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Leung Lai, Barbara M. "Voice and Ideology in Ecclesiastes: Reading 'Cross the Grains'." In *Interested Readers: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David J.A. Clines*, edited by James Aitken, Jeremy M.S. Clines and Christl Maier, Pages 265-278. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013.

INTERESTED READERS

ESSAYS ON THE HEBREW BIBLE
IN HONOR OF DAVID J. A. CLINES

Edited by

James K. Aitken, Jeremy M. S. Clines, and Christl M. Maier

Society of Biblical Literature
Atlanta

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Interested readers : essays on the Hebrew Bible in honor of David J. A. Clines / edited by James K. Aitken, Jeremy M. S. Clines and Christl M. Maier.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-58983-924-3 (paper binding : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-58983-925-0 (electronic format) — ISBN 978-1-58983-926-7 (hardcover binding : alk. paper)

1. Bible. Old Testament—Criticism, interpretation, etc. I. Clines, David J. A. II. Aitken, J. K. (James K.) III. Clines, Jeremy M. S. IV. Maier, Christl, 1962–

BS1225.52.I58 2013

221.6—dc23

2013035946

Printed on acid-free, recycled paper conforming to
ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (R1997) and ISO 9706:1994
standards for paper permanence.



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VOICE AND IDEOLOGY IN ECCLESIASTES: READING “CROSS THE GRAINS”¹

Barbara M. Leung Lai

1. POINT OF DEPARTURE: TEXT, IDEOLOGY, AND READER

Two notions, rooted in the rubrics of biblical interpretation in general and reading strategy in particular, form the conceptual framework and specific directives for this endeavor. First, the biblical text is an ideological production. This not only means that all texts have ideology, but that interpreters also read the text from their respective ideological formations.² The ideologies of the ancient community of Israel ingrained in the Hebrew Bible are “historically and culturally far removed from the ideologies of our own

1. I have picked up Carol A. Newsom’s “plywood” analogy here but with a more focused appropriation. When “cross-graining” is applied to the production of plywood through gluing together layers (veneers) of adjacent plies having their wood grain at right angles to each other, a high-quality, high-strength wood panel is formed. Specifically, plywood is bonded with grains running against one another and perpendicular to the grain direction; it is very strong and hard to bend. Plywood was invented around 3400 B.C.E. by the ancient Mesopotamians. Modern plywood was invented by Emmanuel Nobel, who realized that several thin layers of wood bonded together would be stronger than one single thick layer of wood. I have found this “cross-graining” imagery quite fitting to a reading strategy that incorporates both conventional “against the grain” and “with the grain” and moving into a potential multilayered, richer reading by “cross-graining.” See Carol A. Newsom, “Reflections on Ideological Criticism and Postcritical Perspectives,” in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen* (ed. Joel M. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 553–57.

2. Let it be political, confessional, religious, or established through one’s “Text-of-Life.” See David J. A. Clines, *The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup 205; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), ch. 1.

days.”³ Engaging in ideological critical reading is, in essence, the merging of the two horizons—the horizon of the ancient text and that of the contemporary reader. The outcome will either be the clashing of the two ideologies, or a reshaped interpretation through negotiating with (sometimes) conflicting hermeneutical choices.

This situation is well exemplified in Athalya Brenner’s remark in the series editor’s preface of *The Meanings We Choose: Hermeneutical Ethics, Indeterminacy and the Conflict of Interpretations*.⁴ In an age of methodological pluralism, perspectival readings abound; and, as a result, indeterminacy and conflicts in interpretation are common. Reading texts with embedded ideologies different from our own and coming out with one’s chosen interpretation has been, in essence, the result of ideological-critical endeavors. David J. A. Clines further articulates the dynamics of this process by noting that writers and readers alike are highly motivated parties. They are not disinterested bystanders but advocates of their own ideology as they interact with the texts.⁵ The enticing “I”-voice of Qoheleth that calls for the engaged reader’s encounter with his discourse gives witness to this dynamic, which is expected to be at work in reading Ecclesiastes.⁶

Second, employing the imagery of woodworking (i.e., just like wood, text has grain/directionality), Carol A. Newsom underscored in her statement that reading self-consciously “against the grain” of the biblical text is a distinctive feature of all ideological-critical engagements.⁷ While reading “with the grain” seems to find little place among practitioners of ideological criticism in the postmodern interpretive situation, reading Ecclesiastes demands a strategy tailored to possess a certain degree of intentionality.⁸

3. *Ibid.*, 19.

