed to follow Gregory and he relinquished his eminent ecclesiastical positions and retired to the See of Nazianzus where he spent the remainder of his life.

D. Gregory of Nyssa

Gregory of Nyssa's position is probably the least prominent or acclaimed among the Cappadocian Fathers. The majority of his life appears to have been guided and determined by the often, autocratic control of his brother, Basil the Great. It was not until Basil's death in 379 that Gregory seems to come into his own and in terms of literary works, his greatest compositions proceed this sombre event in his life. Little is known of Gregory's contribution at the Council of Constantinople in 381 and Gregory himself only mentions it in passing in his funeral oration over Meletius of Antioch, who died during the course of the council. Though, there are indicators that Gregory did make a significant impression on the Emperor and on the other Bishops during the Council.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Ibid. "The name of Catholic was restricted to adherents of the orthodox and Catholic faith."

⁸⁷ Leclercq, *passim*.

⁸⁸ Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 4. Gregory was accused of breaking canon 15 of Nicaea, which forbids the translation from one See to another. Even though the accusation was unfounded, as Gregory had never acted as See of Sasima but had acted as coadjutor with his father in Nazianzus, he was forced out of office by a hostile group of prelates, mainly from Egypt and Macedonia.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 4. "Three facts reinforce this impression. He was chosen to deliver the funeral oration on Meletius, bishop of Antioch, the first president of the council, who had died in the course of the first session. Then, after the close of the council, he was selected to be one of the promoters of the orthodox teaching, above all on the deity of the Holy Ghost, in the Roman province of Pontus. Finally, at a slightly later date, he was selected to deliver funeral orations on the emperor's little daughter, Pulcheria, and his wife F(P) Flaccilla."

Gregory's orations on the deaths of Bishop Meletius and his brother, Basil, have become part of a collection of great Christian speeches of the fourth century.⁹⁰

Previous to this assembly, Gregory had led a copiously unfulfilling and unsuitable role as Bishop of Nyssa. His episcopate was a disappointment to himself and also to his brother, Basil, who had coerced Gregory into the position but later showed his disdain at Gregory's ineptitude to such an appointment. Gregory's term was fraught with controversy and altercation, and he was accused of embezzling Church funds. Along with this serious indictment, there was contention concerning his appointment to the See of Nyssa. Around 376 Demosthenes, Governor of Pontus, ordered Gregory's capture after hearing the accusations put forward but Gregory fled and he did not return to Nyssa until after the death of Valens two years later.⁹¹ He was eventually restored to his See under the new emperor, Gratian but it wasn't until after Basil's death that Gregory's prelatial duties really commenced and flourished.⁹² He attended the Council of Antioch in 379 and later the Council of Constantinople in 381. He is thought to have travelled to Palestine on official Church work. Like Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus, much of Gregory's time was spent addressing ecclesiastical and theological disorders that sprang up in various sections of the Eastern Church. Details of Gregory's years preceding his death are sketchy and it is left to his writings to provide us with a literary window into his ideology, philosophy and instilled orthodoxy.⁹³

Gregory of Nyssa's considered lack of leadership qualities, political astuteness and a preference to remain outside of the practicalities of ecclesiastical foray, was more than compensated for by his philosophical reason and the application of it to the contemporary theological debate. Gregory's entrance into the priesthood was more a result of guidance and encouragement from his family than any initial personal conviction or calling. His first choice to study rhetoric, a secular vocation that drew objection from his family, is one that he remained sympathetic to and incorporated in to his later life. Though not as broadly or as formally educated as Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa's use of

⁹⁰ Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 135.

⁹¹ Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 4.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid. Gregory is believed to have died after 385 or 386.

language and his literary works do not provide evidence of his inferior schooling. His skills as an orator have already been recounted and in his commentary on the Song of Songs he states the importance and use of this skill:

The human voice was fashioned for one reason alone – to be the threshold through which sentiments of the heart, inspired by the Holy Spirit, might be translated clearly into the Word itself.⁹⁴

His love of rhetoric preceded his theological vocation and his rhetorical aptitude remained throughout his life.

Gregory is considered to be probably the most speculative and mystical writer among the Cappadocians. His writings reveal a more sympathetic and tolerant attitude towards secular culture and that he drew greatly from contemporary philosophy.⁹⁵ His literary works encompass a variety of genres: homilies, commentaries, treatises, sermons and letters.⁹⁶ Gregory's theological development is observed through his writings, where his views and thinking are modified with time and in response to particular challenges. His literary works show in particular a gradual move away from or dilution of Platonic dualism, where dualism between mind and body is seen later as being between creator and creature.⁹⁷ Also in his earlier works, Christ is portrayed as a teacher who reveals the way to transcend the world of sense but in later works Christ takes the role of saviour and redeemer.⁹⁸ The theological controversies of the fourth century, of course, greatly influenced Gregory's developing philosophy and theology but also the tension between his Greek understanding of reality and his belief that Christianity was able to overcome this obstacle.⁹⁹ The clash between his Hellenic world-view and his Christian theology is clearly apparent in his literary works, and as will be observed in the Homilies on Ecclesiastes.

Gregory's literary audience also influenced his compositions and would have consisted primarily of his peers and superiors within the Church organisation, the religious elite. The volume of compositions and circulation of

⁹⁴ *Commentary on Song of Songs* 7.933M, 235, II. 3-5 (Langerbeck ed.) on Cant. 4.4; cited in Cameron, 15.

⁹⁵ Stead, 83. Basil and Gregory Nazianzus in contrast attacked philosophy and argued that only Christian theology yielded truth.

⁹⁶ Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 15. Meredith finds that most of Gregory's writings were 'occasional', written in response to disputes within the Church.

⁹⁷ Alden Mosshammer, "Gregory of Nyssa and Christian Hellenism" in *Athanasius and his Opponents, Cappadocian Fathers, other Greek Writers after Nicaea*. Elizabeth A. Livingstone ed. *Studia Patristica* Vol. XXXII (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 172.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

written works by the early Church provides some clues to the extent of literacy among its adherents.¹⁰⁰ But this literary production represents the select Christian literati and it cannot be assumed that Christian literacy was any greater than the wider Greco-Roman society.¹⁰¹ High levels of literacy would have been unusual among the general Christian community and would have been confined to the upper classes, namely the ecclesiastical hierarchy.¹⁰² Therefore, Gregory may well have been writing for a very small but influential audience, one with whom his philosophical and theological arguments would have resonated.

E. The Homilies on Ecclesiastes

It is difficult to date the *Homilies on Ecclesiastes* with any degree of accuracy from any external evidence. The character of the work places it in the period between 378 and 381, and it is thought to be somewhat contemporary with the first book against Eunomius, which is written towards the end of 380.¹⁰³ The homilies signify and are witness to a transitional phase in Gregory's thought and intellectual development. The tension between his Platonic and Christian worldviews and other theological/philosophical debates that existed in Gregory's early works are addressed and responded to in the homilies on Ecclesiastes.¹⁰⁴

The *Homilies on Ecclesiastes* are a collection of eight individual homilies, which cover Ecclesiastes 1:1-3:13. The manner in which this portion of Ecclesiastes is broken up into eight homilies is not obvious and Gregory does not

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Michael Macdonald, Wolfson College Oxford, *The Uses of Literacy: Life With and Without the Alphabet in the Ancient Near East*, The Stevenson Lecture Theatre, British Museum, 15 January, 2003. Macdonald suggests that in a literate society the majority of the population may in fact not be literate at all, but literacy is indispensable for the proper functioning of that society. Conversely, in a non-literate society a large proportion may be literate but literacy is not indispensable for the functioning of such a society.

¹⁰¹ Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 5.

¹⁰² Ibid., 6. Gamble points out that most well educated Christians would have received their education before their conversion.

¹⁰³ Alden A. Mosshammer, "Time for All and a Moment for Each: The Sixth Homily of Gregory of Nyssa on Ecclesiastes." in Stuart G. Hall, ed. *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on Ecclesiastes*. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), 251.

¹⁰⁴ Brian E. Daley, "Divine Transcendence and Human Transformation: Gregory of Nyssa's Anti-Apollinarian Christology", in *Athanasius and his Opponents, Cappadocian Fathers, other Greek Writers after Nicaea* Elizabeth A. Livingstone ed. *Studia Patristica* Vol. XXXII (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 88. In regards to Gregory's Christological writings, Daley comments that they do not appear as a single treatise but rather, they appear "in a polemical context-in works against Eunomian Arianism or the 'new' heresy of the Apollarians-or in works dealing with the interior, spiritual fulfilment of the individual, such as *On Perfection* or the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*".

provide any explanation in his selected division of the chapters and verses into sections, or as to why he considered only this early portion of the book and not the rest. Each homily does not at first appear to be thematically distinct, for themes, like the Ecclesiast, the Church and restoration, appear repeatedly and are not reserved for a specific homily. But Gregory does state in his first homily that the message of Ecclesiastes is for the Church and though themes are not restricted to a particular homily and so overlap, the stress placed on the various theological themes does vary from one homily to the next.

1. The First Homily: Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

The message of the first homily is believed by Gregory to be given by the Ecclesiast, Christ, and not Solomon. Gregory believes that the 'Son of David' is to be read allegorically to mean Christ and not Solomon, fitting in with Gregory's interpretative ideology, as observed in *On the Titles of the Psalms*. This allegorical understanding of the 'Ecclesiast' is developed further by Gregory later on in the first homily. The theme or lesson of which is that the earthly, sub-celestial life, contains futility and in it unreality prevails.¹⁰⁵ The Ecclesiast, the Logos himself, investigates the earthly life and finds that what the Word calls 'under heaven' is unreal and futile.

Gregory introduces the first homily by arguing that Proverbs acts as a preparatory discipline, an exegetical precursor to the reading of Ecclesiastes. The importance of Ecclesiastes is implied from the beginning and its unique demands are not understated. Proverbs prepares the mind for the exertion that is to come from the study of Ecclesiastes. These scriptural stages may reflect Gregory's theory of the soul's progress to God, as illustrated in his treatises *On the Life of Moses* and *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. Therefore, Proverbs could signify stage one, the way of the Light, and Ecclesiastes stage two, the Cloud. The second stage appears to agree with the textual structures of Qoheleth, where the soul interacts with the vanity of this world, reality, while still trying to discover the Good. Gregory recognises that the effort required in the study of Ecclesiastes is nearly as great as the benefit that is gained from the process. To depict the relationship between Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, Gregory employs athletic imagery to further articulate his point:

¹⁰⁵ Hall, 59.

For just as those who have trained in wrestling in the gymnasium strip for greater exertions and efforts in the athletic contests, so it seems to me that the teaching of Proverbs is an exercise, which trains our souls and makes them supple for the struggle with Ecclesiastes.¹⁰⁶

Mental gymnastics is indeed a prerequisite to the study of Ecclesiastes and it is only fitting that Proverbs is the book that should provide such a workout. The imagery of mental exercise is not an original one or unique to Gregory. St. Paul's depiction of the Christian struggle as a race provides an early example of the physical metaphor being used to describe the spiritual state.¹⁰⁷ In I Cor. 9:25 Paul writes of the "strict training" required in preparation for an event. The preparation is vital not only in realising the goal but also in the setting of or visualisation of the objective:

Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air.¹⁰⁸

Gregory's athletic imagery is equally expressive and emphatic. The study of Ecclesiastes requires skill and perseverance as that of an athlete in a contest, and Gregory extends this requirement to the whole of scripture.¹⁰⁹ The stress on mental training and exercise is also found in Plato's *Republic* and the writings of Plotinus and Origen.¹¹⁰

Gregory follows his preparatory statement by explaining the meaning of the title Ecclesiastes and the identity of the author. Firstly, he interprets the title by questioning why Ecclesiastes among all the other books of the Bible should be given this title, even though many others could also fittingly hold such a title.¹¹¹ He finds the answer in the purpose and intention of the book. For Ecclesiastes differs from other books in that it only focuses on issues concerning service to the Church (*ecclesia*), unlike other books which include historical accounts, genealogical information and other details that do not "help the Church

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 33.

¹⁰⁷ Examples of Paul's use of physical metaphorical language are found in I Cor. 9:24-27 and I Tim. 4:7.

¹⁰⁸ I Cor. 9:26.

¹⁰⁹ Hall, 33.

¹¹⁰ Plato in *Republic* 7, 532b ff. and 533c writes about the preparation required for the vision of the Good. Plotinius in *Enneads* regards this preparation as both a moral and intellectual process. In *De Principiis Praef.* 3 and in the prologue to his *Commentary on the Canticle* GCS 8, 76.9 ff, Origen emphasises the necessity for mental exertion in the discernment of the creed.

¹¹¹ Gregory interprets Ecclesiastes to mean "the Churchman" or "the Ecclesiast".

so much in its struggle towards its goal of godliness".¹¹² This initial interpretation of Ecclesiastes by Gregory provides an indication of the bias of his homily and the manner in which the book will be interpreted. His categorical statement on the purpose of Ecclesiastes leaves him with a narrow exegetical corridor and an almost inevitable reading:

Now the teaching of this book looks exclusively to the conduct of the Church, and gives instruction in those things by which one would achieve the life of virtue. For the object of what is said here is to raise the mind above sensation, to persuade it to abandon all that seems to be great and splendid in the world of existence, to catch a glimpse through the eyes of the soul of those things which are unattainable by sense-perception, and to conceive a desire for those things to which sense does not attain.¹¹³

The purpose of the book as solely regarding the Church is further reinforced when Gregory provides both a Christological and typological interpretation regarding the author of Ecclesiastes. Since the book focuses on the *Εκκλησία* (*Ecclesia*) it follows that the true *Ἐκκλησιαστής* (Ecclesiast) is the one who leads the *Ecclesia*, the Church. It is obvious to Gregory that that person could only be the Son of God, the King of Israel.¹¹⁴ The deduction continues and concludes with Gregory's conjecture that the Ecclesiast (Qoheleth), Son of David, King in Jerusalem is Jesus, Son of David, King of Israel:

If therefore these are words of the King of Israel, and this same one is also the Son of God, as the Gospel says, then the same one is called the Ecclesiast (Assembler)... Words it says, of the Ecclesiast, the Son of David. And Matthew so names him at the beginning of his Gospel, calling the Lord Son of David (Mt 1,1).¹¹⁵

The argument for authorship is concise and candid, and has a subtle hint of rabbinic derash in its methodology, where seemingly random verses (Jn 1:49 and Eccl. 1:1) are strung together to read a specific meaning into a text and provide a suitable or safe interpretation. The stage is set therefore not only for the first homily but the remaining seven to follow; Ecclesiastes is an allegory where the true Ecclesiast is Christ,¹¹⁶ not Solomon, and the *Ecclesia* is the Church.

¹¹² Hall, 34.

¹¹³ Ibid., 34.

¹¹⁴ Here Gregory uses Jn 1:49 where Nathaniel declares to Jesus, "You are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel" as his reference.

¹¹⁵ Hall, 34.

¹¹⁶ Daley, 87. Daley comments on Gregory's, somewhat confusing, Christological language in regards to the nature of Christ, and the relation between the divine and the human.

Gregory approaches the meaning of *ματαιότης* (futility/vanity), central to any study of Ecclesiastes, by firstly offering a number of definitions for the word and then providing an explanation for the need and use of the intensified form *ματαιότης ματαιοτήτων* “futility of futilities”.¹¹⁷ His descriptions of what he understands as ‘futility’ are illustrated by poetical and aesthetic examples of those actions that he regards as pointless and of serving no real purpose;

...like the sandcastles children build, and shooting arrows at stars, and chasing the winds, and racing against one’s own shadow and trying to step on its head...¹¹⁸

Further, Gregory uses the term *τό ἀνυπόστατον* ‘the insubstantial’ to explain the meaning of ‘futile’.¹¹⁹ Gregory continues by stating that futility only exists when the very word is uttered, otherwise it has no meaning, expressing nothing substantial and so is in itself a form of futility. Gregory orders his thoughts and provides a personal definition of futility:

‘Futility’ is either a meaningless word, or an unprofitable activity, or an unrealized plan, or unsuccessful effort, or in general what serves no useful purpose at all.¹²⁰

The definition favours a subsequent scrutiny of the meaning of ‘futility of futilities,’ one that Gregory finds greatly necessary in the understanding of the overall concept. The examination is approached by firstly drawing on scriptural parallels as a means of understanding the usage. “Work of works” (Num. 4:47) and “holy of holies” (Ex. 26:33-34) both provide a superior value to the singular use of the term, reflecting the worthiness of work and the supremacy of holiness respectively.¹²¹ Gregory concludes that the form ‘futility of futilities’ indicates an intensification of the underlying thought, an exaggerative intensity, as shown by other scriptural examples. The idiom provides an unmistakable clarity to the concept being stated and indicates in this instance the absolute extreme of what is futile.¹²²

After his examination of the key word *ματαιότης* ‘futility’, Gregory is anxious to reassure his audience that by applying this expression to the physical world he is by no means condemning or undermining the work of God and his

¹¹⁷ Hall, 34

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 35.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 34.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 35.

¹²¹ Ibid., 35-36.

¹²² Ibid., 36.

creation.¹²³ His response discloses his Platonic leanings, exposing an underlying philosophy that exists throughout his work. By differentiating between the two natures of man, the body and soul, Gregory hopes to diffuse the created conflict between the futility of all things and God's creation. The life of the body is mortal and so subject to death, while the life of the soul is immortal and not subject to death. It therefore follows that the body exists only in the present but the soul continues to eternity.

Gregory's conclusion is that what we consider the present or reality is in fact what is unreal and insubstantial.¹²⁴ The Ecclesiast is therefore imploring his audience not to look to the life of the senses but to dwell and exist in the true world, the one in which the soul habitats. This conclusion is not without its own set of problems; for it still leaves the question of God's role, if it is to be believed that he created both the soul and the body, the seen and unseen worlds. Gregory responds to this dilemma that fault could be found in the divinely created physical world by arguing that the problem does not lie in the physical world itself but rather in an individual's attitude towards or perception of "life in the flesh".¹²⁵ For only those who are "trained in the divine mysteries" can see beyond the life of the senses, which is visible and substantial and have knowledge of the unseen, the soul. They also know that the purpose of the visible world is to act as a guide or pathway to the unseen world. Those who look to the physical world look to nothing but those who look beyond to the higher life will see God, who is the Good that really is. Gregory's notions of the divine, the differentiation between the seen and unseen again echo Platonic thought.¹²⁶

The distinction that Gregory observes in the world, that between the seen and unseen, sets the tone and underlying premise for the remainder of the first homily. Continuing on from his examination of the term futility, Gregory interprets Eccl. 1:3-7 by arguing that everything accomplished in the physical world is futile and unprofitable:

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 37.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Anthony Meredith, "Homily I", in *Gregory of Nyssa. Homilies on Ecclesiastes: An English Version with Supporting Studies*. Stuart G. Hall ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), 147. Meredith in his study of the first homily provides clear examples of Platonic thought and language that have been borrowed by Gregory. The most noticeable adoption of Platonic language is the preference of the neuter over the masculine when referring to God.

What does the soul gain by the toil of this life in the case of those who live for the visible? In what does life even exist, or what visible good lasts unchanged?¹²⁷

Gregory answers his own questions by drawing examples from the natural world, the sun, sea and rivers, which are all testaments to the fragility of the visible world. The pointless toil of the natural world is reflected in man, who gains nothing from toiling all his life. Gregory's parallels between the natural world and human existence mirror Qoheleth's own views, where the borders between animals and man are blurred. The cycles of life and the passing of generations are to be expected and are of no consequence to Gregory. The cyclic nature of the physical world provides no stability but rather reminds us that nothing lasts forever. It is a sobering thought and one that Gregory is keen to dwell upon. The human desire or instinct for more and more is insatiable and ultimately futile, as Gregory readily points out.

The need to separate oneself from what is earthly and attach oneself to what is divine and not of this world is Gregory's theme. The futility of human life is self-evident and the appetite for worldly things and their transient nature is illustrated as and compared to children's toys of sand: "As soon as they cease from their toil, the sand collapses, leaving behind no trace of what the children worked at".¹²⁸ The sand symbolises power, wealth, ambition and other pleasures of the flesh. It is only the soul that forsakes the things of this world that can achieve higher things in this life. Gregory's message appears to be more Christ-like than Qoheleth-like in its fervour and tone. The parable of the rich young man (Mat.19:16-30) and the counsel by Christ not to place value on things of this earth (Luke 12:34) resonates in Gregory's message and language.

Gregory questions the accuracy of Qoheleth's statement concerning the laborious nature of words in Eccl. 1:8 and if indeed it is possible for words to be laborious, as there is nothing easier to do than to speak. He finds his answer in I Tim. 5:17 where it states that double honour is given to those elders who labour in the word. Therefore it is concluded that it is virtuous words, holy and true words, which are the ones that require much labour in order to become words.¹²⁹ Gregory also provides an alternative explanation for the verse by pointing out the

¹²⁷ Hall, 38.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 41.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 43.

frailty of our intellectual natures. In trying to express the divine, that which is beyond our comprehension, words fail and we are left unable to speak. It is not possible for human words to describe the Word or the Father of the Word. The same argument follows for the eyes and ears, both of which cannot be filled (Eccl. 1:8) as our eyes cannot see beyond our visual impression and our ears cannot be filled as there are no words that describe the Word.¹³⁰

The first homily concludes with Gregory's reading of Eccl. 1:9-11 where the predictability and the cyclic nature of life is returned to by Qoheleth. Gregory divides and examines these verses as three main thoughts and considers them as past, present and future ideas. There is again a conceptual conflict with the term futility and its place within the hypothesis that what has existed continues to exist. If everything is futile and temporary how is this possible? Gregory finds the answer in man. By elevating each soul through virtue, forming good characters and abandoning evil, the image and likeness of God will be realised. The present situation is completely futile due to the absence of any semblance to the likeness of God. Gregory sees the difference between the soul and body as the subjects for what has been (the body) and what will be (the soul). "The resurrection of the dead is nothing but the complete restoration of the original state".¹³¹ This is an identifying mark of Gregory's theology and summarises his views on the distinction between the soul and body.¹³²

Gregory concludes his first homily on a moral note in his examination of Eccl. 1:11, "The earlier ones are not remembered; so too those that will occur later will no more be remembered than those that will occur at the very end." The identification between good and evil is Gregory's understanding of the text. For when we incline towards evil we forget the good but when we elevate ourselves to good then evil will instead be forgotten and will no longer be remembered. The homily is completed by the message of restoration, for it will be the final restoration which will make the memory of evil completely disappear.

¹³⁰ Meredith observes similar arguments to that of Gregory in *Contra Eunomium 2, 13* and as an expansion of Plato's dictum in *Timaeus 28C*, which has its roots in Philo.

¹³¹ Hall, 45.

¹³² Meredith, Homily I, 156. Anthony Meredith suggests that Gregory's ideas are a fusion of Origen's views on the soul and an Athanasian view of the body. This fusion creates further difficult juxtapositions in trying to identify distinctions between the restoration of the soul and the realisation of the body.

2. The Second Homily: Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:3

The lesson of the second homily, which reaffirms the first homily, comes from Solomon who through his life of pleasure provides a convincing argument to us to reject such a life of futility.

In the first homily Gregory was candid in his understanding of the meaning of the Ecclesiast. The true Ecclesiast was identified as the Son of God, Christ, and the instruction provided by the text is directed to the Church.¹³³ Gregory introduces the second homily with the same forthrightness, providing New Testament quotations from Mathew and John as cross-references for his claim that Ecclesiast is another name for Christ. According to Gregory, Ecclesiast is just one among the many titles given to Christ as a tool to describe his love for human kind.¹³⁴ The name Ecclesiast is appropriate in this context as he is speaking to the ecclesial assembly, the Church.¹³⁵ In response to Eccl. 1:12, when did the Ecclesiast become King in Jerusalem over Israel? The implication, after drawing support from Ps. 2:6-7, is that when the Son of God became flesh for the salvation of mankind the text was fulfilled.¹³⁶

The theme of salvation continues as Gregory reflects on the meaning of Eccl. 1:13. What is it that the Ecclesiast set his “mind to study and to probe with wisdom all that happens under the sun”?¹³⁷ The answer is found in the mystery of salvation, for the “true Ecclesiast” became flesh so that he could investigate in his own wisdom all that has come about under heaven and recount as he teaches.¹³⁸ Qoheleth finds this study, one where God gives to men, an unhappy business but Gregory resolves this apparent discrepancy by confining this part of the verse to those things, which are futile. For futility enters the world through evil but futility is not real and does not exist according to Gregory and so also evil has no substance and does not exist. Gregory is eager to clarify the meaning of the unhappy business or evil that God gives to man to be concerned with. It is

¹³³ Hall, 33-34.

¹³⁴ Names given to Christ include Physician, Life, Resurrection, Light, the Way, the Door and the Truth (Mat. 9:12, John 14:6, 11:25, 12:46 and 10:7).

¹³⁵ The explanation by Gregory of the appropriate use of names/identities in various contexts was also observed in Qoheleth Rabbah, where the rabbis argue that Qoheleth is just one of many names given to Solomon and one that fits in with his contextual role of addressing an assembly.

¹³⁶ Hall, 48-49.

¹³⁷ Eccl. 1:13.

¹³⁸ Hall, 49.

not possible for God, the Good to give evil or be the producer of evil. Gregory's explanation is as follows:

What the more devout understanding is disposed to think is this: that the good gift of God, that is, freedom of action, became a means to sin through the sinful use mankind made of it.¹³⁹

It is man that converts a good gift from God, free will in this case, into a tool for evil. Though clear with his explanation, Gregory provides an alternative exegesis of the text by providing examples in scripture of other instances when God "gave" bad things. Examples of expressions of this idea include Rom. 1:26 where God gave them up to shameful passions and in Ex. 9:12, where God hardened Pharaoh's heart.¹⁴⁰ The conclusion by studying the language of these texts is that it is not God that puts anything bad in human nature but it is the human capacity to choose, which is intrinsically a good thing, that provides an opportunity for a choice of evil. Eccl. 1:14 appropriately follows and observes that all is futile. And again Gregory observes that all the futility that is found under the sun is not caused or is a result of God but due to the human choice for evil instead of the things of God.