4. Charles H. Cosgrove, ed., *The Meanings We Choose: Hermeneutical Ethics, Indeterminacy and the Conflict of Interpretations* (JSOTSup 411; Bible in the Twenty-First Century Series 5; London: T&T Clark, 2004). Brenner commented that, in essence, all articles in the two-part volume (Part I: Reflections on Indeterminacy and Hermeneutical Judgment; Part II: Case Studies in Indeterminacy and Hermeneutical Judgment) can be compartmentalized as “ideological criticism” (ix).

5. Clines, *Interested Parties*, 24.

6. Throughout the article, I use *Qoheleth* for the “preacher/speaking voice” and *Ecclesiastes* to refer to the book.

7. Newsom employs the same imagery of woodworking in the beginning and challenging conclusion of her reflective review. See Newsom, “Reflections on Ideological Criticism,” 541, 553–57.

8. An array of intentional approaches emerges in the recent past. See, e.g.,

2. TOWARD A READING STRATEGY

With respect to the interconnectedness of text, implied author, and reader, at least two levels of ideological critique are at work in reading Ecclesiastes. First, Qoheleth is interacting “against the grain” with a different set of ideologies embedded in traditional Israelite wisdom (his “pretext”). Second, Qoheleth is inviting all readers (his first audience and contemporary readers), from their/our different ideological locations to respond to his discourse “with the grain” through his compelling “I”-voice.⁹ This involves consideration of the roles of both the narrator (1:1–11; 7:27)¹⁰ and the epilogist (12:8–14).¹¹ There are subsequently three potential ideologies represented in this kind of reading: (1) the *text’s* ideology to which Qoheleth is responding by reflecting “against the grain” represents the ancient Israelite wisdom; (2) the *multilayered* ideology upheld by Qoheleth and rooted in his community’s collective lived experience that he defends through his reflective “I”-voice; and (3) the *reshaped* ideology proposed by the narrator and especially by the epilogist in 12:8–14.

While *Qoheleth’s* ideology clashes with the ideology ingrained in traditional wisdom, readers are left with three interpretive choices: (1) being drawn to the affirmation of Qoheleth’s ideology—the absurdity of life overarching the “order of things”;¹² (2) adopting the reshaped ideology proposed by the epilogist, reaffirming the reality of the two-way doctrine, or one that is cause-effect (12:13–14; cf. Deut 11:26–28); or (3) bringing

Timothy Walton, “Reading Qohelet as Text, Author, and Reader,” in *Tradition and Innovation in Biblical Interpretation: Studies Presented to Professor Eep Talstra on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (ed. W. Th. van Peursen and J. W. Dyk; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 113–31; Andrew G. Shead, “Reading Ecclesiastes ‘Epilogically,’” *TynBul* 48 (1997): 67–91; Gary Salyer, “Vain Rhetoric: Implied Author/Narrator/Narratee/Implied Reader Relationships in Ecclesiastes Use of First-Person Discourse” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1997); and more recently Kyle R. Greenwood, “Debating Wisdom: The Role of Voice in Ecclesiastes,” *CBQ* 74 (2012): 476–91.

9. This could be considered as a unique example in the Hebrew Bible.

10. For a detailed analysis of the narrative structure of Ecclesiastes, esp. the “frame narrator” in 1:1–2, 7:27, and 12:8–14, see Eric S. Christianson, *A Time to Tell: Narrative Strategies in Ecclesiastes* (JSOTSup 280; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 45–50.

11. See esp. Shead, “Reading Ecclesiastes ‘Epilogically,’” 86–91.

12. The same dynamics and alternatives have been spelled out in Walton, “Reading Qohelet,” 130.

into the text another *readerly* ideology (through embracing, rejecting, or reshaping Qoheleth's and the epilogist's explanations and resolutions), by putting the conflicting ideologies together—like the production of plywood, with wood grains running against each other. A reading that is “cross the grains” has the potential of coming up with a more enriched meaning-significance of the collective message of the book.

Ecclesiastes is a multivoiced text. If one attends to polyphony as its characteristic feature, the analysis and textual dynamics of narration, reflection, inner debate, explanation, and resolution take on new dimensions of meaning. The study of the interface between voice and selfhood, voice and ideology/interiority has been an area of increased scholarly interest and investment.¹³ However, though the interconnectedness between voice and ideology is a well-established maxim, and the blurry distinction between monologue and dialogue has been elucidated in the works of Luis Alonso Schökel and Meir Sternberg, the Bakhtinian view on polyphony and dialogism demands further reorientation in reading voices and ideology.¹⁴

In reading Ecclesiastes as Wisdom literature, the common denominator of two-level ideological critical engagements stands out significantly, that is, that all ideologies (the ancient Israelite wisdom, Qoheleth's, as well as that of the contemporary reader) are accumulatively drawn from humanity's collective lived experience under the sun—the Grand Narrative. This common denominator may close the “historical” and “cultural” gap between the ideologies ingrained in Ecclesiastes and that of present readers.

A threefold reading strategy is featured in Donald F. Murray's treatment of 2 Sam 5:17–7:29.¹⁵ Dealing with an utterly ironic text like Ecclesiastes, I adopt the same reading dynamic here. With a focus on “prag-

13. See, e.g., my monograph *Through the “I”-Window: The Inner Life of Characters in the Hebrew Bible* (Hebrew Bible Monographs 34; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011); Greenwood, “Debating Wisdom.”

14. See Luis Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1998); Meir Sternberg, “The World from the Addressee's Viewpoint: Reception as Representation, Dialogue as Monologue,” *Style* 20 (1986): 295–318. For Bakhtin see esp. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (ed. Michael Holquist; trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986); idem, “The Problem of Speech Genre,” in *Speech Genre and Other Late Essays* (trans. Vern W. McGee; ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 60–102.

15. Donald F. Murray, *Divine Prerogative and Royal Pretension: Pragmatics, Poet-*

“poetics” (reader’s construction of meaning), “poetics” (what makes the “I”-discourse effective to readers through Qoheleth’s different modes of expression), and “polemics” (elements of ideological conflict), it entails a heuristic reading strategy that is “crossing the grains of the wood/text.”¹⁶ While “reading with the grain” and “against the grain” are already at work in exemplifying the ideologies of the text and that of Qoheleth, the ideology I bring to the text (though as an “I” embedded in the collective lived experience of all contemporary readers) demands a reading that aims at uncovering the existence of the many cross-graining fibers (or veneers with grains running against each other) that constitute Ecclesiastes—with centuries of the collective lived experience of the ancient community of Israel as its resources. Reading “cross the grains” is an integrated approach with promising results, appropriately applied to an ironic, multivoiced ideology text like Ecclesiastes.

3. VOICE AND IDEOLOGY: POLYPHONY, MODES OF EXPRESSION, DIALOGIC DYNAMICS

Identification of the different voices represented in Ecclesiastes has been an area of interest especially in the recent past.¹⁷ Incorporating earlier attempts, Kyle R. Greenwood has provided a precise analysis and presented her thesis on the identification of the three voices in Ecclesiastes.¹⁸ First is the “true voice of wisdom,” who primarily speaks in the second person imperative. The second voice is the voice of Qoheleth speaking as Solomon in the first person “I”-voice. The third voice serves as the “Frame Narrator,” and is found in the third person sections of chapters 1 and 12. Among the variety of speaking voice analyses, it is still a matter of the

ics and Polemics in a Narrative Sequence about David (2 Sam 5:17–7:29) (JSOTSup 264; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

16. See n. 1 and Newsom, “Reflection on Ideological Criticism,” 541.

17. See, e.g., Robert D. Holmstedt, “אני ולבי: The Syntactic Encoding of the Collaborative Nature of Qoheleth’s Experiment,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 9 (2010): 1–27; Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 75–83, where he summarized and responded to Michael Fox’s analysis of the speaking voices in Ecclesiastes. See Fox, “Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qoheleth,” *HUCA* 48 (1997): 83–106.

18. Kyle R. Greenwood, “Debating Wisdom: The Role of Voice in Ecclesiastes,” *CBQ* 74 (2012): 476–91.

interpreter/reader's interpretive choice—the perspectives represented through different voices. Based on the nature of Ecclesiastes as “narration,” my identification and analysis will focus solely on the level of “speaking voices” as indicated in Ecclesiastes and not on the conceptual level. The Bakhtinian notion of polyphony and dialogism may potentially provide an additional dimension to the speaking voices, particularly in terms of interacting/dialogic textual dynamics.

3.1. THE QOHELETHIC “I”-VOICE

Ecclesiastes is a polyphonic text. The most prominent “I”-voice in this “I”-discourse is that of Qoheleth. Francis Landy has argued convincingly regarding the interplay of voice and interiority that “if vision suggests clarity and exteriority, voice evokes the interiority of the person and an intimation beyond the horizon.”¹⁹ Among the representative first person texts of the Hebrew Bible (i.e., where the characters speak in the first person “I”-voice)²⁰ are the Isaianic and Danielic “I”-voices,²¹ which share a great degree of hiddenness (or shielded selfhood/ideology).²² The Qohelethic “I”-voice also takes on a highly reflective character. The cycle of “turning-seeing-reflecting-perceiving-concluding” (1:14–18; 2:1–11, 12–26; 3:16–22; 4:1–3, 4–6, 7–10, 11–12, 15–16; 5:12–19 [Eng. 13–20]; 6:1–12; 7:15–18, 25–29; 8:10–12, 14–17; 9:1–10, 11–12, 13–18; 10:5–15) characterizes Qoheleth's persistent and intentional engagement in life. The results of such life-engagements are exemplified in his summary appraisals (e.g., 2:13–14; 3:16–17; 7:15–17; 8:12–14). Yet though the Qoheleth's “I” is contemplative and deep, here there is no shielding but a voice that always positions itself at the center stage of the “I”-discourse. It echoes everywhere.