Eccl. 1:15 continues the theme of restoration. For what is crooked could never fit into the order of creation designed by God. Therefore nature that has been twisted by evil cannot belong to a creation created by the true Word.¹⁴¹ Through the second part of the verse, where it is observed that "a lack that cannot be made good", Gregory's exegesis restores the first part of the verse. From language used in Phil. 4:12, Luke 15:14 and Heb. 11:37 it can be understood that anything lacking or what is left out is a want. From this understanding it is concluded that the verse means that once humanity was counted within the totality of existence but was then led astray by evil, the futile.¹⁴² Parallels are drawn with Mat. 18:12-13 and Luke 15:4 where one sheep is lost from the hundred and in the same way "the futile is left outside the total existing things, and thus a want will not be able to be counted in the total".¹⁴³ Just as the lost sheep is saved in the parable, in the same manner what was lost through futility will once again be restored by God.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 50.

¹⁴⁰ Further examples include Rom. 1:26, Is. 63:17, Ps. 106:40, 107 and Jer. 20:7.

¹⁴¹ Hall, 52.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

Any acknowledgement of or direct references to Solomon in the homilies are sparse but Solomon becomes the subject of the text in Gregory's study of Eccl. 1:16-18. Firstly an overview is provided into the reason why Solomon's life is discussed, also a brief look at the meaning of the verses before a more detailed exegetical study is undertaken. Solomon is used as an example so that others can learn from an individual who has pursued his heart's desire and so can speak from personal experience. Gregory portrays Solomon in a positive light and his indulgent lifestyle is glossed over as a life lesson for others and one that proves and teaches that in the end all is futile:

...and thus, when he has matured in wisdom, he does not merely theoretically observe the passionate and irrational deception of mankind in the matter of bodily enjoyments, but through the actual experience of each of the things they pursue recognizes their futility.¹⁴⁴

A further more detailed study of the three verses discloses few new insights. The focus is on wisdom and the connection between wisdom and knowledge. It is through effort and diligence that knowledge is acquired and in turn wisdom gained. Gregory surmises the relationship between wisdom and knowledge as follows:

For knowledge is produced from wisdom, and knowledge makes easier the discernment of what is beyond us. This does not simply happen without effort to those who pursue it, but the person who increases his knowledge exactly matches effort to learning.¹⁴⁵

Continuing this line of thought, the second homily concludes with the study of Eccl. 2:1-3. Solomon's image as one who pursued worldly pleasures as a selfless act of instruction to others is developed and validated by Gregory. Solomon's descent to things of the senses was not due to being drawn to them by passion but was rather necessary in order "to investigate whether the sensual experience of them makes any contribution to the knowledge of God".¹⁴⁶ When Gregory speaks of Solomon he does not equate him with Christ but suggests that like Solomon, Christ experienced all things. It is interesting to note that in the first homily when Gregory equates the true Ecclesiast with Christ he does not make any direct reference to Solomon. Now, when Solomon is mentioned his role is

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 54.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 55-56.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 56.

described as one of a conduit through which Christ speaks in the book of Ecclesiastes:

Now note, please, that Wisdom speaks to us through Solomon himself after the flesh, and speaks about those things by which we may most readily be led to despise the things which are pursued by men.¹⁴⁷

The notion is that like Solomon, Christ experienced all things and therefore Solomon's life acts as an example and a lesson for the Church. This is further stated in the introduction to the third homily, where a summary of the second homily is given:

In the second homily we learnt that the condemnation of the attitude to life based on enjoyment and emotion comes from the mouth of Solomon, in order to make its rejection convincing to us; for he had absolute freedom to practise a life aimed at pleasure and enjoyment, and utterly repudiates all that seems to be sought after by mankind.¹⁴⁸

The difference in the desires of the flesh, which are transitory, and those of the mind, which are lasting, are compared to the wine and wisdom of Eccl. 2:3 respectively. It is in seeking after the true Good that desire is fulfilled and satiety is found. The satisfaction found in the Good is equal for all and at any stage of life. The equality found in the Good is according to Gregory the work of faith. For faith is available to all who seek it and it lasts throughout life. This is the good work.

3. The Third Homily: Ecclesiastes 2:4-6

Gregory views the lesson of the third homily as being directed expressly to the Church. The theme of this message, that appears to be only appropriate for those belonging to the Church, is the confession of those things not in accordance with reason.¹⁴⁹

Before entering into the lesson Gregory has a curious discussion of the difference between modesty and shame. Though different, in definition, they are both effective reactions and emotions in restraining the disposition to sin. Gregory uses anatomical imagery, the face and its changing colour, to also show

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 53.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 59.

¹⁴⁹ Adolf Martin Ritter, "An Introduction to Homily III", in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on Ecclesiastes: An English Version with Supporting Studies*. Stuart G. Hall ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), 173.

the difference and the similarity between the two feelings.¹⁵⁰ According to Gregory these feelings relate to Church discipline and the necessity for confession for the soul and he discusses the influence on and the contribution of modesty and shame to the conduct of a virtuous life.¹⁵¹

The remainder of the homily is devoted to Solomon's worldly and material pleasures. Before going into great detail of houses, vineyards, gardens and irrigation, Gregory first makes a disclaimer concerning Solomon's position in all this lavish indulgence. He questions Solomon's reasons for disclosing or confessing all this information regarding his lifestyle and concludes a higher, a more noble reason for the confession. Solomon, it is considered, could have made up the story for our benefit but Gregory believes that Solomon was involved in the practical experience of pleasures.¹⁵² Solomon is compared to a pearl-fisher whose effort or life of pleasure, as in Solomon's case, brings him no real pleasure but it is the pearl or the hope in seeking the Good that is the ultimate fulfilment. Gregory's justification of Solomon's lifestyle is that by experiencing all carnal desires Solomon could then teach with authority and warn others of succumbing to temptations and their consequences.

After this introduction Gregory spends the majority of the homily on Eccl. 2:4, with only a brief explanation of verses 5 and 6 in comparison. Gregory provides an extensive and detailed explanation of 2:4, embellishing the text with elaborate descriptions of fine houses. The message is a simple one, for it is spiritual adornment that beautifies a dwelling and not the construction or the extravagant use of materials. Gregory compares each major structure of a house with a virtuous character trait or gives it a spiritual meaning. The lengthy explanation of 2:4 is testament to Gregory's grand rhetorical style, one that is rich in effective descriptive and persuasive passages.¹⁵³ The vineyards in the second part of 2:4 are associated with their licentious consequence, drunkenness. Noah, Lot and his daughters are held up as examples of the evils of wine, the fruits of the vineyard. But by planting the spiritual vine in the soul, the wine cultivated will make the heart glad.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 60. "Modesty is revealed only by a blush...but the person who feels ashamed when his fault is exposed turns livid and reddish."

¹⁵¹ Ritter, 173. Ritter suggests that Gregory may have been influenced by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics IV* and other works.

¹⁵² Hall, 61.

The gardens of Eccl. 2:5 and the pools of water of 2:6 are similarly used by Gregory to convey to his audience the difference between earthly pleasures, which are momentary and a desire for the spiritual which lasts forever. There is but one Garden in Gregory's view and the only consequential pool of water is the divine spring from which virtues of the soul are irrigated and flourish.

4. The Fourth Homily: Eccl. 2:7-11

The opulent, excessive imagery of the third homily continues into the fourth. The poetical imagery and lavish language characterise Gregory's prose, and the passionate and animated manner with which Gregory examines Eccl. 2:7-11 is immediately evident. The main issues mentioned in these four verses, those of slave ownership, the love of money, usury and a life of pleasure, are all attacked with equal vehemence. According to Gregory, Solomon's confession continues in these verses after previously confessing to his houses, vineyards, gardens and pools of water. The rebuke for such material possessions was made clear in the third homily but the severity of Solomon's flaunting of human and monetary possessions receives the greatest denunciation by Gregory.

In the interpretation of Eccl. 2:7, Gregory goes to great length to point out the evils of slave ownership but his underlying message is directed against the pride and boastful nature of those who practise such a system, who in this case is Solomon:

Now he reaches as it were a more serious indictment of things he has done, as a result of which one is accused of the feeling of Pride. For what is such a gross example of arrogance in the matters enumerated above...as for a human being to think himself master of his own kind? *I got me slaves and slave-girls, he says, and homebred slaves were born for me.* Do you notice the enormity of the boast? This kind of language is raised up as a challenge to God.¹⁵⁴

It is through pride that a human oversteps his nature and believes that he can own or have dominion over another human, that which is only the property of God. When humans ignore their own limits and boundaries, in their arrogance they try to acquire the power and likeness of God. The morality and ethics surrounding the practice of slavery is not ignored by Gregory and his arguments are strongly against the practice. His reasoning is based on the belief that an individual's ownership of another implies the assumption that one is divinely superior to the

¹⁵³ Ritter, 176.

¹⁵⁴ Hall, 73.

other. Since God has given humans the freedom of choice, who is the person who has the power to enslave another? To his audience, Gregory's homily would be blunt but not necessarily threatening to their way of life. Lionel Wickham suggests that the sermon would be delivered to a congregation that was predominately clergy and devout lay people who would not have practised slavery and so would not have been disturbed by the message.¹⁵⁵

Though the conceit involved in the ownership of slaves was strongly rebuked by Gregory, it is in the reading of Eccl. 2:8 where Gregory reserves his strongest condemnation. For according to Gregory it is here that Solomon confesses to the greatest of sins: the love of money. In admitting to the gathering of gold and silver, Solomon commits a grievous act in the eyes of Gregory. It is curious that after showing his obvious contempt for pride or the attempt by humans to acquire god-like status by owning others that Gregory should make the love of money the greater sin. He uses I Tim. 6:10 as his reference and that alone appears enough to validate his argument. The uselessness of gold and its ineffectiveness in bringing happiness is spelled out. The gathering of gold for its own sake is futile and offers no benefit to the body or soul. Gregory describes the desire for gold as taking an individual to the height of futility.¹⁵⁶

Continuing with Eccl. 2:8, Gregory speaks against usury and the perils of music and wine. The desire for gold, according to Gregory, leads men to commit acts of violence, which include murder and robbery but also the practice of interest on loans. By exacting interest from a person, another form of robbery and murder is committed. Wickham observes important parallels between Gregory's condemnation of usury and that of Aristotle in *Pol.* 1, 9f.¹⁵⁷ Gregory's condemnation of usury was in keeping with Church law, which forbade the practice of usury among the laity and clergy.¹⁵⁸ Once Solomon has the "money-disease" as Gregory calls it, this exposes his passion and prepares the way for even more intemperate and indecent behaviour. The perils of music and wine are that they provide false gratification to the senses and act as luxurious baits.

¹⁵⁵ Lionel Wickham, "Homily 4", in *Gregory of Nyssa: The Homilies on Ecclesiastes: An English Version with Supporting Studies*. Stuart G. Hall ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), 179-180.

¹⁵⁶ Hall, 78.

¹⁵⁷ Wickham, 182.

¹⁵⁸ Canon 17 of Nicaea is one of many canons that mention the law against usury.

In the final section of the fourth homily Gregory reads Eccl. 2:9-11 and speaks of insinuating pleasure and the Ecclesiast's experience of it. Gregory firstly compares the sense of pleasure to a snake. Just as a snake is difficult to remove so is pleasure once it slips into the soul. It is therefore in one's interest to avoid evil entering in the first place. In confessing all his pleasures and acknowledging the ultimate frivolity and futility of them all, Solomon teaches us from experience:

When, therefore, he has recounted his extravagance in detail...all the luxuries, as he names himself, which his wisdom studies, investigating and bringing to his understanding the kind of thing which he says he enjoyed with every sense, the eyes finding what pleased them and the soul having all it desired, without restraint – then he interprets the first word, declaring that all things are futile.¹⁵⁹

Gregory sees the lesson of Solomon as one that teaches us that there is no advantage found in wealth, ambition, indulgence, etc. for they are fleeting and as futile as writing in water.

The question of Solomon's position or persona in the biblical text, as viewed by Gregory, calls for re-examination. Since the identification of Solomon with the Ecclesiast is only by inference, as found in the first homily, similarly, by inference Solomon would be the anti-type of the Son of David. This presents a theological problem, namely, that one would expect a similarity between the two anti-types of the Son of David; Solomon and Christ. Gregory does not find it necessary to explicitly identify Solomon as an anti-type, but uses him and his life as examples and lessons, for Gregory finds that like Solomon, Christ experienced all things.

5. The Fifth Homily: Eccl. 2:12-26

The fifth homily begins with a preface in which Gregory explains how the turning from evil is the prelude to higher wisdom. The previous homilies served to show to the Church how to purge the soul of the desire for futility and instead apply the mind to truth and desire for the Good. It is again the Church that is being addressed and to whom the lesson is being taught. Once this fundamental lesson is understood of the need to escape from evil, then begins the virtuous life. According to Gregory the great Ecclesiast firstly experiences and

¹⁵⁹ Hall, 83.

eliminates futile things and now in Eccl. 2:12ff he directs us to what we should truly desire that which is actual, substantial and will remain forever.

Gregory interprets Eccl. 2:12-13 to mean that all that is real consists of higher wisdom. Real wisdom is differentiated from human wisdom, in that real wisdom, which he also calls counsel, is “none other than the Wisdom which is conceived of as before the universe”.¹⁶⁰ Real wisdom is equated with Christ, as Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God (I Cor. 1:24.). The role of human wisdom is to ponder the true works of real Wisdom and Counsel and consequentially be led on to the knowledge of good things. Gregory agrees with Solomon’s analogy of light and darkness in discerning good from evil. He elaborates further that darkness is unreal, as if there was nothing to obstruct the sun it would not exist but light is real and exists of itself. Similarly, evil arises from a deprivation of good, of being and does not exist in and of itself, unlike good, which is always present.

Eccl. 2:14 speaks of a wise man having his eyes in his head. Gregory questions the meaning of this obvious statement, as eyes are only found in the heads of all creatures. The statement is explained by understanding that there is an “analogy between what is thought to belong to the soul and the parts of the body”.¹⁶¹ The inference as to the meaning of the text is that the eyes of the wise are spiritually in his head. The eyes of a wise man should be raised up to its own Head, which is Christ. Gregory refers to Paul’s writings of Eph. 1:22, 4:15 and Col. 1:18, 2:19 in support. The conclusion is that by keeping his eyes on Christ, who represents perfect virtue, the wise man cannot fix his gaze on anything futile. Darkness, which is equivalent to futility, is the domain of the fool who walks in it.

Gregory outlines the rest of the homily, Eccl. 2:15-26, interpreting it as the summary of objections to the life of virtue and their refutation before dealing with each objection separately and in more detail. In raising these objections Solomon puts himself in the place of those who take a narrow view to life and who in their wickedness make such claims. Solomon then answers these hypothetical objections by teaching that virtue has advantage over evil and that concerns for the flesh are a distraction of the soul and are futile.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 88.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 89.

First Objection: The same fate for the wise and the fool (Eccl. 2:15). The objection is a valid one, for if death is the ultimate destiny for both the wise and the fool, then the quest for wisdom appears to be in vain. In response to this objection Gregory provides three interpretative answers:

First answer: The wise lives, the fool is forgotten (Eccl. 2:16-17). The distinction is made here between the death of the wicked, which is a physical death and that of the wise, whose virtue is immortal and so is exempt from death. In regard to the memory of the wise and fool being not remembered, Gregory interprets this verse as meaning that “memory of the wise is not with the fool for ever”.¹⁶² In stating that he loathes life and all that goes on under the sun (Eccl. 2:17), Solomon is confessing to his past wicked life and is filled with shame and disgust at what he has done. He considers himself as wicked according to Gregory, and so in the context of 2:15 sees his fate as the same as the fool.

Second answer: Another inherits (Eccl. 2:18-19). Gregory is tactful in his interpretation of Solomon’s loathing of the fact that all his wealth which was gained by toil and wisdom will in the end be inherited by a man who could be either wise or foolish. Gregory’s take on this complaint is that Solomon is actually saying that he did not enter a life of pleasure passively, not being dominated by its seductive power but rather through a deliberate choice and reason of wisdom. Therefore, Solomon’s complaint is not made out of resentment for his successor but rather concern for whether his inheritor will be controlled by passion or prompted by wisdom and temperance for the things that he has toiled.

Third answer: It is wicked to regard worldliness and virtuous life as the same (Eccl. 2:20-23). The interpretation of the text is that Solomon takes offence at those who show no sound judgement in differentiating between those who work hard for virtue and those who work solely for physical effort. Therefore the Ecclesiast pronounces wrong judgement on those who disregard the life superior in wisdom and who choose instead an evil and futile life.

Second Objection: Food and drink are God-given (Eccl.: 2:24-26). The second objection is spoken from the standpoint of an advocate of gluttony. For such a person questions that if what is outside us is considered futile how can

¹⁶² Ibid., 94.

food and drink which is taken into ourselves be considered to be futile also?

Gregory responds with two answers:

First answer: God gives to the good man wisdom, knowledge and joy (Eccl. 2:24). Gregory describes facetiously the man who would ask such a question as “the bullock-shaped man who is bent down over his own belly, and has got a gullet instead of a faculty of reason”.¹⁶³ The good man in contrast craves wisdom and knowledge and not physical food. The soul is nourished on prudence, wisdom, justice and freedom and not by bread and steaks.¹⁶⁴

Second answer: Worldly distraction drags the sinner down (Eccl. 2:26). Gregory concludes the fifth homily on this second answer. He finds the answer in Rom. 14:17 which states that “the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”. Those whose goal are bodily pleasures and judge this as good will find only futility. Gregory’s final hope is that by setting before his audience the comparisons between good and evil they will flee from what is condemned and instead put their effort into what is superior, the Good.

6. The Sixth Homily: Eccl. 3:1-4

Gregory’s aspiration for the sixth homily is to reveal the purpose of all that was described in the previous two chapters. The preceding passages have taught us that everything pursued in this life that is not advantageous to the soul is futile. Now what remains for Gregory is to learn from the text some kind of art or method on how to live virtuously. By exploring the depths of meaning of the words of the Ecclesiast, Gregory hopes to discover both a theoretical and practical philosophy that will provide advice on successful, virtuous living. Gregory begins, as he has repeatedly done in previous homilies, to differentiate between the material and sensory world, and the intellectual and immaterial one. Therefore according to Gregory the text deals with those things under the sun because sense, which can comprehend the material world, is unable to see beyond the visible. The purpose of the text is to help a person to go through the earthly life without stumbling and to contemplate solely the Good.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 97.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. Gregory describes each virtue as part of a meal: food, bread, sauce and drink respectively.

Gregory finds in Eccl. 3:1 two tests for the good of the world: time and measure. He observes that the Ecclesiast is stating a principle in this verse when he declares that “A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven.” Time is to be understood as ‘measure’, for time is a constant that accompanies all that happens. Gregory determines that season and measure are the criteria of good. The conjecture is that virtue is a measurement that contrasts between things. He denounces secular philosophers who firstly steal and then misuse the concept of measure and its application to life. Virtue is the philosophical mean that guards against excesses. Achieving the correct balance of good and right requires considered timeliness. Gregory explains his practical philosophy as follows:

...if measure lacks timeliness or timeliness lacks measure, even what is there is surely disabled, as well as what is missing. On the other hand, measure at the right moment and timeliness with measure produces results. ‘Time’, therefore, is understood by us to mean ‘measure’, because time is the measure of every particular thing that is measured.¹⁶⁵

He further explains the concept by providing numerous examples of what time measures, from pregnancy to crops. Before continuing with his interpretation of the next three verses Gregory inserts a disclaimer by saying that the Ecclesiast, who declares that there is a time for all things excludes the evil that results from a lack of proportion, that which is beyond time or falls short of it.

By setting out his understanding of time and season, Gregory then continues to interpret what he calls the “divinely-inspired oracles”.¹⁶⁶ The first of these oracles is Eccl. 3:2, “A time for being born and a time for dying”. The inherent manner in which birth and death belong together is the essence of Gregory’s interpretation. He regards the Ecclesiast’s use of death in connection with birth as a goad, to disturb or to wake those who are asleep in the fleshly existence of this present life and to rouse them to a mindfulness of the future and their immediate condition. Gregory refers to examples of the close connection between birth and death within scripture. The insight of Moses is commended for the order in which he wrote Genesis and Exodus. For Exodus, which represents a departure or death would naturally follow Genesis, a birth. Gregory points out that those things which are not within our control, like birth and death, cannot be

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 101-102.

described as either a virtue or a vice.¹⁶⁷ The argument returns to Gregory's introduction to the homily where he stresses the importance of the correct balance and timeliness of things. Paul is held up as a virtuous example of this thought for according to Gregory every moment was timely for the good death for holy Paul in Rom. 8:36 writes, "For your sake we face death all day long".¹⁶⁸ By dying daily to sin and a life of the flesh, a person lives not for himself but has Christ living in him and so is partaker of a timely death.

The second oracle in Eccl. 3:2 is one that speaks of a time to plant and a time to uproot the plant. Gregory firstly establishes who the gardener is and what the garden is. His interpretative cues are found in Jn. 15:1 where Christ declares that "my Father is the gardener" and I Cor. 3:9 where Paul refers to the Church as God's garden. Therefore, seeing that the Gardener can only plant good things, he weeds out what is bad (Matt. 15:13). It is interesting to note that Gregory singles out only one example of plants that are weeded out and they are the Pharisees whose "wickedness and unbelief, and insensitivity to the miracles done by God" caused such an action.¹⁶⁹ Gregory again reaffirms the blameless nature of God, as he does not plant or propagate wickedness, for these weeds are sown by another as related in the parable of the weeds in Matt. 13:24-30. The lesson taught in the gospel by Christ is now, according to Gregory, taught in the Ecclesiast's riddle, that there is "the same moment for both receiving the saving plant of faith and pulling up the weeds of unbelief".¹⁷⁰

The oracles of Eccl. 3:3 are interpreted in a similar manner and theology to those of the previous verse. The time for killing is not the slaying of another but rather of evil in the form of passions and pleasures. It is by killing such things that a person can then heal. Gregory illustrates this explanation with an analogy between physical disease and diseases of the soul. The medicine that is recommended to eliminate the parasites of evil is the teaching of the gospel.

A similar message is found in the second part of Eccl. 3:3, "A time for tearing down and a time for building up". It is the buildings of evil that must be

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 102.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 104.

¹⁶⁸ Gregory also refers to Rom. 6:6, Col. 3:5, II Cor. 4:10 and Gal. 2:19-20 in illustrating how Paul died to sin daily, so allowing Christ to live in him.

¹⁶⁹ Hall, 105.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 106.

torn down and in their place the temple of God, which is built in our souls, is to be constructed and the construction material is virtue.

The sixth homily closes with the contemplation of Eccl. 3:4. Gregory provides a simple explanation for the first part of the verse, “A time for weeping and a time for laughing”. The explanation for this verse is given by Christ himself in the Beatitudes when he says, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:4). According to Gregory the time for weeping is now and the time for laughter is to come through hope. Gregory then paints a vivid picture of a life that is hoped for. It is a life free from death, disease, selfishness and one where we will be able to share the realms of the divine. The argument is that if this is the life to come, who would not wish to spend his present life in lamentation and sadness. Gregory commends a pessimistic attitude to present life as it helps to produce virtuous conduct.

“A time for wailing and a time for dancing” is seen as repetition of the first part of Eccl. 3:4. Wailing is interpreted as a “passionate and profound lamentation” and dancing indicates “the strength of joy”.¹⁷¹ The wailing of the Israelites at Moses’ death (Deut. 34:8) and the dancing of David as he led the procession of the Ark (II Sam. 6:14-17) are given as scriptural examples of both behaviours. Gregory closes the homily by again speaking of the twofold nature of man, that of soul and body. He praises a miserable soul, one that is self-controlled and humble. The struggle of the present life will in the end be rewarded and the pessimist will be crowned.

7. The Seventh Homily: Eccl. 3:5-7

There is no introduction to the seventh homily and Gregory enters directly into a lengthy study of Eccl. 3:5, the throwing and collecting of stones. Timeliness is again the lesson to be applied here as the standard of goodness. It is the arm of the soul that throws stones at the enemy and then these same stones are recovered and used to strike the enemy continuously. Gregory provides this symbolic meaning from the outset and he goes to great length in arguing against a literal interpretation of the text. Persons, who consider the possibility that the text could be referring to the Law of Moses, where an individual is stoned for certain acts and in particular breaking the Sabbath, are regarded superficial in

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 109.

their interpretation.¹⁷² His main defence for his own understanding of the text is found in the second part of the verse, which speaks of the collecting of stones:

For my part, if the Ecclesiast had not claimed that collecting stones was also something timely, about which no law directs and no event in biblical history suggests a comparable precept, I might agree with those who interpret the passage through the law... But as it is, the addition of the requirement to collect stones again, which is prescribed by no law, leads us to a different interpretation, so that we may learn what kind of stones it is which after being thrown must again become the property of the thrower.¹⁷³

Gregory continues his argument against taking the law literally in the immediate sense by focusing on the law of stoning someone for breaking the Sabbath. He is outspoken in questioning the laws on keeping the Sabbath and their rationalism. His reasoning is that if sin is always a sin irrelevant of the time it was committed, then how can an act which is considered innocent, like the gathering of sticks, become unlawful by virtue of its time. But since these laws were given to us by God they must be observed. Gregory therefore insists on a more symbolic understanding of the Sabbath laws than a keeping to the letter of the law. Therefore a person is to be idle about vice and not collect the sticks of vice. Gregory sees the object of the Sabbath laws as a way to “keep the Sabbath” from wicked deeds.¹⁷⁴

The stones in Eccl. 3:5 are assumed to be spiritual stones and Gregory is somewhat disdainful in claiming that such an understanding is “surely not obscure to one who is in any way skilled in texts with mystic meaning”.¹⁷⁵ Gregory’s imagery is an attractive one, where he implores his audience to always keep their soul’s lap full of spiritual stones that can be continuously thrown at evils that can assault at anytime. The spiritual stones are to be collected from the divine Word, which is a constant source.

The second part of Eccl. 3:5 speaks of “A time for embracing and a time for shunning embraces”. Again Gregory deals with this text in a spiritually symbolic manner and interprets it through the words of David and Solomon. In Ps. 48:13 David speaks of walking around Zion and circling or embracing her. And in Prov. 4:8 where Solomon speaks of the spiritual marriage to wisdom, he

¹⁷² See Ex. 19:13, Lev. 24:10-23, Num. 15:32-36 and Deut. 17:5.

¹⁷³ Hall, 112.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 114.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 115.

describes this union by saying, “Hug her to you and she will exalt you; she will bring you honour if you embrace her”. From these texts it is determined that the object of the embrace is high principles or virtue, which is indicated allegorically by Zion according to Gregory. Therefore there is a time to embrace Zion and a time to be embraced by Wisdom. Consequently, if one is embracing the Good then it is also the right time to shun the embrace of the opposite, evil. Timeliness is, as always, of the essence.

Eccl. 3:6 is to be essentially understood in the same way as the previous verses. The time for seeking is all your life and the object to seek is the Lord.¹⁷⁶ What is to be lost is anything that spiritually damages the owner, the love of money, grudges and unbridled desire. By losing such possessions we become paupers in the devil’s treasures. The philosophy that the Ecclesiast has given according to Gregory is that by losing what is of earthly value we will gain higher things, the Good.

The second part of Eccl. 3:6, the keeping and discarding of things, appropriately follows the seeking and losing of things. It is obvious to Gregory that what is to be kept is that which was found by seeking, the Lord, and again the time for keeping is not confined to a single moment. The opposite of this virtuous find is to be discarded which are those things that cause the soul to slip and the mind to be distracted.

The philosophy of Eccl. 3:7 is considered to be more profound in its content. The verse speaks of “A time for ripping and a time for sewing” and Gregory observes from this a cyclic, holistic lesson as applied to the universe. The Platonic influence is clearly evident as in previous homilies the distinction between what is real and what is not, is made:

What really is, is Absolute Good, or whatever name beyond this one conceives to denote the indescribable Being.¹⁷⁷

Everything outside of the Good is deemed unreal and the opposite of virtue and all that is Good. Hence, we are torn or ripped away from all that is evil and to be sewn together to what is good. In applying philosophy to the Church, a person is torn away from the Church because of a sinful act and can only join again through repentance. Gregory goes further with this ecclesiastical application and

¹⁷⁶ Ps. 105, 104:4, and Is. 55:6 beseech one to seek the Lord and are used as scriptural references by Gregory.

states that by being ripped away from heresy, we are continually being sewn to true belief, so that the garment of the Church appears whole and untorn. The timely tearing away and the timely mending is the lesson.

The remainder of the homily is devoted to an extensive study of the second part of Eccl. 3:7, “A time for silence and a time for speaking”. Gregory firstly questions at which time it is better to stay silent. The answer is found in the words of Paul in Eph. 4:29, where the message is that only words that build up faith should be spoken, and I Cor. 14:34-35 which states that women should be silent in church.¹⁷⁸ The interpretation of silence and speech is harmonised with the lesson of ripping and sewing. Gregory explains this connection by stating that when the soul is torn away from evil and is attached to the Good, this process transcends explanation and is beyond words. When dealing with matters of the infinite, words are futile and one who tries to describe such things with verbal expressions unknowingly errs about the divine. The divine for Gregory is beyond knowledge and comprehension. Each earthly creation has its limits and is not capable of going beyond those preordained limits. And the Good which we are taught to seek is beyond creation and our understanding. When the soul tries to reach beyond its limit, Gregory compares it to a person on the edge of a cliff, if sensing they are losing their foothold grasps onto what is familiar rather than experiencing the fall of the unknown. Therefore when speech tries to reach beyond what is able to be spoken, then that is the time for silence and “to keep the wonder of that ineffable Power unexpressed in the secrecy of inward knowledge”.¹⁷⁹ The time for speaking is always when the words spoken are to express the good that is within our knowledge and to declare what is virtuous.

8. The Eighth Homily: Eccl. 3:8-13.

The eighth homily begins with the ending of the “A season is set for everything...” oration. Gregory devotes the majority of the final homily to Eccl. 3:8, “A time for loving and a time for hating; A time for war and a time for peace”. He first addresses the issue of timeliness as it applies to hate and love. In

¹⁷⁷ Hall, 121.

¹⁷⁸ Further Pauline references given are Col. 3:9 and Eph. 4:25, which counsel against lying and for speaking the truth. Examples are also given from the Old Testament; Ps. 37:14, 38:2-3, 13, 39, 44:2, 45, 70:8, 71, 77:2, and 78.

¹⁷⁹ Hall, 126.

order for benefit to be gained from each, the timely use of both dispositions is crucial. Gregory defines both emotions, providing a positive spin on what is hate:

The inner disposition towards what is desired, functioning through pleasure and passionate feeling, produces love; but aversion from what is unpleasant, and turning away from what is painful, is hatred.¹⁸⁰

Gregory points out that both dispositions can be used in either a profitable or unprofitable manner and from that a life of virtue or evil originates. The soul is infiltrated by the object of its affection, either good or evil. The discrimination between the two is imperative but there is a sense of despair on the part of Gregory that human nature cannot be trained in this objective. It is because of our definition of good as what is enjoyable and pleasant that we find it difficult to discern the true good. Our minds are dulled by our senses that seek pleasure and so this is the beginning of evil. In the same manner, what guides the soul towards evil is not love and not every kind of love has its right moment but “love for the only Loveable has”.¹⁸¹ Those things which seem good to everyone and are good always are said to be the truly good things, which for higher or precise thinkers are the divine and everlasting nature. The one who loves the good will be good himself because according to Gregory whatever we choose to love we become.¹⁸²

Gregory interprets the time for hating as a lesson from the Ecclesiast on what we should turn away from. The only thing that is to be hated is the “Inventor of evil, the Enemy of our life” and Mat. 5:43, “You shall hate your enemy” is quoted in support, so isolating a single phrase without taking the contextual meaning of the whole text into account.¹⁸³ Simply put, life is therefore the time for affection or love for God and the time to estrange oneself from or hate the Enemy. Gregory concludes his reading of Eccl. 3:8 by cautioning his audience about the consequences of love and hate and reaffirming God as the source of only good.

Once having identified the correct time for love and hate, Gregory continues and broadens this understanding in the reading of Eccl. 3:8, “A time

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 129.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 131.

¹⁸² Here Gregory refers to the sweet smell of Christ (II Cor. 2:15) as the good that is to be loved which generates a change in the one who takes pleasure in it.

¹⁸³ Hall, 134.

for war and a time for peace". Since we are to love the Loveable and hate the Enemy, it follows that we are to make peace with one and go to war with the other. Here Gregory uses the analogy of real warfare, describing the troops and weapons, to demonstrate the idea of the soul waging war on the Enemy. Temptation is the first onslaught on the soul and it becomes the spy of our strength, trying to arouse passions and desires. Gregory refers to Eph. 6:10-20 in describing the troop's only defence as the armour of God, which is "the whole armour of the Apostle".¹⁸⁴ Once it is taught with whom the war is to be fought and the modus operandi to be implemented, the one with whom peace is to be made is addressed. The peace is with God, the Commander of the allied troops. By laying aside worldly desires and evil then one can be joined to the true Peace. Gregory finally summarises the preceding eight verses as a lesson that teaches us timeliness so that we may be at peace with God and at war with the Adversary.

In response to Eccl. 3:9, "What value, can the man of affairs get from what he earns"? Gregory lists numerous examples of things that man does in this life that are futile. He concludes that all that man does amounts to nothing and is found to be even more meaningless after death.

Gregory shows how God's goodness is turned to bad uses in his reading of Eccl. 3:10-11 where the Ecclesiast observes:

the business that God gave man to be concerned with: He brings everything to pass precisely at its time; He also puts eternity in their mind, but without man ever guessing, from first to last, all the things that God brings to pass.

Gregory stresses the point that everything that comes from God is good on condition that right use is made of it and in a timely manner. But when right judgement about reality is perverted then this turns good things into the beginning of evils. He further emphasises this notion of the intrinsic goodness of God's creations and that their purpose is to testify and contemplate the Creator.

Gregory ends the eighth homily with a very brief explanation of Eccl. 3:12-13:

Thus I realised that the only worthwhile thing there is for them is to enjoy themselves and do what is good in their lifetime; also, that whenever a man does eat and drink and get enjoyment out of his wealth, it is a gift of God.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 138.

In Gregory's opinion what brings joy to life is keeping the commandments and living a virtuous life. Hope is a product of such a life and the reward is found in the next life, in the kingdom that is prepared (Matt. 25:34). The food and drink of the soul is found in looking towards the Good. The final appeal of Gregory is to look upon the Good ceaselessly.

F. Conclusion

In the Homilies on Ecclesiastes Gregory deals less with traditional theological topics and rather more with the problems of man. The predominant themes of the homilies are concerned with man's struggle to live a life of virtue and the continual training in the virtues, and Gregory considers Solomon to be an example of this struggle with worldly reality. Related issues and problems that Gregory returns to repeatedly include the improvement and transformation of the individual, the relation of the temporal life of the body and the survival of the soul after death, and the ultimate attainment of the likeness of God or the Good. In his attempt to make sense of these issues Gregory tries to complement his Platonic-Origenistic worldview and his notions of personal moral development.

Though Gregory covers only a modest part of Ecclesiastes in his homilies, it can be observed from his consistent reading of Eccl. 1:1-3:13 that the interpretation of the remainder of the text would not have revealed any significant surprises in terms of theology or philosophy. The homilies seem to be highly schematic, in that Gregory appears to have already decided on the ending or moral of Ecclesiastes and then joins the points to arrive at his premise. The mystical purpose of the homilies is to lead us to goodness or the Good. Through allegorical interpretation Gregory attempts to show that the object of Ecclesiastes is to lift the human spirit above the senses by the total abandonment of unreal things of the world and to dwell in communion with God. The importance of the soul is clearly evident in the homilies since for Gregory the soul alone is created in the image of God and so the repeated differentiation between the soul and body is crucial to his mysticism and his observed piety. His progressive asceticism greatly influences Gregory's allegorical interpretation of scripture and his concern with spiritual experiences. The encounter and union between Christ and the Church, and between the soul and its God are spiritual experiences that

he finds are dealt with by the Ecclesiast. The soul's continual journey towards God is intrinsically tied to the lessons and themes of the homilies.

As a result and response to the Eunomian controversy, Gregory repeatedly emphasises the ultimate incomprehensibility of God. In this context Gregory engages and extends the meaning of Qoheleth's חבל, that which is 'futile' or 'insubstantial,' and places it within Platonic thought. By applying *ματαιότης* only to the physical world Gregory endeavours to differentiate between the insubstantial present physical reality and the unseen world of the soul in which God can be found. Therefore the idea of *ματαιότης* only exists in the world of the body and not of the soul. The Divine is beyond knowledge but Gregory does suggest that the higher mind, that which is virtuous and focused on the Good, can grasp through analogy the transcendence of the Divine. Homily V describes the virtuous life as one that is centred on Christ who is himself the absolute personification of virtue and the source of all virtue. Also in the fifth homily the identification of wisdom with Christ is observed and stress is placed on the mind to ponder on real Wisdom, which is immortal.

The influence of Plato and Origen on Gregory's theology and philosophy is observed throughout the homilies. Gregory appears to find something congenial in Qoheleth to Neo-Platonism, agreeing with Qoheleth in certain concepts and diverging in others. Beginning with the first homily Gregory adopts the language of Christian Platonism and it is betrayed in his discussion of the nature of God, human development and change, and the place of man in the divine order of things. The idea that the visible world is actually not real is a Platonic argument that Gregory adopts in explaining the vertical structure of reality and the inferior nature of the visible world and the bodily life, and thus expanding on Qoheleth's notion of "under the sun". The transitory nature of the senses and the superior permanency of the mind and intellect are other examples of Platonic idioms. Gregory's basic view of the soul is also Platonic but he attempts to express it in Christian imagery and terminology. Where Gregory does differ from a Platonic position is in his understanding that the pursuit of truth is an instrument in the growth of virtue and not an end in itself.

The influence of Origen on Gregory's exegesis is equally great and is particularly evident in the fifth homily, where it is seen in both the approach to and the meanings derived from the text. As with the Platonic influence,

Gregory's own creativity and own moral theology and philosophy are also apparent through the Origenistic tone of his work. Unlike Origen, Gregory does not attempt to collect all other relevant scriptural passages when interpreting a verse but usually uses only one or two in comparison. This may be due to the reason that Gregory was already relying heavily on Origen's work and exegesis. The great paradox of Gregory's application of Neo-Platonism and response to the textual structures of Qoheleth is that he completely turns a materialist book into an idealist, Platonic, one.

Gregory's religious context and intellectual climate was one where the basic fundamental teachings of Christianity were still evolving. The nature of Christ, at least up until 381, had yet to be defined and was passionately debated within Ecclesiastical circles and in the wider Church. The conflict within Gregory was the desire to understand the Divine with the mind and at the same time, the acceptance of the limits of this instrument as inherently futile in achieving this end.

From a study on the homilies it is clear that Gregory is foremost a rhetorician but he also wishes to discuss issues seriously and earnestly. His language is persuasive, with the intent to convince his audience to the best of his ability. He is articulate and though borrowing heavily from his philosophical mentors, maintains a mind of his own. The tensions that exist in Gregory's own thought regarding the relationship between God and man, and the nature of God are challenges that create originality in his work. When applied to his reading of Ecclesiastes, the result is a series of homilies that are heavy in rhetoric and moralistic sermons. In the first homily Gregory makes it clear that he believes that the message of the Ecclesiast is directed to the Church and he does not disappoint in his subsequent exegesis of the text. The ultimate goal of the Church is godliness, achieved by the soul's rejection of vices and effort directed to live a virtuous life.

It is in regards to the identity of the Ecclesiast that Gregory faces a hermeneutical challenge. He does not wish to, or is unable to read the text literally and consequently interprets it allegorically and typologically, where he sees Qoheleth or the Ecclesiast, the Son of David as the "type" who finds fulfilment in Christ, the "anti-type". Gregory's view of the Ecclesiast is Christological, Christ is the incarnate Qoheleth, who by searching everything

under the heavens would by experience teach us the futility of non-being, the world, and to seek the Being, the Good, through a virtuous life. In his own rhetorical style, Gregory engages his audience in basic tenets, including those of free will, virtue as the mean, being and non-being, the soul and the body, the rational and the sensory, control of pleasures and the continual pursuit of the Good. The Homilies on Ecclesiastes present a chapter in Gregory's personal, intellectual, theological and philosophical development as revealed in his works. The lessons of the Ecclesiast appear to mark the second stage, the soul's way of the Cloud, in Gregory's (re)construction of his own reality and the Idea of Good.

Chapter Five

Matthew Henry

An Exposition of Ecclesiastes

A. Reformation Theology and Literature

Matthew Henry's contribution to biblical exposition and commentary is to be encountered in the post-reformation era just prior to the Age of Reason. Matthew Henry was a nonconformist Presbyterian minister during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The English Church was in a stage of transition and great upheaval prior to and during this period, as Puritans and nonconformists called for further reform within the Church of England and encountered strong opposition from royal, ecclesiastical and political ranks.¹ The religious revolution of seventeenth century England impacted the wider social and political communities and manifested itself through popular radicalism.²

The designation of these groups, nonconformists and Puritans, is not so clearly defined due to the fluidity within the English Church at the time.³ The terms, 'nonconformist' and 'Puritans', are often used interchangeably and as umbrella terms to include the various kinds of disparate groups that were calling for reform and that were evolving under the reformation movement.⁴ How these radical groups fit into the history of the English Church will be discussed in the following section but first will be considered the defining traits of Puritanism, especially as encountered in its religious literary works.

1. Puritanism

Definitions of Puritans are numerous but underlying them all, what may be understood as, is the essence of Puritanism, which was the desire for a

¹ Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace and Sentiment: A Study of Language of Religion and Ethics in England 1660-1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 90.

² J. F. McGregor and B. Reay, *Radical Religion in the English Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), preface. McGregor describes radical religion, that which existed during the English Revolution, as those "religious movements and ideas which were fundamentally in conflict with official, institutionalized, established religion and theology".

³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *From Puritanism to Nonconformity* (Bridgend: Evangelical Press of Wales, 1991), 10. Lloyd-Jones argues that 1662 was the end of Puritanism and the beginning of nonconformity.

⁴ Rivers, 90. Rivers finds that the terms, 'nonconformist' and 'puritan', are applied in different senses and not uniformly but where both mean much the same in a technical, disciplinary sense.

complete reformation of the Church of England, into one that was based solely on Scripture.⁵

It was a purification, an effort, wise or unwise, to rid the Christianity of England...[of] everything in doctrine, discipline, ceremonial, which during the Middle Ages had been added to the Gospel of Christ. Puritanism was not primarily a preference for one form of church government rather than another; but it was that outlook and teaching which puts its emphasis upon a life of spiritual, personal religion, an intense realization of the presence of God, a devotion of the entire being to Him.⁶

The Puritan emphasis on morality, conduct and ethics led to misunderstanding and a popular image of Puritans as spiritual killjoys was developed and propagated. This mis-portrayal is questioned and refuted by many, and here Christopher Hill makes the case for mainstream Puritanism, which he considers to have been the ideology of the English Revolution:

We should think of John Milton, lover of poetry and music, of Oliver Cromwell, lover of music and wine...Bunyan thought that a teetotaler lacked the spirit of God. The charge of being killjoys may perhaps be laid at the door of some nonconformists at a much later date, after they had been excluded in 1660-62 from central and local government and from the universities.⁷

The period of the English Revolution, 1640-1660, was marked by a period of intense literary activity, especially in Puritan literature.⁸ Puritan literature flourished during this time and would form the basis for study and consultation by later revivalists, like the Wesleyans, in the eighteenth century.⁹ Puritan writers had their own view of the Bible, which also differed among themselves, and employed it accordingly to produce a body of literature that had its own system of thought and imagery.¹⁰ The common factor among the

⁵ David Underdown, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England 1603-1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 41. Underwood provides a more sociological definition of Puritanism, in that it was, among other things, a response to social disorder and instability. His book aptly places the religious and political components of the English Revolution within their social context, where focus is placed on the effect on and the response of ordinary people at this time.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷ Christopher Hill, *Some Intellectual Consequences of the English Revolution* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), 53-54.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 46-52. Hill comments that "one creation of the Revolution was a steady reading public which may have been starved in the generation after 1660".

⁹ Lloyd-Jones, 8-9.

¹⁰ John Ray Knott, *Sword of the Spirit. Puritan Responses to the Bible* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980). Knott traces in his book the evolution of Puritan spirituality through their literature. In the book's introduction he introduces the five genres which he

writings of the Puritan tradition was the concern on the part of the author to convey and reveal the original simplicity and plainness of the Bible. Elaborate interpretation of scripture and excessive rhetoric were denounced and a similar restraint extended to sermon style.¹¹

When it came to preaching, emphasis was placed on content rather than on technique.¹² The kinetic understanding that the Bible was “living”, also had a great impact upon those who produced Puritan literature.¹³ The need to discover the simple meaning of scripture did not mean that Puritans avoided the complexities and detail involved in scriptural interpretation. They acknowledged the necessity for knowing Hebrew and Greek, and that interpretation should be different to the likeness of faith.¹⁴ It was common Puritan custom to read the Old Testament typologically and to perceive it as foreshadowing the New Testament.¹⁵ There was also a strong connection between preaching and writing and in turn the writer and the reader.¹⁶ Reading was greatly advocated and charitable and wealthy people were encouraged to set up schools to teach poor children to read.¹⁷ The reading of non-religious books was frowned upon but the availability of substantial religious works was significant. B. M. Berry in his study of Puritan religious writing summarises the characteristics of works produced by Puritan theologians:

...inflating a single thesis into a mammoth, systematic work, refining arguments, spinning out implications, clarifying assumptions, weaving an ever more tightly constructed web out of a few central propositions. Puritan writing on any topic tends therefore to be profoundly repetitious... At the same time, however, the urge for self-consistency which produces this sort of monumental repetition also makes Puritan writing extraordinarily vital.¹⁸

In general, Puritan literature can be identified by its iconoclastic, plain and highly theologising style, where the recovery of simple scriptural truths remained

examines: “the Puritan sermon (Sibbes), meditation (Baxter), the radical tract (Winstanley), poetry and polemical prose (Milton), spiritual autobiography and religious allegory (Bunyan).”

¹¹ Ibid., 5.

¹² Boyd M. Berry, *Process of Speech: Puritan Religious Writing & ‘Paradise Lost’* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 1.

¹³ Knott, 12-41. This kinetic notion of the ‘living’ Word emerged in the argument over the authority of scripture in the sixteenth century and put forward by Tyndale and his followers.

¹⁴ Ibid., 36.

¹⁵ Knott, 37.

¹⁶ Rivers, 115. Rivers notes the “emphasis on the interdependent roles of preacher and hearer is repeated in the relationship between writer and reader”.

¹⁷ Ibid., 117.

¹⁸ Berry, 4.

central. Though the desire to discover the single literal sense of scripture was the basis for Puritan hermeneutics, affecting in turn their religious works, typological and allegorical interpretative styles also played an important role in Puritan writings.¹⁹

John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is probably the most vivid and well-known example of Puritan Literature, though not in its most conventional sense.²⁰ The work is seen as both a reaction to what Bunyan considered erroneous Christian doctrine, as exemplified by the Church of Rome and England, and also as the response of a concerned minister for fallen man.²¹ Bunyan fitted to some extent in to the Puritan literary style of practical divinity but his use of allegorical figures, the ability to combine the "incisively realistic with the typically representative" set his works apart.²² In keeping with Puritan literary tradition he depended fully on scripture for his inspiration and basis of truth, and was also deeply interested in the real experiences of man.²³

2. Calvinism

The theological roots of the Puritans and nonconformists can be traced back to Calvinism.²⁴ As with Puritanism, the historical context of the influence of Calvinism in the English Church will be discussed in the next section, but here the characteristics of Calvinism, in particular their approach to study of the Bible, will be explored. It is difficult to succinctly outline the doctrines, dominant themes of Calvinist thought and its approach to the interpretation of the Bible.²⁵ As with Puritanism, simplicity and clarity in regards to scripture, were common

¹⁹ Thomas H. Luxon, *Literal Figures: Puritan Allegory and the Reformation Crisis in Representation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), ix. Luxon also refers to the "single literal sense" as the "tongue sense".

²⁰ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. ed. N. H. Keeble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). John Bunyan (1628-88) had an extensive literary career, producing over sixty works. Keeble notes in the introduction that his literature was "marked by an uncompromising zeal, a trenchant directness of style, and a particular concern for the spiritual welfare of common people".

²¹ *Ibid.*, x.

²² *Ibid.*, xi. Keeble observes that "although it may have been intended but to illustrate and impress a particular conception of Christian life, and so apparently of interest to but a limited audience, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is lifted above the body of seventeenth-century Puritan writing precisely because its inspired author was liberated from the constraints of his theology".

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 1-2.

²⁵ Kendall provides a lucid chapter on Calvin's doctrine of faith (13-28).

objectives.²⁶ J. T. Macneill in his study of the character of Calvinism notes the complexity and uniqueness of Calvin's theology and ideology, and here he describes Calvin's approach to and view of the Bible:

His whole study of the Bible reflects the humanist interest in words and their meanings. Calvin's writings must be first of all thought of as the utterance of deeply felt religious convictions that resulted from the primary experience of a sudden conversion in which he felt himself arrested and redirected by God. The Scriptures were his guide, authority, and his arsenal. Calvin was Calvin.²⁷

Calvin's own personal experience of God had a direct effect on his theological emphasis on divine sovereignty and election.²⁸ For Calvin, God manifests himself to man in two ways; through his physical, created universe and through his Word.²⁹ Man finds that he can know God to a point but the abstractness of God remains a mystery. The role of Scripture was to provide the saving knowledge of God and for Calvin, revelation was progressive and developmental.³⁰ The main doctrines and understanding of Calvinism are, of course, to be found in Calvin's *Institutes* but all his writings should be considered to form a clearer and better understanding.³¹ The Church was central to Calvinism where the profession of faith and adherence to doctrinal teachings by its members was paramount.³²

B. The History of the British Nonconformist Movement

During the reign of Henry VIII the Protestant reformation took place. A few of those in the now reformed English Church felt that the reforms were not comprehensive or radical enough and they became known as the Puritans.³³ When Queen Mary took the throne (1553-58) there was a backlash against the Protestantism created by Henry VIII, and many reformers, especially Puritans,

²⁶ John Thomas Macneill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 201.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 203.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 209.

³⁰ Macneill, 212-3. Calvin regarded both testaments the Word of God but he speaks of the "superior excellence of the New Testament over the Old".

³¹ David C. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), vii. Steinmetz provides a valuable look at Calvin in the context of various theological and exegetical traditions. Due to constraints of this research a detailed look at all of Calvin's writings will not be possible.

³² Macneill, 214. Calvin distinguished between the true universal Church, which is invisible and known only to God, and the visible Church.

³³ Keeble, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 10.

were put to death.³⁴ The beginnings of the nonconformist movement can be traced back to Calvinism, when many English Protestants during the reign of 'Bloody Mary' went into exile in the Reformed cities of Geneva and Zurich.³⁵ In Geneva exiles became well versed in Calvinistic theology.³⁶ When Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558 the national church reverted to Protestantism and many of these exiles returned to England. Elizabeth I maintained a prelatical system of governance³⁷, a design which was opposed by reformers within the church.³⁸ The returned exiles did have some effect, for they introduced Calvinism to the English Church, and its influence can be seen in the *Book of Common Prayer* (1559) and the *Thirty-Nine Articles* (1563).³⁹

Though theologically Calvinist at the time the Church of England was thought by the growing number of nonconformists as not being radical enough in its reforms. They felt that the Anglican Church should adopt the model of the Reformed churches on the Continent. Within the group of nonconformists different theological emphases existed, marking the beginnings of both Presbyterianism and Puritanism:

Presbyterianism and Puritanism came to be inseparable from rigid and consistent Calvinism, but both do have their native English antecedents which antedate Calvin. Calvinism gives system and direction to the protest against episcopacy and Anglo-Catholic theology.⁴⁰

The division between the Puritans, Presbyterians and a third group, known as Separatists, gradually grew in the time of Elizabeth I, and so did the oppression of these radical groups.⁴¹ The struggle between these nonconformists and the Church of England continued even when James I, who was Presbyterian and doctrinally Calvinist, came to the throne in 1603.⁴² When Charles I came to the

³⁴ Ibid., 13. John Hooper, considered to be the father of Puritanism, was martyred during the reign of Queen Mary.

³⁵ John H. Bratt, ed., *The Rise and Development of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), 109.

³⁶ Kendall, 309-311. The early influence of Calvinism in England is seen with the appearance in printed English of; 'Calvinian' (1566), 'Calvinism' (1570) and 'Calvinist' (1579).

³⁷ Prelatical system of governance was church government by prelates. Prelates were those in high ecclesiastical office, like (arch)bishop.

³⁸ J. A. McHugh, "Presbyterianism," in *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Vol XII, (On-line ed.), passim.

³⁹ Bratt, 109.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Lloyd-Jones, 17.

⁴² Ibid., 18. James I called for, what became known as, the Hampton Court Conference to discuss the Puritans petition for reform but little was achieved due to strong Anglican

throne in 1625 there was even greater persecution of the Puritans and many fled England.⁴³ The outbreak of the Civil War in 1642, which was a direct result of the growing tensions between the Church establishment and the reformers, did not bring a clear resolution to the warring factions.⁴⁴ Parliament became the forum for apocalyptic sermons and the milieu for what B. Raey and J. F. McGregor call 'radical religion':

It was a religion in the form of militant Protestantism or Puritanism – hostility to the Church of Rome, attachment to Calvinist doctrine, an obsession with preaching and the message of the Scriptures, a penchant for godly discipline, and a vision of the New Jerusalem.⁴⁵

This rebellion was validated and justified in these religious terms and contemporary events were given a divine angle. In 1647 the prelacy, which was upheld by Elizabeth I, was abolished by Parliament and the Westminster Confession of Faith was presented to Parliament by the Westminster Assembly.⁴⁶ The role of the nonconformists and their adopted Calvinist theology and ecclesiology was very significant in the principle of government and polity at the time:

In England the very basis of the parliamentary democratic system is the secular role of Calvinism in the form of seventeenth-century Puritanism, Presbyterianism and Separatism.⁴⁷

The execution of Charles I in 1648 came as a direct result of his refusal to recognise the rights of Parliament and of his leanings towards Catholicism.⁴⁸ This action was supported by many Puritans and Presbyterians but their moment of power under the rule of Oliver Cromwell was short lived. Any temporary gains made by the presbyterian position during this period of conflict were set

opposition. The main outcome of the conference was that Authorised King James Version of the Bible was published in 1611.

⁴³ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁴ B. Raey, "Radicalism and Religion in the English Revolution: An Introduction", in *Radical Religion in the English Revolution* J. F. McGregor and B. Raey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 2. Raey emphasises the fact that it was the issue of church reform that helped to polarise England along royalist and parliamentarian lines.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ McHugh, passim.

⁴⁷ Bratt, 103.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 110. Raey comments that "religion was both the legitimizing ideology of the rulers and...the revolutionary idiom of the ruled" (3).

back when the monarchy was restored in 1660.⁴⁹ Under the reign of Charles II, neither Protestant nonconformists nor Roman Catholics were tolerated.⁵⁰

In 1662 Parliament passed the Act of Uniformity which required that all ministers in the Church of England had an episcopal ordination and had to vow to use the *Book of Common Prayer*.⁵¹ Many nonconformist ministers refused to comply with this edict and about two thousand of them were expelled from the Church of England.⁵² In spite of persecution, these ministers nurtured and attended to covert congregations. Though congregations were independent in what was forming into a loose organisation, there were attempts to have some appearance of ordination by presbytery. These nonconformists or dissenters were eventually to form Baptist, Congregationalist, and Presbyterian congregations but for now they remained a disparate group of nonconformists.

The accession of William and Mary to the throne in 1688 brought some manner of respite to the growing Presbyterian movement. Licenses to meet were granted to certain nonconformist ministers and congregations. There was still no organised Presbyterian system at this time but in the course of the next thirty years over one thousand meeting houses were established.⁵³ Attempts were made to organise and form alliances between Presbyterian and independent ministers but theological and doctrinal differences prevented any formal union from taking place.⁵⁴

C. Matthew Henry: Nonconformist Presbyterian Minister

It was during this seventeenth century period of ecclesiastical turmoil that Matthew Henry was born. His father, Philip Henry, was a scholarly Anglican minister who had been educated at Westminster and Christ Church, Oxford.⁵⁵ He

⁴⁹ R. Buick Knox, "Presbyterianism in England", in *Encyclopaedia of the Reformed Faith*. (Edinburgh: Saint Andrews Press, 1992), 300.

⁵⁰ Hill, 24.

⁵¹ Robert William Dale, "The Nonconformists" in a Series of Articles contributed to The Daily Telegraph, *Christianity in Great Britain* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1874), 118-119. Dale points out that "no statute ever disqualified a Protestant Nonconformist from sitting in the House of Commons".

⁵² Lloyd-Jones, 5.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Stewart A. Dippel, *The Professionalization of the English Church from 1560 to 1700. Ambassadors for Christ* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999). This is a significant work that looks at how the English Revolution related to the professionalisation of clergy in general, without imposing doctrinal categories.

⁵⁵ Alexander B. Grosart, *Representative Nonconformists: with the message of their life-work for to-day. I. John Howe: intellectual sanctity. II. Richard Baxter: seraphic fervour. III.*

married an heiress, Miss Matthews of Broad Oak, Flintshire.⁵⁶ When Philip Henry was later expelled, along with two thousand other ministers,⁵⁷ from his position under the Act of Uniformity (1662) the family depended on the sizeable inheritance of Matthew Henry's mother.⁵⁸ Matthew Henry was the only boy of five surviving siblings and his childhood, as portrayed by Rev. Hamilton, was one of pure "domestic happiness".⁵⁹ His father, now without a parish, continued to prepare sermons in his well-stocked library and provided strong spiritual leadership to the family. It was a deeply religious Puritan household and attendance at morning and evening worship was strongly required from all. This worship would prove to be extremely influential in Matthew Henry's later liturgical and exegetical work. During worship Philip Henry would comment on a specific passage of scripture and encourage his children to write analogous explanatory notes of their own. These notes and his father's "pithy sayings" were incorporated into and created a rudimentary commentary on the Bible that would be the source of Matthew Henry's later biblical expositions.⁶⁰

Matthew's eldest sister Sarah was taught Hebrew by their father and maintained an intensive personal study of the Bible throughout her life. She married a farmer and devoted herself to charitable work and her household.⁶¹ The second and third sisters, Catherine and Eleanor lived equally pious lives. The youngest sister, Ann, was the favourite of their father because of her sweet, obliging nature and her propensity to learn.⁶²

Matthew Henry was born October 18, 1662 at Broad Oak, the only son and the oldest surviving child.⁶³ As early as the age of three, Matthew is said to have been able to read the Bible and displayed a love for books.⁶⁴ His eagerness to learn and an immoderate devotion to his studies were tempered by his mother

Samuel Rutherford: devout affection. IV. Matthew Henry: sanctified common-sense (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1879), 267.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁵⁷ Rivers, 92. Most of the ministers who were expelled were Presbyterians.

⁵⁸ James Hamilton, *Lives of Bunyan, Henry, and Hall* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1853), 72.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Grosart, 267. Grosart also comments on how the experiences of persecution and silencing under the Act of Uniformity in Matthew Henry's early childhood, probably half-consciously and half-unconsciously entered into his later commentary of the Bible.

⁶¹ Hamilton, 74-75.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 79.

⁶³ Grosart, 266.

⁶⁴ Hamilton, 80.

who encouraged him also to spend time outdoors. Due to the times, Matthew did not have any formal schooling but was home-schooled mostly by his highly academic father and by a tutor, Mr. Turner, who lived at Broad Oak at that time.⁶⁵ Turner's influence on Matthew, in comparison to his father, is not thought to be notable, even though he had an interest in incredible narratives and later became a writer.

It is obvious that the greatest influence on Matthew's life was his father, Philip Henry, who inspired his son and was instrumental in the formation of Matthew's character, his academic interests and his spiritual maturity and beliefs. As his father's constant companion, Matthew was a keen observer of his father's spiritual conduct and his devotion to biblical studies. Family worship was a forum for him to share his expositions and revelations. From the writings of Rev. James Hamilton, you are led to believe that the Henry household was a picture of serenity, where a "hallowed sunshine irradiated" during the week and "through the Sabbath atmosphere every peaceful feeling and heavenly influence fell in sacred and softening intensity".⁶⁶ The tranquil harmony enjoyed between parents and children, as portrayed by Rev. Hamilton, provided an environment in which Matthew flourished. The home was frequently visited by other ministers, some being renowned contemporaries of Philip Henry.⁶⁷ The interaction with these men resulted in a strong and lasting impression on Matthew and greatly influenced his decision to enter the ministry.

In 1680, when Matthew was eighteen, his father took him to study at the academy of Thomas Doolittle in Islington.⁶⁸ Mr. Doolittle was an active nonconformist minister and attracted large gatherings at his meeting-place. Due to the turbulent ecclesiastical climate of the time the academy was closed and Matthew returned home to Broad Oak.⁶⁹ By this time Matthew was conversant with Latin, Greek, Hebrew and a number of other languages.⁷⁰ In 1685 he

⁶⁵ Grosart, 267. Grosart describes his paternal training as unparalleled and likens it to "heaven on earth".

⁶⁶ Hamilton, 82.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 83. The renowned contemporaries named by Rev. Hamilton are Richard Steel, Francis Tallents, John Meldrum, William Cook and Edward Lawrence.

⁶⁸ Grosart, 267.

⁶⁹ It was at the time when the Act of Uniformity was still enforced and nonconformists were driven underground.

⁷⁰ Grosart, 268. This linguistic knowledge was utilised in his commentary on the Bible and Gregory's knowledge of Hebrew is evident in his exposition of Ecclesiastes.

returned to London to study Law at Gray's Inn, more as a back-up vocation than from any real desire to go into the profession.⁷¹ Matthew's real wish to become a minister remained in spite of the fact that as a nonconformist minister he would not be free to conduct his ministry but in 1686 he returned to Broad Oak and began to preach in the surrounding areas.⁷² In 1687 when James II granted a "licence to Dissenters to preach", Matthew Henry's long held aspiration to become a minister was fulfilled when he was ordained as a Presbyterian minister.⁷³ It was a momentous event in his life and on the eve of his ordination he reflects on his motivation to join the ministry and he also shares some thoughts on the growing crisis within Christendom at the time:

I think I can say with confidence that I do not design to take up the ministry as a trade to live by, or to enrich myself, out of the greediness of filthy lucre. No! I hope I aim at nothing but *souls*... I can appeal to God that I have no design in the least to maintain a party, or to keep up any schismatical faction; my heart rises against the thoughts of it. I hate dividing principles and practices, and whatever others are, I am for peace and healing; and if my blood would be a sufficient balsam, I would gladly part with the last drop of it for the closing up of the bleeding wounds of differences that are amongst true Christians.⁷⁴

That same year Matthew Henry married Miss Hardware but she died eighteen months later of smallpox.⁷⁵ He then married Miss Warburton of Grange, with whom he had one son and five daughters.⁷⁶ Little else is known about his personal life, apart from the fact that his son, who did inherit his father's pious way of life, later became a Member of Parliament for Chester. Matthew Henry ministered to the Presbyterian congregation in Chester from 1687 to 1712. It was an ideal parish for him, being located not far from Broad Oak and also his sisters, who after their marriage remained in the vicinity. He had a sizeable congregation, many of whom were educated and so they provided Matthew Henry with a stimulating ministry. He engaged in a fervent study of the Bible and compiled lengthy series of sermons, some lasting years. His choice of

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid. He was first invited to preach by Mr. Illidge of Nantwich and from there his oratory skills became more widely known.

⁷³ Ibid., 269.

⁷⁴ Hamilton, 86-87.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 103.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

subjects or topics fell along very ordered Puritan lines. One prolonged series of sermons followed the outline of putting off a sin and putting on a virtue:

Put off pride, and put on humility...
 Put off melancholy, and put on cheerfulness...
 Put off vanity, and put on seriousness...
 Put off self, and put on Jesus Christ.⁷⁷

Matthew Henry's sermons and thinking were deeply embedded in Puritan ideology. The ideological influence of Puritanism in all aspects of the Reformed tradition is to be greatly expected, as it was the driving force behind those who called for a more radical religious reform. Puritans called for a purification of the Church of England, where rituals and practices as deemed superfluous by them and not in line with the simplicity of biblical teaching, were to be abandoned. These perceived trappings included ceremonial rites, aspects of the liturgy and furnishings. The look they were after within the church was one that was plain and simple. The minister was to also reflect this look in his own appearance and demur, wearing a simple black gown and focusing his ministry on preaching and the exposition of scripture.⁷⁸

Matthew Henry's sermons and writings appealed to the Puritan roots of Presbyterianism. His sermon topics, as seen in the putting off and putting on scheme of sermons, were ordered and disciplined. The sermon topics were also in keeping with this tradition, where the simple truths of scripture were to be revealed as a guide to living a religious life. Another series of sermons was labelled "Penitent Reflections and Pious Resolutions", which drew greatly from the Psalms and Job, and again focused on the departure from sin and the resolution to do what is right.⁷⁹ Apart from his Sunday sermons, he also gave weekly lectures and one epic series of lectures entitled "Scriptural Questions" began with Gen. 3:9 in October 1692 and ended with Rev. 18:18 in May 1712.⁸⁰ Biblical exposition in the Puritan manner was Henry's greatest priority and his writings provide valuable examples of "precritical spiritualizing exegesis".⁸¹

⁷⁷ Ibid., 88-89. The examples given are only four in a series of twenty sermons following identical parameters.

⁷⁸ Dewey D. Wallace, "Puritanism, English" in *Encyclopaedia of the Reformed Faith* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrews Press, 1992), 310.

⁷⁹ Hamilton, 89.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 90.

⁸¹ David F. Wright, "Matthew Henry," in *Encyclopaedia of the Reformed Faith*, (Edinburgh: Saint Andrews Press, 1992), 171.

During his time in Chester, Matthew Henry wrote what is to be considered his most lasting work, the multi-volume commentary, *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments*. It was a labour of love that was built on his early contemplations as a child when his father encouraged him and his sisters to keep notes as they studied the Bible during family worship. Unfortunately he only reached as far as Acts and the remaining books were left to others to complete after his death in 1714.

Matthew Henry's ministry took him beyond his congregation in Chester and he was actively involved in ministering to the wider community. Rev. Hamilton sums up Henry's ministry when he writes that, "the great business of Mr. Henry's life was the cultivation of piety in himself and others".⁸² Matthew Henry kept a diary that was full of gratitude for God's benevolence and recognition of His intervention in his life. Apart from his diary he also kept an occasional journal in which he recorded significant events, like the deaths of his father and mother, and matters of contemplation. His personal spiritual struggle is well attested in these pages; repeatedly he lists his shortcomings and in one entry on Oct. 18, 1697 he takes stock of his life so far:

I was affected this morning when alone, in thinking *what* I was born – a rational creature, a helpless creature, and a sinful creature. *Where* I was born – in the church of God, in a land of light, in a house of prayer. *What* I was born for – to glorify God my Maker, and prepare to get to heaven.⁸³

His devotion to God and to his faith was complete and his quest for holiness was a constant battle. He rose very early in the morning and spent hours poring over scripture, studying until mid-day or later. He himself attests to his rather reclusive behaviour:

I am always best when alone. No place is like my own study; no company like good books, especially the book of God.⁸⁴

The nature of his ministry, though, did not allow for him to become a hermit. He was a guide and spiritual advisor for his congregation, friends and family. When his *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments* was first published, while still in Chester, his scholarly reputation spread further afield and he was head hunted by a number of churches in London. He declined many offers but he

⁸² Hamilton, 91.

⁸³ Ibid., 95.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 99.

finally relented and accepted a post in Hackney and began work there on May 18, 1712.⁸⁵ It was seen as an opportunity for him to broaden his ministry and to reach more souls. The frequency of preaching and lecture appointments also correspondingly increased and sometimes he addressed gatherings more than once in a day. It was an intense period of his ministry and Henry relished the new challenges. His ministry in Hackney, though, did not last long, for once when returning to London from Chester he was thrown from his horse and died the next day on June 21, 1714.⁸⁶

D. The Writings of Matthew Henry

The numerous writings of Matthew Henry serve as the legacy to this nonconformist minister. He published a number of sermons, tracts, and treatises, including the *Pleasantness of a Religious Life* and a *Communicant's Companion*. His most enduring work is his commentary on the Bible, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testaments*, which has had numerous editions and abridgements since its first publication in 1706. His journal records the beginning of the work on Nov. 12, 1704 and the enormity of the task that lay ahead of him:

This night, after many thoughts of heart, and many prayers concerning it, I began my notes on the Old Testament. It is not likely I shall live to finish it, or if I should, that it should be of public service, for I am not *par negotio*; yet in strength of God, and, I hope, with a single eye to his glory, I set about it that I may endeavour something, and spend my time to some good purpose, and let the Lord make what use he pleaseth of me. I go about it with fear and trembling, lest I exercise myself in things too high for me. The Lord help me to set about it with great humility.⁸⁷

As in his sermons, he was systematic and ordered in his approach to the exegesis and interpretation of the biblical text.⁸⁸ Beginning with Genesis he finished his exposition of the Pentateuch in September 1706.⁸⁹ In the preface to the First Volume, Matthew Henry outlined the six principles with which he approached the text and with which he expected his readers also to be in agreement:

1. That religion is the one thing useful.

⁸⁵ Wright, 171.

⁸⁶ Hamilton, 101. The events surrounding Gregory's death and its exact date are disputed. Grosart speaks of Henry as having had a serious illness that lasted for nearly a month until his death on June 22, 1714 (270-271).

⁸⁷ Ibid., 107-108.

⁸⁸ Berry, 8. Berry notes that "The essence of Puritan style is a quest for a permanent, fixed, static, even rigid order".

⁸⁹ Ibid., 108.

2. That divine revelation is necessary to true religion.
3. That divine revelation is not now to be found nor expected any where but in the scripture of the Old and New Testament.
4. That the scriptures of the Old and New Testament were purposely designed for our learning.
5. That the holy scriptures were not only designed for our learning, but are the settled standing rule of our faith and practice.
6. That therefore it is the duty of all Christians diligently to search scriptures, and it is the office of ministers to guide and assist them therein.⁹⁰

Each principle was expanded upon and provided with scriptural support to strengthen the argument. It is interesting to note that Ecclesiastes is drawn upon as the first key text for the first principle. Eccl. 12:13 is seen to be the foundation for this and subsequent principles, for it summarises for Matthew Henry the fact that to be religious, that is to keep the commandments, is the whole and only reason behind man's existence. What is stressed is the idea of religion and being religious. One of his aims in writing the exposition was to make the Biblical text as plain and simple as possible to the reader.⁹¹ His objectives appear to have been achieved, at least among his later Presbyterian readers, as was witnessed by Rev. Grosart:

A commentary that magnifies the simple Gospel...This Commentary went to the roots of people's everyday life. This commentary was the interpreter to them of the Bible. This commentary was the opener of eyes to see and of hearts to receive and of consciences to obey "the truth."⁹²

Rev. Grosart's praise of Henry's commentary is effusive indeed, for he goes on to express his belief that the work was the "most outstanding conservative spiritual force of the eighteenth century".⁹³

Henry rejects any suggestion that he has any other agenda than to provide spiritual guidance and teaching to others and he tries to distance himself from any theological controversy:

⁹⁰ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), x.

⁹¹ Knott, 4. Henry remains within Puritan tradition, where to recover the original simplicity of scripture was paramount.

⁹² Grosart, 276, 281. In the context of his exegetical contribution, Grosart characterises both Henry and his commentary as "sanctified common-sense" (286). "By his 'common-sense' he fell in with the tendency of things in the eighteenth century, while in its being 'sanctified' common-sense, he retained the virtue of Puritanism in the seventeenth for the eighteenth century" (289).

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 281.

I have not obliged myself to raise doctrines out of every verse or paragraph, but only have endeavoured to mix with the exposition such hints or remarks as I thought profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, aiming in all to promote practical godliness, and carefully avoiding matters of doubtful disputation and strifes of words.⁹⁴

His goodly intentions were indeed suited to the ecclesiastical climate of his time. For his commentary to be seen to prejudice a particular doctrinal viewpoint could have been damaging. The nonconformist movement, and the Presbyterian branch to which Matthew Henry belonged, was still very much in its infancy and the push for reform remained resolute. Henry's avoidance of sectarianism is enthusiastically attested to by Rev. Grosart, who himself falls prey to the very virtue he is recognising:

This commentary is FINELY CATHOLIC. The word—like Charity and others—has deteriorated and been usurped by that Church which is flagrantly uncatholic; but it is the one word that I can think of whereby to designate the unsectarianism of the Commentary from beginning to close. You have no arid sect-exalting controversies. You have no wild-fires of bigotry. You have no narrowness of church-order or church-creed.⁹⁵

Henry's commentary was, probably, ultimately intended to reach the masses and his lack, as may be considered by some, of theological depth was compensated for by the commentary's broad appeal.

After the completion of Volume One, the Pentateuch, in 1706, Matthew Henry continued his altruistic studious labour and produced another volume every two years until his death in 1714. His second volume dealt with the historical books and so covered a greater number of books, Joshua to Esther. In the preface to Volume Two, he reminds the reader that the Pentateuch was primarily concerned with laws, institutes and charters but that these books were entirely historical in content.⁹⁶ He underlines this belief by outlining his thoughts on the significance of the historical content of these books:

1. That it is *history*.
2. That it is *true* history.
3. That it is *ancient* history.
4. That it is *church* history.
5. That it is *divine* history.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Henry, x.

⁹⁵ Grosart, 282.

⁹⁶ Henry, xi.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

The certainty with which each statement is made leaves little room for critical analysis of the text but enough room to provide a keenly Puritan reading. History, sacred history, served only one purpose according to Henry and that was to provide instruction on how to live a holy life. Matters of historicity and narrative accuracy are regarded as an unnecessary luxury as he points out in his preface to the historical books:

What concerns our salvation is plain enough, and we do not perplex ourselves about the niceties of chronology, genealogy, or chorography. At least my undertaking leads me not into those labyrinths.⁹⁸

As he closes the preface to Volume Two he declares his wish to complete the Old Testament in two more volumes and then to progress to the New Testament. The third volume is shorter and covers what he designates as, the five poetical books; Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes. The position of these books in the sequence of the whole Old Testament is observed by Henry as being due to a gradual increase in the difficulty and complexity of the texts. The preceding books are described as “plain and easy” in comparison.⁹⁹ This deliberate design was understood by Henry as to provide direction in the order in which to study the books and as a platform on which to progressively build. His approach, as revealed in his preface, is distinctly different from the previous two volumes and will be discussed in the introduction to the reading of his exposition of Ecclesiastes.

The remaining books of the Old Testament are found in Volume Four and are classified by Henry as the prophetic books.¹⁰⁰ Henry’s preface to the final volume of the Old Testament is similar to the first two volumes. He begins with a study into the meaning of prophecy, prophetic character and the prophets’ role in biblical history. He summarises his understanding and the importance with which he views the location of the prophetic books as follows:

The prophets, by waiving the ceremonial precepts, and not insisting on them, but only on the weightier matters of the law, plainly intimated the abolishing of that part of the law of Moses by the gospel; and by their many predictions of Christ, and the kingdom of his grace, they intimated the accomplishing the perfecting of that part of the law of Moses in the

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., xii.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., xiv.

gospel. Thus the prophets were the *nexus – the connecting bond* between the law and the gospel, and are therefore fitly placed between them.¹⁰¹

The main difference that Henry sees between the prophetic books and the other books is that the gift of the writer, the prophet, is entirely from God. There is no room for inspiration through seeing and thinking, as seen in other writings, but prophecy only comes by hearing the word of God.¹⁰² As in previous prefaces, Henry lists theological assumptions or dictates that are necessary for the reader to understand and in this instance they concern the Old Testament prophets:

1. They were all holy men.
2. That they had all a full assurance in themselves of their divine mission.
3. That in their prophesying both in receiving their message from God and in delivering it to the people, they always kept possession of their own souls.
4. That they all aimed at one and the same thing, which was to bring people to repent of their sins and to return to God and to do their duty to him.
5. That they all bore witness to Jesus Christ and had an eye to him.
6. That these prophets were generally hated and abused in their several generations by those that lived with them.
7. That though men slighted these prophets, God owned them and put honour upon them.¹⁰³

Henry perceived that the spirit of prophecy was a gift that was not visible at his time and one that he felt would not be revived again in the future. Therefore the unique importance of the prophetic books is greatly stressed. As he closes the preface to his final volume on the Old Testament, Matthew Henry reaffirms his desire to complete his exposition of the New Testament in two volumes. As with other volumes there is a note of an inevitable fate, death, that overshadows Henry. With this sense of foreboding, he voices his dependence on God's grace that his desire to complete an exposition of the Bible will only be fulfilled if his life is spared.

The fifth volume solely comprises the Gospels. Henry admits in his preface to the fourth volume that his expositions of Matthew and John, which he had already begun work on, were so voluminous that he had to reduce them.¹⁰⁴ He highlights the spiritual harmony and integrity that exists between the Old and

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., xv.

¹⁰³ Ibid., xvi-xvii.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., xvii.

New Testaments and is openly critical of those who dismiss either.¹⁰⁵ He is outspoken in pointing out what he calls the “peculiarity of the Jewish nation”, in their acceptance of only the Old Testament but he does not elaborate further.¹⁰⁶

Henry’s readership would most likely have been limited to a sympathetic nonconformist, Presbyterian audience and therefore his use of language is direct and choice of words unequivocal. His argument though is not with the Jews alone but also with Christians who undermine the spiritual validity of the New Testament by misusing its teachings to further their own agenda. Those guilty of this act are named as those belonging to the Church of Rome.¹⁰⁷ It is in this context that Henry addresses the ecclesiastical and political issues of his day. He denounces the corruption and dishonesty of the Church of Rome and its pretence in supposedly promoting freedom of thought.¹⁰⁸ The oppression of differing thought by the established Church and the lack of individuals who questioned the status quo was also fiercely criticised by Henry. “Liberty of thinking” is the freedom that he contends has been taken away by those who do not allow themselves or others to think freely.¹⁰⁹ He believes that only by allowing a true liberty of thought can an individual be equipped and competent to accept all of Christ’s teachings and so abstain from the carnal world and its immorality. He declares that it is precisely because of his free thinking that he is convinced that Christianity is the true religion. He reiterates this conviction by listing ten beliefs that have been direct products of this liberty of thought. It is obvious that in finally arriving at his exposition of the New Testament, Matthew Henry is in his element and that the Christological and Puritan exegetical approach, which ran through the previous four volumes, culminates in the fifth volume. He concludes his fifth preface with a pietistic hope:

I desire I may be read with a candid, and not a critical, eye. I pretend not to gratify the curious; the summit of my ambition is to assist those who are truly serious in searching the scriptures daily. I am sure the work is designed, and hope it is calculated, to promote piety towards God and charity towards our brethren, and that there is not

¹⁰⁵ He does not share, or at least does not express, Calvin’s predisposition to the New Testament.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., xviii.

¹⁰⁸ It is interesting that later Presbyterian readers of Henry’s commentary, like Grosart, comment on Henry’s lack of sectarianism, when Henry is at times openly hostile to the Catholic Church and the Church establishment in general.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

only something in it which may edify, but nothing which may justly offend a good Christian.¹¹⁰

It is a curious aspiration and one that precedes a lengthy tirade on those who sequester liberty of thought. He guards himself against critical analysis by dismissing a certain type of reader and then judges or assumes that those who agree with him or will not be offended by him will be the good Christians. Who then were these good Christians? Most likely Matthew Henry's reading audience, those whose faith and life were in accordance with Puritan/Presbyterian ideology. His immediate audience, though, was much smaller and consisted primarily of his own and parental home and his learned congregation in Chester.¹¹¹ His commentary would later be circulated further afield and could be found among all "ranks and classes".¹¹² Readers of Matthew Henry's writings were clearly very different from those of Gregory of Nyssa, whose readership was comprised of the academic and religious elite. Matthew Henry directed his commentary to all levels of society and intended that it be accessible to all who desired to understand scripture and live a life in keeping with scriptural teachings. A feature of nonconformist literature was that it was interested in its different classes of reader, both social and spiritual, and their individual stage in the Christian experience, in an effort to provide a more personal, fitting reading of scripture.¹¹³ The nonconformists, those who refused to conform to the edicts of the Church of England, were maturing into establishments of their own and one that ironically demanded its own brand of conformity.

The final volume was never completed but was in progress when Matthew Henry died in 1714. His hopes for the final volume were never realised and the significance of this work was expressed in the preface to the fifth volume where he states that this part of scripture above all others "requires the most care and pains in expounding it".¹¹⁴ He completed his exposition of Acts but the remainder of the New Testament was left to a consortium of ministers to be completed after his death. The ministers drew upon their own and others' personal notes, which had been taken on occasions when Matthew Henry expounded scripture in the

¹¹⁰ Ibid., xix.

¹¹¹ Selwyn Gummer, *Bible Themes from Matthew Henry* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1953), preface.

¹¹² Grosart, 272.

¹¹³ Rivers, 117. Anglican writings from the same period are vastly different, where the class of the reader was not regarded as a factor or taken into account.

presence of his family and congregation. The work attempted to stay true to the spirit of its original author and was a tribute to his scholarship.

E. The Exposition of Poetical Books

The exposition of Ecclesiastes is found in the third volume of Matthew Henry's series of expositions. Along with Job, Psalms, Proverbs and Song of Solomon it is classified as one of the five poetical books. As previously mentioned, Henry observed a gradual shift in the complexity of the biblical text from the Pentateuchal and historical books to the poetical books. The preface to the third volume provides valuable clues to how Henry approached the reading of Ecclesiastes and the other poetical books. There is a marked difference in this preface to the previous two volumes and in the consequent volumes, in that he focuses on the unique nature of the poetical texts rather than on theological presuppositions necessary for a correct understanding of the text:

1. The books of scripture have hitherto been, for the most part, very plain and easy, narratives of matter of fact.
2. The books of scripture have hitherto been mostly historical, but now the matter is of another nature; it is doctrinal and devotional, preaching and praying.
3. The Jews make these books to be given by a divine inspiration somewhat different from both of Moses and the prophets.
4. The style and composition of these books are different from those that go before and those that follow.
5. As the manner of the composition of these books is excellent and very proper to engage the attention, move the affections, and fix them in the memory so the matter is highly useful, and such as will be serviceable to us.¹¹⁵

The poetical books are perceived as an anomaly in scripture and Henry delves a little into the history of their literary classification by Christ, the Jews, and other Christian scholars. He discovers a loose consensus regarding the classification of these books into a discrete literary genre. The Jewish division of *kethuvim* is critiqued for its inconsistencies. Henry queries the criteria adopted and the reason for the inclusion of books like Daniel, Ruth and Ezra in the *writings*.¹¹⁶ Christ's division of the Old Testament into the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms is viewed as guidance to the reader to be able to distinguish between books.¹¹⁷ The

¹¹⁴ Henry, xix.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., xii-xiii.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., xiii.

¹¹⁷ Luke 24:44.

conclusion reached by Henry is that the five books, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, are to be categorised as poetical books:

Job is an heroic poem, the book of Psalms a collection of divine odes or lyrics, Solomon's Song a pastoral and an epithalamium; they are poetical, and yet sacred and serious, grave and full of majesty. They have poetic force and flame, with out poetic fury and fiction, and strangely command and move the affections, without corrupting the mind and profit the more by pleasing.¹¹⁸

Indeed, Henry bestows high platitudes on these poetical texts and their ability to engage, to move, and ultimately to draw the reader to God. He goes further in placing these books above all other scripture, for according to him they contain the "very sum and substance of religion".¹¹⁹ The high status conferred on the poetical books may be partly due to the integral part that Psalms played in the Presbyterian worship service. From its Puritan beginnings, Presbyterianism restricted worship music to the Book of Psalms.¹²⁰ When Rev. Hamilton describes Matthew Henry's order of service the singing of Psalms was a significant part of the Lord's Day worship.¹²¹

Another important point to note, not only in the third volume but the whole exposition, is that each exposition includes what Henry calls "practical observations".¹²² This was characteristic of Puritan literature which consisted largely of sermons, meditations and practical biblical expositions.¹²³ Stress was placed on the spiritual life and the individual's journey to salvation and God. N. H. Keeble notes in his introduction to *The Pilgrim's Progress*, that:

Puritan divinity was above all practical, or, as we should say, moral and casuistical, concerned with problems of daily life. Scholasticism was rejected as firmly as monasticism. Furthermore, despite our modern sense of the word (a legacy of seventeenth-century anti-Puritan satire), the Puritan did not conceive the way to salvation to consist in abstinence or asceticism but in the right use of our physical natures.¹²⁴

¹¹⁸ Henry, xiii.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ McHugh, passim.

¹²¹ Hamilton, 90.

¹²² This is included in the title for each book; "An Exposition, with Practical Observations, of The Book of Ecclesiastes", 1028.

¹²³ Wallace, 311.

¹²⁴ Keeble, xiii. This version of Puritan theology is seen in *The Pilgrim's Progress* where eating, drinking, singing, music and dancing are celebrated and seen as divine gifts.

In conjunction with the practicality of Puritan spirituality, was also the emphasis placed on retrieving the original purity of scripture, and so fully understand the truth of the Spirit.¹²⁵

F. An Exposition, with Practical Observations, of the Book of Ecclesiastes

In addition to the preface to all the poetical books in Volume Three, Henry provides a further introduction to each book before embarking on their individual exposition. Henry assumes Solomonic authorship, and considers Ecclesiastes to be a natural progression in Solomon's spiritual journey, after writing Proverbs during the virtuous chapter of his life.¹²⁶ The introduction to the commentary on Ecclesiastes is brief and focuses on the nature of the book and Henry's observation of it as being first and foremost a sermon:

1. That it is a sermon; a sermon in print.
2. That it is a penitential sermon...it is a recantation-sermon.
3. That it is a practical profitable sermon.¹²⁷

It is not ambiguous as to why Henry concludes that Ecclesiastes is a sermon. The first verse of Ecclesiastes in the 1611 King James Version reads, "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem".¹²⁸ The KJV translates Qoheleth as "preacher" and so the focus on Solomon as a preacher, who is delivering a sermon, is to be expected.¹²⁹ The centrality of the sermon and preaching in Henry's life, in keeping with Puritan tradition, has been already discussed but cannot be emphasised enough:

The power of the preacher to transfix and transform his hearers through the combined weight of his own experience, divine assistance, and the spoken word.¹³⁰

It is therefore understandable that Henry finds the narrative of Solomon's tragic life and ultimate repentance lends itself to the format of a sermon and one

¹²⁵ Knott, 6.

¹²⁶ Not a unique observation and one shared by Gregory of Nyssa among others.

¹²⁷ Henry, 1028.

¹²⁸ It is assumed that Henry used the 1611 King James Version but without the Apocrypha which was retained by the Anglicans and rejected by the Puritans.

¹²⁹ Ira M. Price, *The Ancestry of our English Bible* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 268-272. The translators of the KJV were organised in six groups, two each in Westminster, Oxford and Cambridge. It fell to one of the Cambridge groups to work on Ecclesiastes and it appears that in their translation of the Hebrew word Qoheleth they were strongly influenced by the LXX rendering of Qoheleth as *ekklesiastes*. This translation probably also influenced Henry in his conjecture that the writer of Ecclesiastes, Solomon, is preaching a sermon.

¹³⁰ Rivers, 115. Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* encapsulates this idea.

that is “plain and powerful”.¹³¹ Henry states that the doctrine of Solomon’s sermon is Eccl. 1:2 “Vanity of Vanities”.¹³² Ecclesiastes is viewed as a sermon in which Solomon uses his personal spiritual experiences to warn others of the dangers of vanity and then provides the solution for safeguarding against this carnal temptation.

The concept of ‘Solomon the Preacher’ is fundamental to Henry’s reading of Ecclesiastes, where Solomon speaks from experience to convey a practical message, one that provides guidance and benefit to the Christian life. The function and importance of the sermon within Presbyterianism was immense. It was a principal part not only of the Lord’s Day worship but also throughout the week during prayer meetings and worship. Another nonconformist minister, John Gere points out the important function of the sermon within nonconformist congregations, when he writes about the character of a nonconformist:

He esteemed reading of the word an ordinance of God both in private and public but did not account reading to be preaching. The word read he esteemed of more authority, but the word preached of more efficiency...He was not satisfied with prayers without preaching.¹³³

Preaching and sermons were not reserved for a weekly oration but often occurred daily and on a number of occasions. The simplicity of faith was to be found in the Bible and in the spoken word. Ecclesiastes as a sermon was a logical extension of the role of scripture: firstly to provide direction to all things concerning the Church, and the edification of the soul and complete submission to God.¹³⁴

The exposition itself is approached in a very ordered and structured manner.¹³⁵ There is no arbitrary division of Ecclesiastes along exegetical themes or imposed nuances but rather, Henry examines each chapter in its entirety and in order of sequence. Therefore, unlike the rabbinic texts, Henry’s exposition of Ecclesiastes will be studied sequentially instead of thematically since its literary structure preconditions a structured reading. Each chapter begins with a brief outline, such as one would produce when preparing a lecture or sermon. Henry

¹³¹ Knott, 5. Knott describes how the mantra “plain and powerful” became the Puritan formula for describing effective preaching.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ John Gere, *The Character of an Old English Puritan, or Non-Conformist* (London: W. Wilson, 1646), passim.

¹³⁴ Knott, 33. Cartwright, one of the main proponents of Presbyterianism, insisted that all church practices be authorised and tested by scripture.

then further outlines the actual exposition of the chapter by dividing each chapter into a series of verses and provides headings, sub-heading and points, that bear some correlation to the initial general chapter outline

1. Chapter One

Chapter one is divided into four sections of verses: 1-3, 4-8, 9-11, 12-18. Though no explanation is given to how or why this division was contrived, Henry moves through the chapter and each section with a purpose and design that he recognises as being intrinsic to the meaning of the text.

In the first section, verses 1-3, Henry observes three main points: the inscription of the book, the general doctrine of vanity and its explanation. A substantial account of Solomon as the preacher, the son of David and King of Jerusalem is given but the principal focus is on Solomon as "*Koheleth*". There is no question of Solomon's authorship but Henry finds that the word "*Koheleth*" requires further elaboration. Here Henry insists upon the word *soul* being understood with "*Koheleth*" as:

1. A *penitent* soul, or one *gathered*.
2. A *preaching* soul, or one *gathering*.¹³⁶

Here is seen a word play, where Henry uses the English words "gathered" and "gathering" which are clearly from the Hebrew root *קָהַל*. The role of the soul within Puritan and early Presbyterian theology carries with it great consequence. The theology of soul is taken from their Calvinistic roots where the soul is understood to be immortal and the receptacle of the image of God. Calvin defines the soul, also referred to as the spirit, as "an immortal though created essence, which is nobler in part".¹³⁷ It is through the soul that an individual can conceive of the mystery of divinity and other mental thoughts and perceptions. The distinction between the soul and the body was greatly stressed by Calvin. Here are seen elements of Plato's theory of the soul, where the soul is immortal and where one part of the soul is where knowledge of Ideas is conceivable.¹³⁸ Calvin finds that by dividing the soul into two parts, the intellect and will, he is better

¹³⁵ Berry, 8. Puritan style was characterised by a pursuit for order and consistency.

¹³⁶ Henry, 1029.

¹³⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966), 1:160.

¹³⁸ Julian Marias, *History of Philosophy*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1967), 54. Plato divides the soul into three parts, the other two being: "an appetitive" or sensual part, the part most closely related to the needs of the body; a second, "spirited" part, corresponding to the drives and emotions.

able to place his theory within Christian doctrine.¹³⁹ When discussing the image of God, Calvin draws this conclusion:

For though the divine glory is displayed in man's outward appearance, it cannot be doubted that the proper seat of the image is the soul.¹⁴⁰

When Henry speaks of the soul and associates it with *Koheleth*, it appears that he is imposing a Calvinistic reading of the text. Solomon, as *Koheleth*, is the penitent and preaching soul, which corresponds to the two parts of the soul as described by Calvin. The will and the intellect act together in a penitent *Koheleth* who repents and returns to God, and then becomes a preaching soul, for as Henry observes:

Penitents should become preachers; those that have taken warnings themselves to turn and live should give warning to others not to go on and die...Preachers must be preaching souls.¹⁴¹

The importance of the preaching soul or spirit is intrinsically tied to the godliness of the minister and so it is significant that Solomon is given this attribute.¹⁴² That Solomon was also the son of David and the king of Jerusalem adds further credence to his fall from grace, his repentance and his ultimate witness to others. Henry describes the presence that Solomon exhibited:

Solomon looked as great in the pulpit, preaching the vanity of the world, as in his throne of ivory, judging.¹⁴³

Verses 2 and 3 are seen to be dealing with the general doctrine and intent of Ecclesiastes. Henry lays down the doctrine that all things are vanity in 1:2 and asserts that all is vanity apart from God.¹⁴⁴ The catalyst for Puritan reform was a desire for a purification and simplification of the ecclesiastical rites and polity, and the rhetoric called for a departure from frivolous and unnecessary trappings which were exhibited by Catholicism and which had entered the established Church. John Gerec complies with this rhetoric in his description of the character of a Puritan:

¹³⁹ Calvin, 159.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 162.

¹⁴¹ Henry, 1029.

¹⁴² Knott, 39. Calvin found rhetorical skills to be largely irrelevant but preaching by the Spirit of far greater importance.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

In his habit he avoided all costliness and vanity, neither exceeding his degree in civility, nor declining what suited with Christianity, desiring in all things to express gravity.¹⁴⁵

Henry stresses repeatedly that *all* is vanity and the intensification of the doctrine when the phrase vanity of vanities is applied. The credentials of Solomon as spokesman on the doctrine of vanity is reiterated by Henry:

Many speak contemptuously of the world because they are hermits, and know it not, or beggars, and have it not; but Solomon knew it...if Solomon find all to be vanity, then the kingdom of the Messiah must come, in which we will inherit substance.¹⁴⁶

The explanation of the doctrine of vanity is found in verse 3, where the insufficiency of human effort in attempting to fill the void caused by the pursuit of vanity is stated. For all the labour in this world does not bring happiness or satisfy the needs of the soul which looks to eternity.

The second section of chapter 1, verses 4-8, is said by Henry to prove that all things are vanity and that they do not bring true happiness. The references to the continuum of generations and examples from the natural world provide evidence of the uncertainty and finiteness of human existence and for true fulfilment that man must look above the sun, for a new world.¹⁴⁷

From the third and brief section, verses 9-11, Henry determines two main ideas that Solomon was teaching in order to save the world from vanity. Firstly, the curiosity and interest that surrounds a new invention or new idea is a mistake, for everything in the world and in men's hearts remains the same.¹⁴⁸ The only newness that is found is that which exists in the spiritual realm.¹⁴⁹ Secondly, Solomon is thought to caution against the delusion that we will be remembered for our accomplishments, for "that which we hope to be remembered by will be either lost or slighted".¹⁵⁰

The final section is comprised of the remaining verses 12-18. Henry finds these last six verses to be the conclusive argument on the doctrine of vanity:

Solomon, having asserted in general that *all is vanity*, and having given some general proofs of it, now takes the most effectual method

¹⁴⁵ Gere, 3.

¹⁴⁶ Henry, 1029.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 1030.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. In heaven *all is new* with reference to Rev. 21:5.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

to evince the truth of it, 1. By his own experience; he tried them all, and found them vanity. 2. By an induction of particulars.¹⁵¹

By speaking of knowledge and learning, Henry asserts that Solomon is holding up the one thing a “reasonable creature” desires above all else as a persuasive example. For according to Henry, if Solomon finds the pursuit of and acquiring of wisdom is vanity then it follows that everything else must indeed also be vanity.

2. Chapter Two

Chapter 2 is divided into three main sections and is thought by Henry to be a continuation on the theme of the vanity of the things of this world. Solomon is said now to reaffirm this belief and provide further evidence to support his thesis, and it is with a great sense of weariness that he relates his firsthand experience and counsel.

The first section, verses 1-11, follows Solomon’s descent into a life of worldly pleasures and is considered by Henry to be purely experimental on the part of Solomon; an experiment that was devoid of self-gratification and egotism.¹⁵² The research design of the experiment is found in verse 1, where Solomon sets out to seek pleasure and find out what is good in life. The results of the experiment according to Henry are given in verse 2, where it is concluded that the search for pleasure is pointless and that in fact it does a great deal of harm. The experiment, though, is not over, for it appears to be Solomon’s duty to investigate every facet of life that has the potential to be good and provide pleasure. In relation to verse 3 and Solomon’s experimentation with wine, Henry passes this *absolution on Solomon’s intemperate behaviour*:

Many give themselves to these without consulting their hearts at all, not looking any further than merely the gratification of the sensual appetite; but Solomon applied himself to it rationally, and as a man, critically, and only to make an experiment.¹⁵³

Henry further excuses Solomon’s ungodly conduct by explaining that he had only entered into such delights of the senses after intense study and with much reluctance. It is also pointed out that Solomon did acquaint himself with wisdom concurrently and that it was not his intention to gratify his own appetite but rather as an obligation to man’s happiness. The experiment continues on

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid., 1031.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 1031.

from wine through verses 4-10, where Solomon turns to the products of his enormous wealth in pursuit of happiness. Henry finds the results and conclusion drawn in verse 11 to be identical to the one reached earlier in verse 2. Henry's judgement on Solomon's experiment in debauchery was that expectations of finding happiness in all the pleasures that Solomon pursued cannot be realised from the enjoyments of this world.

Henry sees the second section, verses 12-16, as retracing and reiterating some of Solomon's previous observations. Solomon's initial search to find contentment in wisdom was fruitless and similarly in the pursuit of worldly pleasures and so now he compares and considers both wisdom and folly. Solomon's authority on the subject and his sound judgement is restated by Henry. It is when Solomon observes no difference between the wise and the foolish that Henry sees the need for further clarification. He points out that though the foolish may be forgotten, the righteous will be remembered forever and their names are written in heaven.¹⁵⁴ It is important for Henry that the righteous, those who have lived a godly life, are recognised and not confused in any way with those who live a life not in accordance with scripture.

The final section undertakes the remaining verses 17-26. Here Henry sees Solomon now engaging in and giving an account of a life of business. Henry refers to this business as the business of a king and he goes into detail regarding the burdens surrounding this business and its lack of fulfilment. The conclusion remains the same, that all is vanity and a vexation of spirit.

3. Chapter Three

Like the previous chapter, chapter 3 is also divided into three sections. In the chapter preface Henry outlines three main lessons to be drawn which are seen as further support to the doctrine of vanity that had been presented in the previous chapters. The inferred concluding message is a humanitarian one, where the wisdom gained by one should not be used to oppress another. The three lessons that Henry draws from chapter 3 are:

- I. The mutability of all human affairs (v. 1-10).
- II. The immutability of the divine counsels concerning them and the unsearchableness of those counsels (v. 11-15).
- III. The vanity of worldly honour and power... (v. 16-22).¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 1033.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 1034.

Verses 1-10 contain the first instruction, that we live in a changeable world where there are no constants and where instability underlies our existence. Henry sees this mutability as being decided by a divine power and not as the result of some natural consequence.¹⁵⁶ This notion is in keeping with Calvinistic theology and the belief in predestination. Henry, in reference to the series of verses on a time and season for everything, makes this observation:

That every change concerning us, with the time and season of it, is unalterably fixed and determined by a supreme power...Some of these changes are purely the act of God, others depend more upon the will of man, but all are determined by the divine counsel.¹⁵⁷

The doctrine of predestination held a prominent place in Presbyterian theology and especially in the teachings concerning total depravity of fallen man and limited redemption.¹⁵⁸ This was a controversial teaching and Calvin writes of it in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

We, indeed, ascribe both prescience and predestination to God... When we attribute prescience to God, we mean that all things always were, and ever continue, under his eye; that to his knowledge there is no past or future, but all things are present... This prescience extends to the whole circuit of the world, and to all creatures... By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man.¹⁵⁹

Henry applied this teaching to this text and finds that a season and time for each action is not left to chance or choice but to God's providence and hegemony. The resultant attitude of Henry to this lot is one of resignation to whatever life brings and his counsel is to instil a sense of responsibility and probity on the individual.

It is the second section, verses 11-15, that are seen by Henry to be confirmation of the hand of God in those changes that occur through time and seasons.¹⁶⁰ Henry advises the reader to make the best of what life has to offer and to allow life to take its course. But he then follows it with a note of caution, to keep the focus on God alone and to be open to his will and providence. Henry further stresses the importance of the ability to acknowledge God's hand in all changes that take place around us and the eternal attributes of his governance.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 1034.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ McHugh, 2.

¹⁵⁹ Calvin, 206.

¹⁶⁰ Henry, 1035.

In the final section of this chapter, verses 16-22, Henry succinctly summarises the message of these final verses:

Solomon is still showing that every thing in this world, without piety and the fear of God, is vanity. Take away religion, and there is nothing valuable among men, nothing for the sake of which a wise man would think it worth while to live in this world.¹⁶¹

The message of Henry is that a God-less life is empty and meaningless. It therefore follows that a life void of God can be compared to that of an animal, for the fate of both is the same. Henry, though, sees the need to point out what he considers to be important gaps in Solomon's query as to the ultimate fate of the corresponding spirits:

The soul of the beast is at death, like a candle blown out – there is an end of it; whereas the soul of a man is like a candle taken out of a dark lantern, which leaves the lantern useless indeed, but does itself shine brighter.¹⁶²

As was observed in chapter 1, the distinction between the body and soul was an important part of Presbyterian theology. The fact that Henry sees the soul of a man not only remaining after his demise, but gaining in brightness or significance, is testament to the Calvinistic belief in the soul as the conduit for divine comprehension and intellect.¹⁶³ Henry does not see death as the end but encourages his readers to look to the "other world".¹⁶⁴ Here, Henry clearly perverts the original meaning of the text, Qoheleth's 'one world' and describes a different fate for the soul of man. The identity of the "other world" is not revealed but the unfamiliarity that exists between this world and the other, is spoken of by Henry:

When we are gone it is likely we shall not see what is after us; there is no correspondence that we know of between this other world and this, Job 14:21. Those in the other world will be wholly taken up with that world, so they will not care for seeing what is done in this; and while we are here we cannot foresee *what shall be after us*, either as to our families or to the public.¹⁶⁵

The mystery of the "other world" remains and Henry closes with a warning against looking only to this life. He argues that instead of focusing on this world,

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 1036.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Calvin, 159.

¹⁶⁴ Henry, 1036.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

our concern of time and seasons should extend to another life, one that is after this life.

4. Chapter Four

The consequences of a life given over to vanity and pursuit of pleasure are what Henry believes that Solomon is speaking of in this chapter. The results are magnified by those in power, for their vanity causes them to oppress those who were weaker than themselves. Henry observes five lessons in this context:

- I. The temptation which the oppressed feel to discontent and impatience (v. 1-3).
- II. The temptation which those that love their case feel to take their case and neglect business, for fear of being envied (v. 4-6).
- III. The folly of hoarding up abundance of worldly wealth (v. 7,8)
- IV. A remedy against that folly, in being made sensible of the benefit of society and mutual assistance (v. 9-12).
- V. The mutability even of royal dignity, not only through the folly of the prince himself (v. 13, 14), but through the fickleness of the people, let the prince be ever so discreet (v. 15, 16).¹⁶⁶

Henry divides chapter 4 into four sections with the first one being verses 1-3. Once again Henry is very generous in his judgement of Solomon's character and disposition. In comparison to the scurrilous power hungry oppressors that he speaks of, Solomon's gentle spirit and "large soul" permits him to speak with the authority not only of a prince but even more importantly of a preacher. The fate of the oppressed is a pathetic and a pitiful one, for their very condition causes them to yield to temptations of bitterness and envy. They hate life with such vitriol that they envy the dead and even more so those who had never been born. Henry, uncomfortable with Solomon's rhetoric, senses the need to clarify this generalisation and provide a clause for the righteous:

A good man, how calamitous a condition so-ever he is in this world, cannot have cause to wish he had never been born, since he is glorifying the Lord even in the fires, and will be happy at last, for ever happy. Nor ought any to wish so while they are alive, for while there is life there is hope; a man is never undone till he is in hell.¹⁶⁷

Henry's assertion that a man should be "glorifying the Lord even in the fires" suggests a symbolic reading and interpretation of the text. Fire, a powerful symbol in its own right, is interpolated with equally puissant symbols of life and

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 1036-1037.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 1037.

death.¹⁶⁸ Henry's choice of words suggests an allusion to the precarious position of the nonconformist movement in its past and present. The violent persecution of the early Puritan movement had tapered off since the brutal reign of Mary Tudor in the sixteenth century, when hundreds of Protestants were martyred and many others forced into exile on the Continent.¹⁶⁹ By the seventeenth century and Matthew Henry's ministry, the persecution had modified and subdued to one of a less pernicious nature by the Establishment. It was indeed a calamitous condition and one that called for posture of hope and felicity.

Henry observes a retrospective Solomon in the second section of chapter 4, verses 4-6. For here Solomon revisits the ailments of vanity and vexation of spirit. Envy, the insidious motivation to work, and idleness are the principal ailments observed. Henry notes that "idleness is a sin that is its own punishment".¹⁷⁰ A good Presbyterian was one who copiously surrendered his life completely to the devotion and service of God and one that allowed no time for idleness.¹⁷¹

The third section, verses 7-12, is read by Henry as an attestation to the greed of men. Solomon is said to be showing man's egoism and insatiable nature. The cure to this egocentric tendency is sociableness. In this context Henry makes a strong case for marriage and concurrently attacks those ecclesiastical wings that cultivate monasticism:

A monastic life then was surely never intended for a state of perfection, nor should those be reckoned the greatest lovers of God who cannot find in their hearts to love anyone else.¹⁷²

It is not difficult to see this criticism directed towards a practice, which was part of what was considered heretical Roman Catholic asceticism. But his attack is less about asceticism and more against the selfish, introspective nature of monasticism, and also the priesthood, and its lack of love. Henry echoes Calvin in his disdain for the monastic order, who writes openly and vehemently against the practice:

¹⁶⁸ The imagery of fire as a part of the testing of people in the spiritual sense is spoken off by Jeremiah in Jer. 6:27-30, where the example of fire in the refining process of precious metals is used.

¹⁶⁹ Knox, 299. Mary Tudor reigned from 1553-58 and was succeeded by Elizabeth I in 1558, under whose reign those exiled returned to England.

¹⁷⁰ Henry, 1037.

¹⁷¹ Gere, 2.

¹⁷² Henry, 1038.

Our monks place the principal part of their holiness in idleness. For if you take away their idleness, where will that contemplative life by which they glory that they excel all others, and make a near approach to the angels?...meanwhile, the people continue to admire as if monastic life alone were angelic, perfect, and purified from every vice.¹⁷³

Calvin writes in length on the Machiavellian character of monks and their immoral lifestyle choices.¹⁷⁴ Henry's judgement of a monastic life embraces his understanding of traits exhibited by a vanity of the spirit. It is interesting to observe how Qoheleth, as Henry's Solomon, can be used to make a case against monasticism. Clearly, Henry's response to the textual structures of Qoheleth is historically and theologically conditioned.¹⁷⁵

Henry regards the final section, verses 13-16, as where Solomon, as king, can speak with authority in respect to the corruption and vanity that comes from stately power. Henry introduces his commentary on these verses by stating that "nothing is more slippery than the highest post of honour without wisdom and the people's love".¹⁷⁶ This sentiment remains and is expanded upon in his reading of the remainder of the text.

5. Chapter Five

The emphasis alters slightly in the first half of chapter 5 as Henry observes Solomon speaking of religion as the remedy for the vanity of the world. The discussion returns to the maligning of vanity in the second half of the chapter where the desire for wealth joins the appetite for power as deliberated in chapter four.

The first section, verses 1-3, is seen as part of Solomon's experimental design. By firstly demonstrating the scourge of vanity, Henry concludes that it was Solomon's strategy to drive us away from the world and towards God. This plan comes with a sobering warning that even the worship of God can become a

¹⁷³ Calvin, 481.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 481-486.

¹⁷⁵ Henry Wace and Philip Schaff, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Second Series Vol. 6, *St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works* (Oxford: James Parker and Company, 1893), xix, xxxii and 487. It is interesting to note that Jerome interprets Ecclesiastes in a pro-monastic manner, one that is directly opposed to Henry's understanding of the same text. Jerome completed his Commentary on Ecclesiastes while residing in his monastery in Bethlehem and like his other writings the commentary contains "the whole spirit of the Church of the Middle Ages, its monasticism, its contrast of sacred things with profane...(xxxiii).

¹⁷⁶ Henry, 1038.

vain religion and so the worshipper must guard against ecclesiastical vanity.¹⁷⁷ It is with great discretion that the act of worship should be conducted, free from false motives and extraneous practices. The form that worship should take was a critical issue in the Presbyterian faith. Puritan in origin, the worship ceremony was to be in keeping with biblical simplicity and plainness.¹⁷⁸ It is clear that Henry takes this doctrine very seriously and he expands and expounds on Solomon's teachings regarding the house of God with great resolve. Henry repeats and endorses Solomon's details on correct worship, an attitude of reverence, suitable sacrifice and guarded speech. It is notable that here Henry chooses to ignore Solomon's descriptions of his magnificent temple, adorned and bejewelled, one that was far from the simplicity of faith called for by nonconformists.

In the second section, verses 4-8, Henry stresses the importance of vows and highlights four significant aspects of making such a solemn promise. Firstly, the importance of the repayment of vows is noted. Secondly and more crucially, great heed must be taken in the making of vows. In conjunction with this counsel Henry echoes his earlier Calvinistic sentiments regarding the monastic order:

We must not vow that which, through the frailty of the flesh, we have reason to fear we shall not be able to perform, as those that vow a single life and yet know not how to keep their vow.¹⁷⁹

When Calvin discusses the principles and the doctrine of vows in general, he confronts monasticism and is candid in his opinions:

Our only reason for disapproving of the vow of celibacy is, because it is improperly regarded as an act of worship, and is rashly undertaken by persons who have not the power of keeping it.¹⁸⁰

Henry makes two further points in regard to the serious nature of the making of vows. Firstly, one should fear and reverence God and in turn reduce the fear of man.

The third section, verses 9-17, returns to the vanity of those things desired by men. Here Solomon is said to be showing the vanity of great riches and the lust and greed that is part of this perceived pleasure. There is firstly an acceptance by Henry that a certain amount of earthly products are necessary for a

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Wallace, 310.

¹⁷⁹ Henry, 1039.

¹⁸⁰ Calvin, 488.

comfortable human existence but the wealth that exceeds these basic necessities is vanity and will not therefore bring contentment and happiness to its possessor.

The final section, verses 18-20, sees Henry adding a note of caution to Solomon's understanding, that it is good and right to enjoy the fruits of your labour and to enjoy the blessings of God. This jovial conclusion at the end of a staid lesson is tempered and clarified by Henry to fill in any gaps that may allow a free for all of intemperate behaviour:

What it is that is here recommended to us, not to indulge the appetites of the flesh, or to take up with present pleasures or profits for our portion, but soberly and moderately to make use of what Providence has allotted for our comfortable passage through this world.¹⁸¹

He urges a path of caution, to use the gifts of God wisely and in the intention with which they were given. To do good with these gifts is Henry's appeal and by doing so our lives will become easier and a cheerful spirit will be the result.

6. Chapter Six

The subject of wealth and the liabilities that accompany it is continued in Chapter 6. Henry refers to Solomon as the "royal preacher" and so maintains Solomon's authoritative jurisdiction in these matters.¹⁸² The royal preacher is said to be showing that wealth in the hands of a wise man is to be distinguished from wealth found in the hands of a scurrilous miser. The difference between the two is exhibited in the use of their riches, one chooses to do good with it while the other does not. Henry's summation is that happiness can not be found in the things of this world but that "our satisfaction must be in another life, not in this".¹⁸³

The first section, verses 1-6, is thought to be responding to the epilogue of chapter five and the admonition to enjoy the material gains that God provides. According to Henry the response found in these verses reveals what happens when this instruction is not followed and the evil of hoarding up riches is stated. Solomon, the royal preacher, is believed to have gained this insight by inspecting the manners of his subjects. Henry draws attention to an individual whom he labels as the "miser" and provides the miser with reasons to serve God.¹⁸⁴ The reasons comprise all that God has done for the miser, including providing him

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid., 1041.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

with riches and all that he desires, a large family and a long life. The miser though is reluctant to use what God has given him according to God's wishes and so deprives himself of the blessings he could have gained. It is with this in mind that Solomon, the preacher, gives preference to a stillborn child over the life of, what Henry labels more specifically as, a miser.

The second section, verses 7-10, is thought to provide further evidence regarding the folly in relying on wealth as a source of happiness. Endless toil brings no contentment and desire for more is insatiable. The fool and the wise may appear to fare equally but the pleasures that are peculiar to the mind of the wise set them apart, if not in this world. The counsel given by Henry is to be content with whatever lot life deals, for constant pursuit of more pleasures will only bring misery. To fight against divine Providence is pointless and submission to it is Henry's resolution.

The final section, verses 11-12, sees Solomon drawing conclusions and putting forward further proof regarding the truth concerning vanity and its vexations. As observed in the previous chapters, Henry is systematic and ordered in his approach to the study of the text. Vanity is the doctrine that Henry is addressing and the royal preacher, Solomon, is the conduit for this sermon on man and his constant struggle with the ethereal pursuit of happiness.

7. Chapter Seven

The objective of this lesson, as interpreted by Henry, is one of redressing the balance of the previous chapters, which concentrated on the examples and proofs of vanity. Here Solomon is believed to be advising on means of guarding against this folly and finding the good in a spiritually anomalous situation. Solomon is also observed to be deploring his own depravity, which he finds to be more grievous than all the other miseries that accompany vanity.

The first section, verses 1-6, sees Solomon again elevated above the masses, the vast majority of whom find his great truths paradoxical.¹⁸⁵ Five great Solomonic truths are exposed by Henry:

- I. That honour and virtue is really more valuable and desirable than all the wealth and pleasure in this world.
- II. That, all things considered, our going out of the world is a greater kindness to us than our coming into the world.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

- III. That it will do us more good to go to a funeral than to go to a festival.
- IV. That gravity and seriousness better become us, and are better for us, than mirth and jollity.
- V. That it is much better for us to have our corruptions mortified by the *rebuke of the wise* than to have them gratified by the *song of fools*.¹⁸⁶

Henry enthusiastically endorses these great truths and finds their paradoxical nature appealing to his Puritan based theology. He finds that these truths address two important aspects of practical spirituality, namely the care of one's reputation and observing a serious manner.

The querulous nature of Solomon comes under scrutiny in the second section, verses 7-10. Henry finds the oppression that Solomon previously described as taking place under the sun is the cause of melancholy and discouragement. Now Henry finds Solomon dealing with this issue and providing advice on how one should approach such a malady. Firstly, there is an acceptance of oppression as a strong temptation that causes a wise man to speak and act in an injudicious manner, one that is against God. Secondly, Solomon argues against this temptation and finally, he provides guidance and direction so that oppression does not possess our souls. The answer is found in humility, patience, temperance and making the best of a bad situation.

Henry, in verses 11-22, finds Solomon testifying to wisdom as the best remedy for the oppressed mind. Henry then proceeds to list firstly, the praises of wisdom and secondly, the precepts of wisdom. Wisdom is praised and highly acclaimed as the medium with which to deal with the vanity of the world. Wisdom acts as a safety net, providing moral strength and being the source of joy and happiness to a man. Henry then examines the precepts of wisdom. The most notable parts of his reading are the repeated references to "Providence" and its role in the interface between wisdom and the world.¹⁸⁷ Wisdom is needed to understand the workings of providence and in turn providence provides a different perspective on the mechanics of the world's integral enigma. Henry has spoken of providence in previous chapters but the concentration of the concept as found here is conspicuous. Providence was a significant part of early Presbyterian theology and Calvinist in origin:

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 1042-1043.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 1044.

First, then, let the reader remember that the providence we mean is not the one by which the Deity, sitting idly in heaven, looks on at what is taking place in the world, but one by which he, as it were, holds the helm, and overrules all events.¹⁸⁸

Indeed, Calvin speaks of a doctrine of Divine Providence. He describes the manner in which providence actually functions as part of this doctrine:

It is to be observed, first, that the providence of God is to be considered with reference both to the past and the future; and, secondly, that in overruling all things, it works at one time with means, at another without means, and at another against means.¹⁸⁹

Henry appears to understand providence in similar terms to Calvin. For Henry, providence works in every chapter of world events. Wisdom enables those who are open to this godly manipulation to recognise it and therefore to see through both the good and oppressive chapters of life without succumbing to the vain emotions that tempt the soul.

Henry expresses the significance of the final section, verses 23-29, when he states that Solomon “is here, more than any where in all this book, putting on the habit of a penitent”.¹⁹⁰ For after proving the vanity of the world and its inadequacy in bringing happiness, Solomon is now said to show the vileness of sin from his own experience and its soul deflating effect. It is pointed out that all this he proved by wisdom, though it is also acknowledged that on occasions wisdom was lacking and that there were some things Solomon was unable to prove by wisdom.

8. Chapter Eight

Solomon’s endorsement of wisdom as the most effective remedy for the enticement and seduction of vanity is felt by Henry to be reiterated in this chapter. The emphasis placed on wisdom is not remarkable. The role of wisdom in practical spirituality was fundamental in handling the realities of daily life. For Calvin, wisdom is the first principle he addresses in his volumes of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ Calvin, 1:175.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 183.

¹⁹⁰ Henry, 1045.

¹⁹¹ Calvin, 1:37.

Henry likewise refers to wisdom in these terms, where the wise man is described as knowing God and also knowing himself.¹⁹² The knowledge of which brings immense happiness to the wise man.

In the first section, verses 1-5, the praises of wisdom are again voiced enthusiastically by Henry. He then adopts a serious tone as he addresses an issue which would have been very current and close to home; subjection to authority:

A particular instance of wisdom pressed upon us, and that is subjection to authority, and a dutiful and peaceable perseverance in our allegiance to the government which Providence has set over us.¹⁹³

Henry, in his interpretation of these verses, speaks with conviction in regards to the duty of subjects in respect to authority, in particular royal authority. The nonconformist contention with political, religious and royal authority was a daily reality and here Henry stresses, through the message of Solomon, to be observant of laws, not to be anxious of finding fault with public administration and to be faithful to the government.¹⁹⁴ There is a sense of trepidation and Henry voices this anxiety when he advises:

For the sake of our own comfort: *Whoso keeps the commandment, and lives a quiet and peaceable life, shall feel no evil thing, to which that of the apostle answers (Rom. 13:3), Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power of the king? Do that which is good, as becomes a dutiful and loyal subject, and thou shalt ordinarily have praise of the same. He that does no ill shall feel no ill and needs fear none.*¹⁹⁵

There underlie pointers and hints to the precarious nature of the times in his admonition and Henry errs on the side of caution.

The uncertainty and unpredictability of the future is addressed by Henry in the second section, verses 6-8. Again, it is wisdom that provides reassurance and the knowledge of God's overriding control over all events.

In the first section Henry warned against going against or disobeying those in power but now in the third section, verses 9-13, he sees Solomon encouraging those oppressed by autocratic and oppressive leaders to rise up and rebel. Solomon's observance of such leaders and their abuse of power is cited. Henry makes a telling statement when he writes that:

¹⁹² Henry, 1046.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

It is sad with a people, when those that should protect their religion and rights aim at the destruction of both...*Agens agendo repatitur – What hurt men do to others will return, in the end, to their own heart.*¹⁹⁶

Is Henry possibly speaking of the monarchy or the hierarchy of the Anglican Church? It is impossible to say conclusively but it is difficult to ignore the innuendoes. A confrontation was taking place between the protestant proletariat, the nonconformists, and the bourgeoisie of the Anglican Church, and Henry is only too willing to use Solomon to assist in this theological and moral conflict.

The final section, verses 14-17, addresses the perplexing and eternal problem of why it appears that the wicked prosper and the good suffer. Furthermore how is this observation to be reconciled with the goodness and sanctity of God's being? Henry finds that Solomon offers advice on this troubling issue. Unsurprisingly, the advice is pious and familiar in content. For, it is not God that is to be blamed for such injustices but the vanity of the world. The conclusion and counsel, as mentioned in previous chapters, is one of resignation to the uncertainty of life but one that is done with a cheerful and content spirit.

9. Chapter Nine

Further proof of the vanity of this world is seen by Henry to be provided by Solomon in this chapter. From Solomon's personal examination of people he noted certain truisms concerning the interaction between man and the world.

Henry finds the first of these truisms is to be found in the first section, verses 1-3, where Solomon observes "that commonly as to outward things, good and bad men fare much alike".¹⁹⁷ Though not a new realisation, Henry commends Solomon's application to his studies and the great time spent in deliberation before making any declarations. It is meant to be a lesson to us all. It is the first of these observations that Henry sees Solomon having great difficulty in studying what he calls the "book of providence".¹⁹⁸ It does not appear that Henry is referring to an actual text but rather as a reference to life itself and the problem in trying to find any variances between the lives of the good and the bad. The distribution of joys and tribulations appear to be the same in both lives

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 1047.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 1048.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

and this is the cause of great perplexity, not only for Solomon but other students of life.

Henry comments on Solomon's hastiness in his earlier remark in 4:2 that the dead are happier than the living. Henry speaks of Solomon being "in a fret" when he came to that conclusion.¹⁹⁹ For now in the second section of this chapter, verses 4-10, Henry notices a change of mind on the part of Solomon. For Solomon now speaks of the advantages that the living have over the dead. It is through wisdom that Henry finds that the best use can be made of life and again there is the admonition to make the best use of it while it lasts.

The third section, verses 11-12, focuses on the uncertainty and unpredictability of the future as being further evidence of the vanity of this world. Henry finds Solomon reminding and advising against being too confident in our own abilities but instead to leave all to God. Henry contemplates on the disappointments that life's hopes often result in and finds them to be understandable. He finds that the reason for this is because it encourages a complete and humble dependence on God and not on our own abilities. Henry further expands on this issue and unsurprisingly returns to the doctrine of Providence. Here Henry comments on Solomon's observations:

He resolves all these disappointments into an overruling power and providence, the disposals of which to us seem casual, and we call them *chance*, but really they are according to the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God, here called *time*, in the language of the book, ch. 3:1; Ps. 31:15. *Time and chance happen to them all*. A sovereign Providence breaks men's measures, and blasts their hopes, and teaches them that the way of man is not in himself, but subject to the divine will.²⁰⁰

Here Henry uses Qoheleth's פגע 'chance/occurrence' to continue his discussion on divine Providence. Qoheleth comments on the inconsistencies of life in Qoh. 9:11 and concludes with a seemingly fatalistic statement that "time and chance happen to all". It is in those same occurrences that Henry finds God's providence. While Solomon leaves the explanation for these paradoxical events open, for Henry there is little doubt that they are a result of God's providence. Henry particularises the sentiments of Solomon, the preacher, and argues that the

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 1049.

existence of universally random acts and injustices are part of God's providential plan.

Henry finds in the final section, verses 13-18, that Solomon reiterates the importance of wisdom in maintaining a peaceful and altruistic existence. Henry counsels his audience to channel the power of wisdom for the good of all and not for private interests.

10. Chapter Ten

Henry finds this chapter to be a departure from Solomon's sermon and is instead a compilation of Solomonic proverbs and adages. The reason given by Henry for this diversion is that:

the preacher studied to be sententious, and "set in order many proverbs," to be brought in his preaching.²⁰¹

Henry felt that the pointed and didactic nature of the proverbs complemented Solomon's sermons. This collection of proverbs is considered by Henry to be a continuation on the virtues of wisdom and its great use in guarding against folly and in guiding correct speech. The proverbs are thought to be directed at both private individuals and rulers, both perceived as being very much in need of such wise counsel.

In the first section, verses 1-3, Henry explicates the main lessons from Solomon's wise sayings and notes that wisdom is a real accolade and bestows on the holder a precious and noble reputation. The warning that follows is that this reputation can be easily lost by a little folly. For those with a reputation to maintain can be even more susceptible to the vanities and pleasures of the world. In this context Henry cautions those who "make a great profession of religion", for they are observed even more carefully and even the appearance of any evil can be their downfall.

The proverbs in the second section, verses 4-11, are understood to be concerned with the loyalty and duty of subjects in relation to the government. Here Henry makes the assumption that Solomon's subjects were all very rich and maintained a wealthy existence that kindled arrogant and querulous characters. Henry further conjectures that though the subjects could afford to pay the high taxes, they harboured resentment towards the government and thoughts of rebellion. It is from this background that Solomon supposedly created these

²⁰¹ Ibid.

parables as a warning. The counsel is for care to be taken on the part of the subjects not to quarrel with their prince on either private or public matters. Even if the prince is at fault, subjects are to remain silent and allow circumstances to take their course. Here wisdom is to be consulted and be the guide in how to conduct oneself in any altercation.

The ill consequence of folly is contrasted against the previously seen benefits of wisdom in the third section, verses 12-15. Henry's observations reflect those of Solomon, that the fool exhibits the mischief of folly in two main ways. Firstly, the fool talks profusely with no purpose and secondly, the fool also works much to no purpose.

In the final section, verses 16-20, Henry outlines five notable observations that he ascertains in Solomon's parables, applying them in the main to authority:

- I. How much the happiness of a land depends upon the character of its rulers.
- II. Of what ill consequence slothfulness is both to private and public affairs.
- III. How industrious generally all are, both princes and people, to get money, because that serves for all purposes.
- IV. How cautious subjects have need to be that they harbour not any disloyal purposes in their minds, nor keep up any factious cabals or consultations against the government, because it is ten to one that they are discovered and brought to light.²⁰²

Henry repeatedly stresses loyalty and submission to authority and also maintains a distance from the governing classes. This could be due for a number of reasons. As previously discussed, the political and ecclesiastical circumstances at the time would argue against an antagonistic position on the part of the nonconformists. Also, in their Puritan tradition the rise in economic and political prosperity was considered to be inversely proportional to spiritual well being.²⁰³ The notion of a twofold government, one spiritual and the other civil²⁰⁴ was proposed by Calvin and he clearly states what he believes to be the jurisdiction of the Church and state:

But he who knows to distinguish between the body and the soul, between the present fleeting life and that which is future and eternal,

²⁰² Ibid., 1051-1052.

²⁰³ Bratt, 111.

²⁰⁴ Calvin, 2:140.

will have no difficulty in understanding that the spiritual kingdom of Christ and civil government are things very widely separated.²⁰⁵

Though this argument does not appear to be found in the considered Solomonic parables, Henry makes a similar discernment. The wisdom of a wise man governs and dictates the spiritual needs of the soul and is not distracted with the issues and spin surrounding the government and its affairs.²⁰⁶

11. Chapter Eleven

In the practical exposition of this chapter, Henry is found at his most moralising and sermonising. The tone is one of religious fervour and is generously flavoured with pious admonitions. Henry finds that the chapter deals with two main subjects: charity and death.

The first of these subjects, charity, is addressed in the first section, verses 1-6. Henry feels that Solomon has previously dwelt on the wealthy enjoying their riches themselves but now Solomon encourages the wealthy to share what they have with the poor and to use their affluence for good. It is apparent that Henry has felt a conspicuous gap in Solomon's sermon and in his interpretation of these six verses as referring to charitable works we find Henry prompting the text.²⁰⁷ Henry outlines the reasons for undertaking charitable duties and also responds to those who make excuses for their selfishness and lack of altruism. In response to the charge by some that they have met many ordeals in the course of their benevolence, Henry dismisses such a pharisaic excuse and states that "Christianity obliges us to endure hardness".²⁰⁸ Henry's life in comparative contrast, though filled with some hardships, seems to have been more dominated by sermons and preaching, and the cultivation of piety in himself and others, than any organised charitable outreach. Rev. Hamilton comments only in passing on Henry's public spirit and his ministry to the young and prisoners.²⁰⁹ Calvin saw charity second only to the worship of God and as a true illustration of faith.²¹⁰ Henry concludes that doing works of charity and in particular giving to the poor are the best ways to counter the vanity of the world and the temptations of riches.

²⁰⁵ Calvin, 2:651.

²⁰⁶ Henry, 1052.

²⁰⁷ Qoheleth Rabbah also interprets the beginning of chapter 11 in terms of charitable acts, as do other rabbinic and patristic commentators.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 1053.

²⁰⁹ Hamilton, 91.

²¹⁰ Calvin, 1:324.

The second subject, death, is introduced in the second part of the chapter, verses 7-10. Here is found Henry's admonition to both the young and the old to think about and prepare for death. For Henry it seems only natural that after much counsel on how to live well Solomon should now turn his attention to death and on how to die well. Firstly, Henry finds Solomon instructing the old to ponder on death, especially in the fullness of life when they are mostly likely to overlook the inevitable. When Solomon, secondly, addresses the young, Henry finds his advice problematic and reasons his appeal to the young to enjoy their life while they are young. Henry does not interpret this instruction as one to be taken at face value but rather he feels that Solomon intended for it to be read with irony:

An ironical concession to the vanities and pleasures of youth: *Rejoice, O young man! in thy youth.* Some make this to be the counsel which the atheist and the epicure give to the young man, the poisonous suggestions against which Solomon, in the close of the verses, prescribes a powerful antidote. But it is more emphatic if we take it, as it is commonly understood, by way of irony.²¹¹

Henry avoids the plain or literal meaning of the text and finds the use of irony to provide a truer, more faithful understanding of the text. By speaking ironically Solomon is thought to expose the young to their folly by apparently saying what they want to hear. And by further proceeding onto judgement in verse 9, Henry feels vindicated in his assessment of Solomon's true intentions. The use of irony is not consistent with Puritan tradition and it appears that Henry is forced to employ this device to avoid a literal reading of the text. With judgement on the horizon, Henry almost dares the young to live an opulent lifestyle, knowing what is to come. He concludes with Solomon's reminder to the young and the old of the vanity of the world and its uncertainties and its inability to provide any lasting contentment.

12. Chapter Twelve

Henry introduces his exposition of the final chapter by praising Solomon as the "wise and penitent preacher" who was not only a good orator but also an excellent preacher.²¹² It is suggested that Solomon's choice of concluding issues was deliberate, for they were intended to make the most impact and leave a lasting impression.

²¹¹ Henry, 1053.

The first of these profound issues is found in the first section, verses 1-7, where a plea is made to the young to bear in mind their Creator while they are still young. The supplication is viewed by Henry to be firstly a warning to guard against the vanity that youth brings and secondly, a reminder of duty towards God and to involve him in all aspects of life. Henry finds a sense of urgency in the plea due to the haste with which old age, sickness and death befalls all. Henry expands on the certainties that old age brings by detailing all the impending infirmities. He finds in Solomon's "figurative expressions" twelve signs of decrepitude in old age, including the decline in vision, depression, insomnia and fear, among others.²¹³ Death is found to be the ultimate cure for the miseries of ageing and he also describes the other consequence of death:

Death will resolve us into our first principles, v. 7. Man is a strange sort of creature, a ray of heaven united to a clod of earth; at death these are separated, and each goes to the place whence it came.²¹⁴

The clod of earth, the body, returns to the earth and the ray of light, the soul, returns to God. It appears that Henry does not believe in resurrection but in the immortality of the soul. The soul does not die with the body but instead it goes to God to be judged. Therefore Henry concludes that the godly souls have nothing to fear and it is only the wicked that should fear death.

In the second section, verses 8-12, Henry finds Solomon reluctant to draw his sermon to a close, longing to persevere and impress on his audience the satisfaction that can only be found in God and never in what is of earthly origin. There is a brief repetition of the doctrine of vanity and then the remainder of the section is absorbed with Henry's arguments concerning the validity of Solomonic authorship, and Solomon's divinely inspired role of a preacher and his study of vanity.

The final section of the chapter and the exposition is the epilogue, verses 13-14. Here Henry finds the results to Solomon's great investigation, which is how to find true happiness, "that serious godliness is the only way to true happiness".²¹⁵ This conclusion is not unexpected and Henry goes on to provide a summary which shows the importance of religion. The summary being that religion is the fear of God and the keeping of his commandments, for it is the

²¹² Ibid., 1054.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 1055.

whole duty of man. Henry concludes his exposition by speaking of the inducement to live a religious life, as being one that mainly stems from the fear of final judgement but also from a desire to serve God completely.

G. Conclusion

Matthew Henry's practical exposition of Ecclesiastes is, as the title implies, a commentary designed to assist the Christian in the practical living of a religious and godly life. The feel of the exposition is unmistakably pietistic and conservative in texture. The rhetoric is Puritan in manner and composition, with a strong underlying Calvinistic tone. Henry's exposition fits comfortably into this genre of literature, where stress is placed on the development of a holy life and a prudent religious outlook. Henry's commentary reflects aspects of Puritan literary tradition, exemplified by John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in which the Christian life is illustrated as a pilgrimage and a spiritual battle. Though the themes may be similar, Henry's literary style differs greatly from Bunyan's narrative, allegorical flare. Henry's approach to the biblical text is methodical, structured, and very deliberate. He allows little room for manoeuvre and so the exposition can be overly systematic and at times prosaic. The manner in which Henry's commentary was studied was intended to illustrate the repetitive, ordered, and consistent attributes that characterise Puritan literature.

Where Henry differs from what is regarded as mainstream Puritanism, is in his highly conservative approach to Solomon's enjoyment of life's pleasures. In this respect, Henry could be considered as a killjoy, one of those later nonconformists whom Hill refers to as promoting a negative image of Puritans.²¹⁶ It is not that mainstream Puritanism would not have frowned on some of Solomon's behaviour but they did not regard abstinence as the way to salvation but rather emphasis was placed on the correct use of the corporal nature.²¹⁷

Nonconformist literature was in part a response to the political and ecclesiastical climate of the time. The backlash from the nonconformists against the perceived vulgarities of the established Church was fought from their pulpits,

²¹⁵ Ibid., 1056.

²¹⁶ Hill, 53-54.

²¹⁷ Keeble, xiii. As is attested to in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, where eating, drinking, singing, music and dancing are celebrated and seen as divine gifts.

and was debated among their educated clergy and learned laity. The battle was an intellectual and theological one; radicalism versus traditionalism. Popular iconoclasm called for complete reform within the Church, where the truth and simplicity of scripture was to be upheld and abided.

It is not then surprising that Henry brings Solomon into this spiritual fray. Henry portrays Solomon as the ultimate authority on the insidious nature of vanity and a prudent survivor of its allure. Solomon's life takes on an experimental dimension in order to provide Henry with profound lessons regarding the vanity of the world and its intrinsic malignancy to all that exists in this world. A message from personal experience was a characteristic of both Puritan and Calvinist religious literature.

Henry's focus on Solomon's primary function and vocation as being that of a preacher, is testament to the centrality of preaching in the Puritan tradition. There is no consideration of Solomon's popular image, of a philosopher. Solomon, the preacher, is more desirable and in keeping with Henry's nonconformist agenda than Solomon, the philosopher. Importance was placed in preaching the simple truths found in the Word of God, rather than deliberating on disconnected concepts and ideas.

There are allusions to philosophy in the form of Plato and his theory on the soul but Henry's theology on the soul appears to be second-hand and to stem more from a filtered Calvinistic theory. It is clear that Calvinism influenced many of Henry's theological ideas, and Calvinist thought is encountered in various manners throughout the exposition. Henry's literalist approach to the biblical text is in sharp contrast to the philosophical homilies of Gregory of Nyssa. For Gregory of Nyssa the homilies' reading audience consisted mainly of the contemporary literati, while Henry's wholesome, literal exposition was intended for the masses.

It is important to be reminded of the designation Henry gives to his commentary on the Bible, which is entitled a practical exposition and not simply a commentary. Its function, as spelled out by Henry, was to provide a simple and plain reading of the text, one that could be understood by the ordinary Christian and could guide them through the minefield of life. Interestingly, Henry embraces Solomon's life story as a suitable example on how to live a virtuous

life despite all the opportunities to live a carnal one, dismissing textual indicators that reflect a different reality.

The approach and the intention was to provide a simple, literal reading of the biblical text but as has been noted, Henry was not always able to observe his imposed hermeneutics. The text of Ecclesiastes posed specific problems for Henry and a plain reading of the text was inadequate in addressing these textual difficulties. This is observed in the reading of Solomon's observation of chance where Henry misreads the text to mean divine providence. The concept of chance had no place in Henry's theology and so a radically conservative reading of the text was required. Henry faces a similar textual difficulty in Solomon's advice to the young to enjoy their youth. In this instance he misreads the text by the use of irony and credits Solomon with a statement of derision, rather than one to encourage pleasure.

The highly repetitious nature of Puritan writing is clearly seen in Henry's exposition, where themes of the doctrine of vanity, wisdom, providence and advice on how to live a godly life are returned to over and over again. In his urge for self-consistency, Henry is unable to stay true to his desire to provide a literal reading of the text, as has been noted. The problems that Ecclesiastes presents force Henry to employ un-Puritan exegetical methods to uncover the simple truths of the text and seemingly to return to authorial intent.

Generally, Henry avoids overt controversy but there are moments when he is outspoken, such as his attack on the Church of Rome and their practice of monasticism. His attack on celibacy, using Solomonic authority, is a notable response to and a unique reading and manipulation of the textual structures of Qoheleth. There are also attacks on the Church of England but more shrewd than the criticisms of the Church of Rome and they can be inferred from Henry's emphasis on Solomon's later dislike of pageantry, wealth and its display. Though Henry encourages loyalty to the Crown and to the government, at the same time he speaks of those who should be protecting liberty and faith abusing their position.

Henry finds the epilogue to be the answer to his doctrine of vanity. His exposition attempts to serve as a moral guide on how to live a religious and godly life. The last couple of verses of Ecclesiastes are the axiom on which he has designed his whole argument. There is a sense of relief when Henry finds

that after all of Solomon's experimentation with the world that he returns, in the eyes of Henry, to his Puritan roots. Where the fear of God and the keeping of his commandments allow Solomon to remain within nonconformist ideology and one in which he is idealised as a conceptualistic radical reformer in regards to providing practical solutions to the vanity of the world.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

Prior to retracing the reception of Qoheleth in a selection of rabbinic, patristic and post-reformation literature, it is beneficial to review the source texts and critique their inclusion in the study. The very nature of Qoheleth itself was the criterion against which the four texts were chosen. The theological plurality and the lack of a single literary style, lends Qoheleth to an investigation incorporating a disparate selection of source texts that will do justice to the complexity of its structure and the diversity of its theological and ideological concepts.

The choice of the rabbinic texts, Qoheleth Rabbah and Targum Qoheleth, were considered ideal for their contrasting approaches to the reading and subsequent interpretation of the biblical text. Qoheleth Rabbah provides a dynamic reading of Qoheleth, one that reflects the theological plurality of the text and the philosophical debate that is intrinsic to the text of Qoheleth. Midrashic hermeneutics allows a reading of Qoheleth to be conceived that is markedly different, in terms of mechanics, to Targum Qoheleth. They both of course approach the text from differing perspectives of text and audience, issues that will be addressed subsequently. Targum Qoheleth complements Qoheleth Rabbah as the second rabbinic text, for in its endeavour to provide a reputed Aramaic translation of the Hebrew text of Qoheleth; it provides another distinct reading of the biblical text. The Targum addresses the hermeneutical challenges that Qoheleth offers, not through a literal translation of the text but rather through an exegetical process that encounters contentious issues, rewriting the biblical text and bringing Qoheleth into harmony with Targumic thought and theology.

Patristic commentators largely overlooked Qoheleth and so Gregory of Nyssa's contribution to the corpus of commentaries on Qoheleth is significant and one that necessitated inclusion as one of the early Christian sources. Though one of the lesser known of the Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa as a theologian and an insider of the nascent Eastern Church at a critical time in its theological development was undoubtedly an engaging contender when looking at the reception of Qoheleth within a different historical context. Gregory's

incorporation of a Platonic-Origenistic worldview into his catholic orthodoxy adds a further dimension and so provides a reading and interpretation of Qoheleth that is distinct and notable.¹

Matthew Henry's marked difference to Gregory of Nyssa both in chronology and theology were both factors in the inclusion of his exposition of Ecclesiastes in the study. Henry's non-conformist Presbyterian faith and Puritan ideology provided an additional discrete Christian reading of Qoheleth to that of Gregory of Nyssa. The audience and thus, the literary language also provided an additional contrast between the Christian texts; Matthew Henry's simple message to the ordinary parishioner compared to Gregory of Nyssa's philosophical rhetoric to the learned classes. Though the selection of literary sources, both Jewish and Christian is far from comprehensive, the choosing of one early pre-Reformation and one post-Reformation Protestant text for examples of the Christian reception of Qoheleth attempted to render a somewhat balanced picture of the interpretation of the text within the varied literary history of Christendom.

The choice of texts, as arbitrary as the process appears, endeavoured to present a breadth of readings that would offer a *mélange* of additional insights on Qoheleth the text, including; Solomon as author, the view of God, the overall message of the book, and the very process of reading the text. What has been learnt from these four texts, as in regard to these points and how they have added to a reading of Qoheleth will be addressed but firstly it is important to review the world of the author, the text and the reader as they relate to all four of the source texts.

A. The World of the Author(s)

The world of the author(s) is inextricably linked to and dominated by their reading audience but also to a more general and wider group. The historical climate in which they were writing undoubtedly impacted the text but equally significant was the role of the intended audience in the production of the final work.

When looking at the compilation of Midrashic readings on Qoheleth, Qoheleth Rabbah, which is roughly dated to the seventh century and which took

¹ The term "catholic" with a lower case is used in the sense of "universal" since at this early time in the history of the Church the clear confessional distinctions between (Roman)

shape in Palestine during what could be described as a renaissance period within Jewish literature, the defined audience was a limited one. The close of the Talmudic period gave way to an age of relative literary openness where biblical exegesis, philosophy and poetry flourished, during which time Qoheleth Rabbah was compiled. Qoheleth Rabbah continued in the long established literary tradition of rabbinic interpretation of scripture. The audience to this classic rabbinic mode of literary exegesis remained largely unchanged during this period. It consisted predominately of a group of literate males who were informed, well-versed students of scripture and familiar with rabbinic hermeneutics. The rabbinic authors, though, did not confine themselves to their students and peers but also interacted with non-rabbinic Jews and to a limited extent non-Jews. The majority of the population in Palestine during this time was illiterate and literature was the bastion of a chosen few. Though largely illiterate, the rabbis' wider non-rabbinic Jewish audience was an important one and one that also influenced the Midrashic process. To make scripture more accessible and more relevant to the people, the rabbis had to be sensitive and aware of the socio-economic status of their audience and their intellectual level. Midrash, a searching out of scripture, allowed the rabbis to connect the community with scripture.

Targum Qoheleth is thought to have been compiled between the sixth and ninth centuries in the East Mediterranean and so the world of the targumist is similar to that of Qoheleth Rabbah. Who the audience of the Targum was remains a question of debate by scholars. Targum Qoheleth, as noted in its study, functioned only in name as an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew text, especially considering that Aramaic ceased to be used in most places during its compilation. Rather, Targum Qoheleth provides a completely new reading of the Hebrew text, where the biblical text is overwritten and obliterated. Though the author(s) build on previous rabbinic scriptural interpretation they have created an Aramaic text that is tangibly different to the Hebrew text, distanced by language and message. The written Targum, which replaced the oral Targum, was used in synagogue worship, schools and private study but questions remain as to whether it is the targums or the process of translation that is referred to in references in the

Catholic and (Greek) Orthodox were at best only embryonic.

Mishnah and Talmuds. But to what extent Targum Qoheleth was used in these contexts remains unclear. Again, like Qoheleth Rabbah it is likely that Targum Qoheleth didn't get the public exposure of its more renowned predecessors, like the Pentateuchal Targum, Targum Onqelos. Similarly, Targum Jonathan, the Targum to the Prophets, became an authoritative Targum like Targum Onqelos and both reveal a more traditional translation of the Hebrew text. Targum Qoheleth, and the other Targums to the Writings take a secondary role in their authoritative position and utilisation. The targumists' audience is difficult to determine and so raises questions as to the actual function of Targum within Rabbinic literary tradition. It may be argued, though, that Targum Qoheleth is a result of the development of Targum as an exercise in homiletic midrash but where little attempt is made to preserve the original text and that Targum Qoheleth is the product of a scholarly game where the audience of the resultant text are the targumists themselves and their inner rabbinic circle.

The world of the Patristic author, Gregory of Nyssa, in terms of who his reading audience was is a little less difficult to define. The compositional nature of the Homilies on Ecclesiastes places the work's production between 378 and 381. Gregory's reading and interpretation of Ecclesiastes is clearly directed toward the Church. The Church is the object of his message but evidence for who actually read or had access to his work is lacking. The Church he is addressing appears to be the wider ecclesiastical establishment rather than his sole episcopate in Nyssa. Gregory's early audience and critics were his brother, Basil the Great and Basil's friend, Gregory of Nazianzus. His abilities as a rhetor are well documented, as are the distinguished audience he was requested to address on notable occasions but Gregory's literary audience can also be extrapolated and defined to a certain extent. When Gregory is writing to the Church, as is clear in his Homilies on Ecclesiastes, he would have been writing to his contemporary clergy, his peers, and to his ecclesiastical superiors. Greek, the official language of Cappadocia, was utilised by a governmental and ecclesiastical hierarchy, while the general population remained largely illiterate in Greek. Gregory's audience was a finite one consisting of bishops and other clerics, the learned and elite, within the catholic church.

As first and foremost a minister, the world of Matthew Henry revolved around his congregation. In the preface to his first volume of his exposition of

the Bible, Henry addresses his expected audience as being those who would be in theological agreement with him or at least he hoped they would be. It is not surprising that Henry's exposition of Ecclesiastes was written for a non-conformist, Presbyterian readership. Sermons and preaching played central roles in Presbyterian worship and in the life of a minister. Henry's exposition would have undoubtedly been incorporated into sermons and heard by his congregation from the pulpit. The study of the Bible, and sermon composition were intrinsically one work. The sixth volume, which was completed after his death, was compiled by a group of ministers, all of whom were admirers of Henry's ministry. Therefore, it is clear that the clergy had access to and read Henry's commentary but we can also surmise that not only did the learned and intellectuals among Henry's congregation have access to his works but the general literate laity probably also had access to the volumes of Henry's exposition as they were published. James Hamilton writes of Henry's ministry in Chester, where he compiled most of his commentary, as being an ideal one for many among his congregation were educated and so provided Henry with an intellectually stimulating ministry.

B. The World of the Source Texts

The world of the text places the text within its historical and social context. Each of the source texts were produced and compiled in their own unique context, where the author(s) were influenced and impacted by their surroundings, their historical horizon, in a similar manner to how their respective audience also influenced their reading of Qoheleth. As has been seen in the study, the historical world of the text plays a significant role in the interpretation and reading of Qoheleth, and the consequent reception of and response to the text.

Qoheleth Rabbah's compilation in the seventh century occurred in a climate of social and political unrest. Palestine was in a continued period of political upheaval. After the short lived Persian raid early in the seventh century, Roman/Byzantine rule ended when Islamic forces swept westwards and eventually took full control of Palestine in the mid-seventh century with the fall of Caesarea. The once dominant Christian faith with the conversion of Constantine to Christianity now gave way to Islam. The response of rabbinic

hermeneutics to this state of affairs, in their reading of Qoheleth, is neither overt nor non-responsive. Qoheleth Rabbah can clearly not be classified as a polemic against Christianity and Islam but what it does contain are polemical nuances and subtleties. Allegory, mashal and symbolism are employed effectively and in ways that would have been understood by their mostly rabbinic audience. The exegetical battle lay more with Christianity than with Islam, for the very ownership of the Torah was under attack. The Rabbinic agenda appears to be more affirmative, in upholding the study of the Torah, rather than pursuing a line of attack against the non-Jewish majority.

The compilation of Targum Qoheleth is thought to have occurred after Qoheleth Rabbah but the exact dating of the Targums to the Writings and Targum Qoheleth specifically is still uncertain and remains a point of question. Also, a more exact geographical location for its production, other than the region of the eastern Mediterranean, is yet to be determined. The Targums to the Writings are thought to have been compiled between the sixth and ninth centuries and it can be postulated that Targum Qoheleth was probably written towards the end of this time scale. Islamic rule dominated the eastern Mediterranean region during most of this time and for the most part it was a period of tolerant co-existence between Islam, Christianity and Judaism in spite of political upheavals. This tolerance between the religions would be drastically changed after the Crusades of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. This comparatively stable climate is possibly reflected in the introspective tone and message of Targum Qoheleth. The themes of the Targum focus on Torah, a holy life and historical Israel, and are largely free of any polemical devices to counteract theological arguments that arose from Islam and Christianity but rather deal with textual issues raised by Qoheleth.

Gregory of Nyssa's Homilies on Ecclesiastes are believed to have been authored towards the end of the fourth century in Cappadocia, probably at his See of Nyssa where he held the position of Bishop. This period was punctuated by a series of political and religious clashes between Roman rule and the catholic church. Though unpredictable times beset Gregory's ecclesiastical ministry, theological debate was instigated more from inside the Church than from external factors. The very basic fundamental teachings of Christianity were still evolving and being concretised and Gregory's rhetoric, letters, commentaries and

homilies were largely a response to consequent theological issues and political instabilities within the Church structure, rather than to any external conflicts.

Matthew Henry's exposition of Ecclesiastes differs most greatly in time and space from the other three source texts. Authored at the beginning of the eighteenth century in Chester, England, the exposition fits into a vastly different chronological and geographical context. What Henry does share with Gregory of Nyssa to a certain extent, is that his reading of Qoheleth has less to do with his general social context but more with pushing a theological agenda within his own religious context. Of course the political climate of his day played a role and impacted on Christianity as it was in the seventeenth/eighteenth centuries, especially in terms of the role of the monarchy in the course of the nonconformist movement. Henry's exposition of Ecclesiastes addresses issues within Protestantism and in so doing makes veiled attacks against the Catholic Church. The influence of the historical context on Henry's reading produces an interpretation of Qoheleth that testifies to and addresses a distinctive religious-theological community, like the three other source texts.

C. The World of the Reader

The readers of Qoheleth, the author(s) of the source texts, inhabit another world, one that is apart from their audience and their own historical context but one that greatly influences their reading of Qoheleth. The view of scripture by each reader, the ideological world that they primarily inhabited in the compilation of their respective works is what will be examined. Their approach to and the theological basis from which they read scripture, and hence Qoheleth, was an important factor in their reception of the text.

The rabbinic view of scripture, as examined in the reading of Qoheleth Rabbah, is not as unambiguous as it may first appear. Though the authority of the Torah is central, God's revelation to Israel also extends to rabbinic literature. The rabbis themselves were considered to be equal to a scroll of the Torah. Therefore scripture itself was not considered to be the only source of truth, for revelation was thought to be received through various media and not exclusively through one. The inclusion of Qoheleth in the Writings continued to be a question of debate among the rabbis. Though questioned, Qoheleth was viewed as part of the scriptural canon and so part of God's message to Israel but also open to

interpretation. The status of sages and rabbis and the concept of the dual Torah allowed for, as in the case of Qoheleth Rabbah, the reading of each rabbi to be heard and be given equal authority. The equation of the sage or rabbi with the Torah allowed for each reading to be expressed without undermining the authority of the written Torah. Midrash was a continuation of the interpretative process of the written Torah and was thus considered to be an extension of Torah.

This view of scripture is also shared by the author(s), the targumists, of Targum Qoheleth. Though in Targum Qoheleth the various voices are not identified, they are audible. The study of Targum Qoheleth reveals little of a translation of the Hebrew text but the creation of a new text that discloses a different dynamic between the rabbis and Torah compared to Midrash. The role of the rabbis as part of the continued process of divine revelation was critical in the approach to and reading of scripture. But what differentiates Targum Qoheleth from Qoheleth Rabbah is language and hence affecting the exegetical process in relation to divine revelation. By writing in Aramaic the targumists were distanced from the intrinsic holiness of the Hebrew text, which rendered the hands unclean, and therefore were able to exhibit a literary freedom in comparison to the Hebrew Midrash. Targum Qoheleth falls late in the literary tradition of Targum, and its lack of authoritative status within rabbinic literature, reflects a view of revelation and scripture where though various rabbinic readings within each book were equal, the equality or authority among the written Torah books appears to be discrete.

When considering Gregory of Nyssa's view of scripture, as observed in his reading of Qoheleth, a distinct difference to that of the rabbinic school of thought is observed. Gregory's theological thinking was filtered through contemporary philosophical thought, thus Neo-Platonism had a fundamental impact on his reading of Qoheleth and early Christian thought in general. There was a shift away from a preceding, basically Semitic way of thinking and taking it into a fundamentally Hellenistic environment.² Gregory's reading of Qoheleth reflects this transition and an emerging Orthodox faith, which was still

² This shift from Hebrew to Hellenistic thought is detailed by Thorleif Boman in *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1960). Boman describes

formulating its doctrinal basis. Gregory appears to read and view the biblical text as a fundamentally philosophical text, one which could be complemented by Greek philosophy. The accentuated dualism between spiritual and physical realities that came into Christianity with the adoption of Neo-Platonism, led to the development of a theology in the early Christian Church which relied heavily on allegorical interpretation, since the emphasis on physical realities which is so strong in the Hebrew Bible could not be given the same emphasis by the Christian interpreters. This non-realistic trend in Patristic thought can also be seen as an influencing factor in the development in Byzantine art, which presents spiritual realities through a highly stylised, non-realistic medium.

There is a yet a further shift in the view of scripture when we look at Matthew Henry's exposition of Qoheleth. Matthew Henry's reading falls in the post-Reformation, and Pietistic period, and towards the end of the Puritan movement. In response to their displeasure with the practices of the Church establishment, the nonconformists called for a return to a true reading of scripture and in turn the adoption of practices founded on a literal reading of scripture. Henry affirms the unity of scripture and its divine authority. Scripture is viewed as divine revelation whose function is to provide guidance on how to live a moral and godly life. Henry's view of scripture allows little room for free interpretative expression and he follows the text systematically and intimately. When scripture is viewed as divine revelation, where nothing is to be added or taken away, individual interpretative thought is not encouraged. Though Henry may view scripture in these conservative terms, that does not prevent him from reading Qoheleth in terms of his historical, social and religious context. For Henry scripture was to be used and applied by Christians in their daily life, it was not an abstract philosophical book that was to be only contemplated and not acted on. Henry's exposition of Qoheleth is exemplified by its practical interpretation of what can be considered a very reality-based text.

D. The View of Solomon

The identity of and the reader's view of Solomon/Qoheleth are called into question in the very first verse of Qoheleth. Solomon, the presumed or implied

the difference in historical thought by stating that the 'Israelites gave the world historical religion, and the Greeks gave it historical science' (preface).

author, obligates a response from his reading audience and how each of the four source texts responds will be reviewed.

Qoheleth Rabbah provides two interpretations of the first verse of Qoheleth, one that affirms Solomon's authorship and the other his kingship and identity. The Midrash confirms Solomon as the author, not only of Qoheleth but also of Proverbs and Song of Songs. In addressing possible questions regarding the use of the name of Qoheleth instead of Solomon, the rabbis discuss the various names that Solomon possessed, varying from three to seven in all. Some were considered proper names and others surnames but each, as in the use of Qoheleth, had a meaning and a purpose. In replying to a question as to why the name Qoheleth was used, a rabbi simply states that it is because in this instance Solomon's words were spoken in public, and so the meaning of Qoheleth, to assemble, fitted the context. According to the rabbis, by employing an alternative name, Solomon is merely describing another facet of his complex persona. The personal introduction to the book and its reproachful message are also pointed out by the rabbis as being indicators of Solomon's other role of a prophet. Throughout Qoheleth Rabbah, it is Solomon that is identified and speaking as Qoheleth and reference is also made to his parentage and position. In the context of Solomonic authorship, the rabbis also address the issue of earlier debates among the sages to exclude Qoheleth from the canon. Though the rabbis acknowledge that some of Solomon's words were considered words of heresy, they demonstrate how Solomon follows such seemingly heretical statements by ones that are in keeping with the teachings of the Torah and thus, defusing any misinterpretation of his words. Though Qoheleth as Solomon's orator persona, authorship, lineage and kingly status is accepted by the rabbis, the problematic nature of this persona is also evident in the Midrash. To render the text safer, Qoheleth is individualised and particularised by rabbinic hermeneutics into Solomon, one that is acceptable and in line with Torah and rabbinic tradition.

Targum Qoheleth reflects many of Qoheleth Rabbah's views of Solomon since it draws heavily on the Midrash. Solomonic authorship of Qoheleth is assumed and is not discussed, nor are reasons for the use of the name of Qoheleth given by the targumists. In contrast to the Midrash, the Targum introduces Solomon's prophetic abilities in the first few words of the Targum and it continues as a prominent theme throughout Targum Qoheleth. The targumists'

proficiency at being able to both expand seamlessly and completely overwrite the Hebrew text is clearly seen in their manipulation of Qoheleth as Solomon. Solomon, the prophet is stressed more than Solomon, the king; for it appears that this device is able to defuse the text more efficiently than Solomon's other attributes. Solomon was able, through the spirit of prophecy, to foresee events that would befall historic Israel and was also able to address current social and religious issues facing his monarchy. Solomon, the prophet, is used by the targumists to respond to historical and contemporary concerns but also to make Qoheleth a less problematic figure. In assigning prophetic qualities to Qoheleth, the targumists' intention was to create a more religiously conventional persona, one in keeping with rabbinic tradition as in Qoheleth Rabbah. The effects of the rabbinic agenda was to transform an anonymous, non-rabbinic Qoheleth into an almost Solomonic caricature who is presented as innocuous, but gaps in the adjusted persona remain and the Solomon that is exposed is one that is unrecognisable to the biblical Qoheleth.

In contrast to the previous rabbinic texts, Gregory of Nyssa's references to Solomon in the homilies are sparse. Gregory does not speak of Solomon as author in the opening to the first homily but rather of the Ecclesiast. Solomon is indeed alluded to by reference to his parentage but the connection is made not as a means to affirm Solomonic authorship or authority but rather as a Christological device to equate Christ, the true Ecclesiast and Son of God with the Ecclesiast, the Son of David. It is the words of the Ecclesiast that are referred to and not those of Solomon. The voice of Solomon is not necessary for Gregory, for it is his Ecclesiast who addresses the Church and the message is one for its edification. Solomon is not identified or restored as a subject until the second homily. Gregory views Solomon's life as a good example to others on how not to conduct their lives. Gregory shares the need of the rabbis to gloss over or to defend Solomon's indiscretions by finding a more altruistic motivation to his imprudent choices. Gregory's Solomon is a philosophical one who descends into a life where the pleasure of the senses are explored in order to investigate them and so contribute to the knowledge of Good. Gregory's Solomon is further given a Platonic dimension, one whose life's purpose is to lead others to the Good and lift the human spirit above bodily senses.

Matthew Henry, as in *Qoheleth Rabbah*, finds the use of the name *Qoheleth* significant but even more consequential in the development of his view of Solomon. For Henry, Solomon as *Qoheleth* is the penitent, preaching soul. Solomon, the preacher is the vocation that Henry identifies most with in his exposition, one that fits in with his puritan based religiosity. As with Gregory of Nyssa, Henry justifies Solomon's vain life as being an experimental one, where the aim was to provide others with evidence of the results of life devoted to worldly pleasures. Solomon's position and authority as king is perceived to benefit only those who look to him as an example. Solomonic authorship is affirmed in the preface to the exposition and is stated again in the first line of the exposition. Solomon, the biblical character is important to Henry, for it is this Solomon who provides the pious Christian with a practical guide on how to live a religious and godly life but he is not the Ecclesiast, Christ, the main character in the exposition.

E. The Message of Qoheleth

The overall message of *Qoheleth*, as understood and interpreted by the four source texts, differs between each of them in terms of thematic stress and religious ideology. The question concerning the essence of *Qoheleth's* message is one that has been and continues to be a topic of debate among readers of *Qoheleth*. As has been discussed, a number of factors impact on how the reader approaches and reacts to the text and on the consequent reading.

The study and the authority of the Torah are the main themes and message that are evident in both *Qoheleth Rabbah* and *Targum Qoheleth*. The identification of wisdom and other attributes, such as work, with Torah is in keeping with early rabbinic thought. That Torah is central to both rabbinic readings of *Qoheleth* is not in itself remarkable. It is how the rabbis confronted the hermeneutical challenges that *Qoheleth* offered and why they found the message of the Torah central to their reading of *Qoheleth* that is more notable.

In *Qoheleth Rabbah* the rabbis confront a text whose very inclusion into the scriptural canon was debated vigorously by the sages due to its supposedly heretical content. Since this is acknowledged in the midrash on *Qoh. 1:3*, the hermeneutical challenge set by *Qoheleth* is recognised early on by the rabbis. Therefore *Qoheleth* sets the rabbis an intrinsically theological problem and how

they deal with this problem is to blend rabbinic theology with Qoheleth's theology. In so doing the rabbis are addressing the same issues their earlier counterparts, the sages, faced. Ironically, the once considered potentially heretical Qoheleth is used by the rabbis to teach against heresy in relation to the written Torah. Though the polemics against the *minim* are a subtext, the Torah is pivotal and every observation and comment made by Qoheleth is filtered through and purged by the Torah. Indeed Israel's very identity and future was intrinsically linked to the Torah and the rabbis are outspoken in this regard. In attempting to subvert the themes of life, death, work and fate, present in Qoheleth, the rabbis have tried through Qoheleth Rabbah to create a more theologically acceptable persona. In their struggle to (re)create Qoheleth, the rabbis have created a new myth, and in so doing not only continue a rabbinic tradition but a biblical one.

The how and why of what Targum Qoheleth is doing differs greatly to Qoheleth Rabbah. The Targum also brings the Torah to bear heavily on Qoheleth and the message to the reader of the Targum is one of admonition to live a life that is devoted to God and in accordance with the Torah. The challenges that were faced by the compilers of the Midrash remain unchanged but the targumists' reaction to the problematic textual structures is to overwrite the Hebrew text. Targumic theology confronts Qoheleth's reality-based theology and transforms and rewrites it through exegesis. The application of rabbinic hermeneutics also differs to that of Midrash, in that there is no citation of biblical texts or a separation of the 'translation' from the original text. Thus, the readers, the targumists, project themselves onto the text, writing what they considered the message of Qoheleth should have been and so creating a new text, one that conveyed a contemporary message.

Though Gregory of Nyssa feels that the message of Qoheleth is directed in general to the Church, the essence of the message is aimed at the individual. In his reading of Qoheleth, Gregory finds that the main purpose and lesson is to lead the individual to a knowledge of God, the Good. The lessons of Qoheleth provide guidance on the restoration of self to seek real wisdom, which ultimately leads to the Good. The challenge faced by Gregory in reading Qoheleth is that Qoheleth speaks of very reality-based observations. But Gregory, with his Neo-Platonic thought base, imposes a greater distinction between body and soul, and

views Solomon's experimental indiscretions as part of the transitory world of the body and senses, which is what is described as vanity. While the world of the soul and the mind occupies a superior level, pursuing a virtuous life and the Good, and is therefore not considered a vain pursuit.

Though Matthew Henry also finds the message of Qoheleth to be directed to the Church, the theological content of the message differs from Gregory of Nyssa. For Henry, Qoheleth provides and functions as a practical guide on how to live a virtuous Christian life. In proposing his intent from the beginning, Henry confronts the textual difficulties that Qoheleth presents. Though Solomon, as Henry identifies Qoheleth, comments on what he considers to be the reality-based issues facing man, his observations are left without solutions and this creates a dilemma for Henry. There is also the problem of Qoheleth's language, which to Henry appears to be overly enigmatic, reflective and philosophical. Henry himself states that he wants to provide a plain and simple reading of the text. As with the rabbinic readings and Gregory of Nyssa, Qoheleth poses specific problems to Henry and as with the others, how and why he deals with them provides additional insights into the text of Qoheleth.

There are common elements shared by all four texts, for they all find the message tailored to their respective communities and theologies and the message or admonition to live a godly life, one that is in accordance with the law or commandments is paramount. What does differ is how each views the problems that Qoheleth presents and how they address them. Difference is found in where they place their focus: for the rabbis of the Midrash and Targum it is the Torah, for Gregory of Nyssa it is the Good and for Matthew Henry it is the pious Christian life.

F. The View of God

The view and impression of God as perceived by the source texts in their reading of Qoheleth is an important factor in their interpretation of the book. The role of God is central to Qoheleth's observations on life and how he understands the manner in which the divine interacts with man. Diverse portraits and impressions of God are found in the text of the written Torah, the Hebrew Bible, and Qoheleth presents yet another image, a theologically individualistic and personal one.

Qoheleth Rabbah views the God of Qoheleth as being one who is in control of and so impacts on all aspects of life. The Midrash speaks of God as קודש ברוך הוא, *the holy one, blessed be he*. This phrase as a reference to God is in keeping with rabbinic exegetical literary tradition, and is included in the *Mekhilta*³, *Sifra*⁴ and *Genesis Rabbah*⁵ among others. The control of the divine extended beyond the realm of man to the natural world where the Midrash speaks of the sun's rays being weakened through water and the force of wind is subdued by means of hills and mountains. The omnipresence of God, not only in climatic changes, is related in a tone of reassurance to those who are righteous. For as easily as God can control nature for the benefit of man, he can also bring natural disasters on the wicked. The impression of a God of judgement is prominent throughout the Midrash, where God awaits in the hereafter/world to come to exact punishment on the wicked and to restore the righteous. The distinction between the righteous and the wicked is made very clear by the rabbis and they portray a God who observes man in these distinct categories. For Qoheleth, the lines between the two are more blurred and he reflects on the common destiny for both the righteous and the wicked in Qoh. 9:1-2. The discriminating, judgmental God of the Midrash responds to Qoheleth's ambiguous view of God's role. The rabbis also viewed God as the originator and source of virtuous human attributes. Wisdom, a trait that is most closely associated with the Solomon of Qoheleth, is given directly from God and he also accords the same wisdom to those who meditate in the synagogues and Houses of Study. There is a response or a reaction by the Midrash to an indistinct divine picture as portrayed by Qoheleth, to define God in more concrete terms, one in which he is given clear attributes and functions.

Targum Qoheleth shares much of the same view of God as Qoheleth Rabbah since it appears to face a similar problematic divine portrayal by Qoheleth. The targumists find a theologically authoritative God in the text of Qoheleth, one who bestows mercy on the repentant and punishment on the unrepentant. Those who live a life in accordance with the Torah will be spared God's judgement and will be rewarded in the world to come. Again, as in

³ Mekhilta attributed to R. Ismael (Exodus) Shirta Chapter two, XXVII:I.5.A.

⁴ Sifra (Leviticus), Parashat behuqotai pereq 3, CCLXIII:I.5.E.

⁵ Genesis Rabbah Parashah seventy, LXX:VI.1.B.

Qoheleth Rabbah, God distinguishes continually between the righteous and the wicked. The ambiguity of Qoheleth is removed and replaced by rabbinic absolutes.

The God that Gregory of Nyssa views in the text of Qoheleth is more impersonal than the one identified by the rabbinic school of thought. For Gregory the characteristics and nature of God can not so easily be defined. The God of Qoheleth presents a challenge to Gregory, and the tension that exists between Qoheleth and God, is continued in Gregory's reading of the text. Gregory sees and understands Qoheleth's one-sided dialogue with the divine as a philosophical and ideological search for God, as represented by the Idea of the Good. For Gregory, Qoheleth, as Solomon, provides lessons and instruction on how to achieve the ultimate goal, which is to be an imitation of the Good. God is removed from the world of the body and the senses, and instead inhabits one of the soul and spirit. Gregory does not recognise the personal and infinite God of Qoheleth, as viewed by the rabbis, and instead sees a God whose infiniteness creates a barrier that can only be bridged by the soul. Also in contrast to the rabbis, Gregory does not view God as bestowing wisdom but through a Christological twist equates real Wisdom with Christ, both of which are immortal. Gregory struggles to understand the Idea of the Good but feels that he is hindered by his mind, a tool of futility, a sense that he shares to some extent with Qoheleth.

Matthew Henry views God, as related in Qoheleth, as omnipresent and personal but the focus is less on God and more on living a religious life. Religiosity almost replaces God in Henry's puritan theology. Indeed God remains transcendent and Henry welcomes divine providence in dealing with life's uncertainties but another side of God is also presented, one in which Henry compensates for a seemingly divine deficiency. Deficient in the sense that Henry's theology demanded a simple and pure way of life to the extent that the individual should have a part in redemption and judgement. The emphasis placed on living a religious life resulted in a constant awareness of one's own conduct and that of others. Qoheleth presents a number of problems and challenges for Henry. One being that Qoheleth does not find that doing what is seemingly virtuous and correct in one's life effects any ultimate outcome or destiny. Qoheleth observes the inconsistencies and injustices of life and though Henry

does partly respond to and deal with them through divine providence, he finds that living an even more religious and moral life is the answer to Qoheleth's issues. Henry appears to be torn between his legalistic pietism and his acknowledgement of divine fate and belief in pre-destination. For Henry, wisdom is required to understand both God and himself. Those who possess wisdom fear God and live a godly life that is in keeping with the commandments.

G. The Modern Reader

It is worthwhile to have a brief look at a modern reader and consider how a modern reader compares to the earlier readers of Qoheleth. Does the modern reader understand Qoheleth any better than the earlier readers and how are the text's structural challenges reacted to? In addressing these questions Michael V. Fox's, *A Rereading of Ecclesiastes*, will be considered and used as an example of a modern reader.⁶ The modern reader has an immediate advantage over earlier readers, in that the modern reader has a wealth of literary sources to draw upon and consult with before even embarking on a reading of Qoheleth. This literary copiousness, though, can also be viewed as a disadvantage and will be discussed later. Fox, the modern reader, has an impressive bibliography of Hellenistic, rabbinic and ancient texts, and more recent authors to confer with and draw upon in his rereading of Ecclesiastes.⁷ In his preface Fox outlines the more recent scholarly literature that he has consulted and this consultation with other texts is an integral aspect of his commentary.⁸ This is an important element of the modern reader to the comparatively literary bereft earlier readers who drew to a lesser extent upon earlier and contemporary written and oral traditions, rarely identifying their sources. The need to recognise sources within literature has clearly its own historical developmental timeline, one that will not be elaborated on but acknowledged for the purposes of this discussion.

In contrast to the earlier readings of Qoheleth, Fox spells out the thesis of his commentary in the preceding study.⁹ His primary thesis is summarised in the

⁶ Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down & A Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 379-406.

⁸ *Ibid.*, x-xiii.

⁹ Matthew Henry comes closest, of the source texts, to stating his thesis in the preface to Volume One of his expositions.

context of what he observes as Qoheleth's inherent contradictions and how the rabbis approached this problem or challenge:

I too take Qohelet's contradictions as the starting point of interpretation. My primary thesis is a simple one: The contradictions in the book of Qohelet are real and intended. We must interpret them, not eliminate them.¹⁰

The study that precedes the main commentary is based around four themes: the absurd, justice and its violation, knowledge and ignorance, and efforts and results. The main thesis is central to these themes and also the investigation of the premises of Qohelet's thought:

These studies converge on the following main thesis: Qohelet is primarily concerned with the meaning of life, rather than with the value of possessions, the duration of existence, or the benefits of human striving.¹¹

The study of the mentioned themes is detailed and thorough, and provides an informative base with which to approach the reading of Qoheleth. It may appear that the analytical approach of a modern reader creates a more objective reading, but that would be an inaccurate conclusion to draw. For the reading still resides within a cultural context, albeit a modern one. The informed modern reader basically produces a more informed commentary but not necessarily a more objective one to that of the earlier reader, whose language may be one that more lucidly betrays theological agendas.

Fox having stated his theses, that the book of Qoheleth is about meaning and that contradictions in the book are to be understood as such,¹² investigates what he considers to be the major themes of Qoheleth. The meaning of *hebel* is examined first; one of the most discussed topics in modern Qoheleth studies, and is understood by Fox to mean "absurd".¹³ The absurdity of life is what the book of Qoheleth observes and this itself is an outcome from a contradiction of realities.¹⁴ The second theme, justice, is viewed by Fox as yet another contradiction in Qoheleth's world for "Qohelet believes that God is just but the

¹⁰ Fox, 3.

¹¹ Ibid., 5.

¹² Ibid., 15, 133. Fox argues against commentators who attempt to harmonise contentions within the book or ignore them altogether.

¹³ Ibid., 30.

¹⁴ Ibid., 31. Fox understanding of "absurd" draws on Albert Camus's description of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: ET Justin O'Brien, 1955), 22f.

world is full of injustices".¹⁵ Fox's etymological analysis and insights are valuable assets in the prelude to the commentary. Fox also applies this linguistic science to his actual commentary of Qoheleth, a discipline that has become progressively more sophisticated in modern readings of scripture. Qoheleth's understanding of wisdom or his epistemology, as Fox also refers to it, is then questioned.¹⁶ The theme of wisdom is broached from various angles, reflecting Qoheleth's diverse ideas on the subject.¹⁷ The semantics of deed and event, good, and toil and pleasure are further themes examined by Fox in his preliminary study. The underlying thesis remains throughout:

The book of Qohelet is about meaning. What unites all of Qohelet's complaints is the collapse of meaning. What unites all of his counsels and affirmations is the attempt to reconstruct meanings.¹⁸

The commentary itself follows a systematic examination of the text, where each individual verse is examined. After evaluating proposed literary structures of Qoheleth by other commentators, Fox's conclusion is that the text has a strong "conceptual organization"¹⁹ and so divides the chapters of the text into distinct units of verses.²⁰ In relation to the literary structure of the book, Fox discusses Qoheleth's literary genre. His conclusion is that Qoheleth can be "classed in the broad genre of royal autobiography" but argues that it would probably be better characterised as "reflective autobiography".²¹ A detailed reading of Fox's commentary on Qoheleth will not ensue but rather key points of Fox's reading of the text will be discussed.

Firstly, in addressing the issue of authorship, which arises in the first verse of the book, Fox concludes that "Qohelet speaks in this book, but he is not its author".²² Fox identifies the author of Qoheleth with the speaker of the epilogue (12:9-11) and that Qoheleth is his persona.²³ Fox's examination of each verse is thorough, where grammatical and linguistic analysis of Qoheleth's

¹⁵ Ibid., 51.

¹⁶ Ibid., 71.

¹⁷ Fox discusses the theme of wisdom by posing two main questions "What is wisdom?" (pp. 71-85) and "Is wisdom foolish?" (pp. 87-95).

¹⁸ Ibid., 133.

¹⁹ Ibid., 150.

²⁰ Ibid., 152. Fox defends his schematic reading of Qoheleth and states that "the unit divisions and subdivisions I propose are not meant to reflect a blueprint the author held in his head but to show how the text is most naturally phrased and parsed".

²¹ Ibid., 155.

²² Ibid., 160.

²³ Ibid., 363-365.

lexicon plays a dominant role.²⁴ The evaluation and discussion of previous commentators and readers of Qoheleth also plays a critical role in Fox's exegesis and interpretation of the text. The themes discussed in the pre-commentary study are, of course, returned to again in their textual context in the commentary itself, where they are amplified and enumerated.

Underlying the themes of the absurd, justice, wisdom, goodness, pleasure and life in general, remain Fox's theses of contradiction and meaning. Fox's Qoheleth believes in divine control but views God as having the power to predetermine events but not always choosing to do so.²⁵ This interpretation is applied to Qoheleth's notable record of times in 3:1-8. Fox understands Qoheleth's use of '*et*, time, not as a reference to a specific time or date but rather to an occasion or situation, where the event fits the time.²⁶ In his discussion of time, Fox uses events from recent history, the attack on Pearl Harbour and the assassination of John F Kennedy, as points of reference.²⁷ The utilisation of examples from modern history is reasonable and to be expected from a modern commentator, for indeed the modern reader/commentator is writing for a modern reading audience, who would be able to relate to these events.²⁸ There is also a certain degree of authorial expectations shown on the part of the commentator of who his reading audience will be, in regards to how educated and well informed they are before commencing the reading of his commentary.

The different ways of reading Qoheleth, literally, symbolically, allegorically and others, are recognised by Fox in his rereading of Qoheleth. In his study on the enigma of ageing and death in Qoheleth, Fox shows how each method of reading can complement one another in the process of arriving at the meaning.²⁹ Interestingly, he views Qoheleth's seeming obsession with death to be the culmination of Qoheleth's individualism and not a result of any particular

²⁴ Ibid., 5. Fox notes Qoheleth's "peculiar lexicon" and observes that "while Qoheleth does not give words unparalleled meanings, he gives them a twist in application. His lexicon not only expresses ideas; to some extent it constrains their formulation."

²⁵ Ibid., 197.

²⁶ Ibid., 198.

²⁷ Ibid., 198, 201-202. In reading a "time for war" Fox does not understand it to mean that the war against Japan was predestined but rather the conditions were right for war, i.e. after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Similarly, in the case of Kennedy, when reading a "time to be born" and a "time to die" they do not express rigid fatalism but rather signify the "*actual time*, a moment in the chronological continuum" (pp.201).

²⁸ Fox also makes reference to the Holocaust (p. 134), World War II and the death of Lincoln (p.168).

social or historical realities.³⁰ How Qoheleth communicates, whether it be on death or another subject, is considered to be as engaging and as significant as the meaning itself.³¹

The commentary closes as it began with a discussion of the identity of Qoheleth. As previously mentioned, Fox believes the epilogist to be the author and Qoheleth to be his persona.³² In returning to this matter the author of the postscript is now brought into play and the “voices” in the book are heard.³³ Fox distinguishes and identifies three voices present in the text; Qoheleth, the epilogist and the author of the postscript.³⁴ The traditional identification of Qoheleth as Solomon is not considered accidental but due to the fact that the persona of Qoheleth is based, according to Fox, on the supposed and assumed historical character, Solomon.³⁵ He posits that Qoheleth, whom he considers to be a fictional literary construct, was adopted by the epilogist in a type of “thought experiment”. Returning to the main thesis of the book, about meaning, Fox believes that Qoheleth’s function is to voice the observations and evaluations of a subjective individual and not one to proclaim fixed and enduring truths.³⁶ The function of the postscript, according to Fox, is to seal “the book with a proper and orthodox conclusion”.³⁷ It is the postscript that is thought to place the book within the tradition of wisdom literature and ultimately the canon.³⁸ Though often less orthodox, Fox believes that Qoheleth belongs to the tradition of the sages.³⁹

Fox’s rereading of Qoheleth follows in a long literary tradition, the history of reception of a book that demands rereading. Fox’s thematic commentary responds to and draws greatly upon previous readings of Qoheleth producing an informed and thoroughly modern reading of the text. The

²⁹ Ibid., 333-349.

³⁰ Ibid., 343.

³¹ Ibid., 333.

³² Ibid., 160.

³³ Ibid., 363.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 372.

³⁶ Ibid., 373.

³⁷ Ibid., 373. At the beginning of Chapter 1 Fox notes a early rabbinical discussion that recounts that though Qoheleth was considered contradictory by the sages it was not withdrawn from the canon because “it begins with words of Torah and it ends with words of Torah. (b. Shab. 30b)”(p.1).

³⁸ Ibid., 375.

³⁹ Ibid., 377.

modernity of the commentary, its contemporary familiarity and relevance to the modern audience, is the culmination and result of an ongoing process of readings. Though, Fox admits in his preface that his basic theses have remained the same, it is his reception of Qoheleth that has evolved and intensified.

H. Concluding Remarks

The initial question posed, whether a modern reader provides a *better* understanding than an earlier one, is probably the wrong one. For it is not whether one is better than the other but rather the contribution of each, is one that is best evaluated in their respective contexts and historical horizons. The modern reader or commentator is clearly more informed, with greater resources at their disposal, in comparison to the earlier readers but this reality parallels cultural development. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the modern audience, who is used to limitless resources and the information era, is more receptive to a modern commentator. This however does not discount the contribution of the earlier commentators, for it is their interpretations that are drawn upon and continued to be critiqued and discussed by modern readers.

Qoheleth continues to present textual challenges to its readers, provoking a response to its signs and structures, resulting in highly individualistic textual fulfilment. As observed, a reader's *frame of reference* gives rise to selective realisation and actualisation of the text. Further, it is clear that the process of meaning production is a historically conditioned one, where the horizon of expectations of each reading of Qoheleth is continually changing. The study of the reception of Qoheleth, as observed between and within different faith communities, is valuable not only in understanding the text's interpretative historical tradition but also the aesthetics of the reading process within a historical horizon, where the response-inviting structures of Qoheleth result in an assiduous establishment and (re)production of a succession of new texts.

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