The ideology of Qoheleth is made known to readers through the prominent “I”-voice in the following modes of expression. First, he dem-

19. Francis Landy, “Vision and Voice in Isaiah,” *JSOT* 88 (2000): 36.

20. Other than the book of Psalms, e.g., Dan 7–12, Habakkuk, and the bulk of Nehemiah.

21. Cf. Isa 5:1–30; 6:1–13; 8:1–18; 15:1–16:14; 21:1–12; 22:1–15; 24:1–23; 25:1–12; 26:1–21; 40:1–8; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 51:17–23; 61:1–11; 63:7–19; and Dan 7–12.

22. Along with the “I”-voice in Habakkuk and Nehemiah. For the Danielic and Isaianic “I,” see the extended discussion in Leung Lai, *Through the “I”-Window*, esp. 19–21, 31–153.

onstrates the breadth of his experience by taking on the Solomonic persona (1:12–2:11).²³ In other words, he highlights the empirical dimension of his exploration in life—“I once lived like a king.” Second, and most significantly, he foregrounds his “I”-voice/worldview in the form of concluding statements (e.g., 2:13–14; 3:16–17; 7:15–17; 8:12–14) that are grounded in the reality of humanity’s collective lived experience under the sun (e.g., **ראתי** in 1:14; 2:13; **השמש תחת ראתי** in 3:16) and through an intentional “seeing-reflecting-perceiving-concluding” search process. Third, in transcending from seeing to perceiving, Qoheleth engages in internal dialogues/monologues with his “inner self” (or through doubling himself into two halves to create a space for debate and resolution—e.g., 1:16 **דברתי אני הנה עם-לבי לאמר אני**, lit. “and I spoke with my heart saying, I, behold”;²⁴ **אני אמרתי** in 2:1; 15 [twice]; and 3:17 in the context of 2:1–9; 2:15–16; 3:17–22).²⁵ As pioneers in the field of speaking voice analysis, Sternberg and Alonso Schökel have been successful in exemplifying “monologue-dialogue” in the Hebrew Bible.²⁶ Contained within the pericope are pockets of monologue within dialogue and imaginary dialogues within monologues. In essence, one can collapse the distinction between monologue and dialogue as they serve the same function of self-representation. Taken into the consideration of the thrust in the “I”-discourse, one may wonder why this monologue-dialogue (saying to one’s own heart) employed by Qoheleth is considered as an effective means of expressing his ideology.

Essential to Bakhtinian notions of discourse or literature is that the basic unit of speech is not the sentence construct or even the word, but

23. I made no attempt to enter into the discussion of the identity issue of Qoheleth here. I have adopted Bartholomew’s conclusion that Ecclesiastes “is not written by Solomon, nor should Qoheleth be literally equated with Solomon” (see *Ecclesiastes*, 53; see 43–59). For counterarguments supporting the dating of Ecclesiastes fitting into the Solomonic age and setting, see Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs* (Apollos Old Testament Commentary 16; Nottingham, Eng.: Apollos, 2010), 31–36.

24. It is a triple emphatic use of the Qoheleth’s “I”-voice here. As Adele Berlin has noted, **הנה** functions almost like an “interior monologue,” an “internalized viewpoint” that provides a kind of “interior vision” (*Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1994], 62–63).

25. To Eric Christianson (*Time to Tell*, 21), **לב** used in Ecclesiastes represents “Qoheleth’s intellectual nature, and it is from here that all his observations flow.”

26. Sternberg, “World from the Addressee’s Viewpoint”; Alonso Schökel, *Manual of Hebrew Poetics*, esp. 178.

the “utterance.” Any utterance or discourse, whether spoken or written, is always addressed to someone, and therefore possesses a dialogic quality.²⁷ Thus at the foundation of Bakhtin’s ideology is the view that any form of discourse is always a reply and therefore always takes shape in response to what has already been said. This also includes “the background of other concrete utterances on the same theme, a background made up of contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgments.”²⁸

The implications of appropriating Bakhtinian perspectives on polyphony and dialogism to the speaking voices in Ecclesiastes are significant. The Bakhtinian notion of dialogic truth introduces a whole new dimension of the function of the Qoheleth’s monologic-dialogic discourse (saying to one’s own heart). Alonso Schökel qualifies monologue as “the breaking into a context of dialogue with a reflection directed to oneself.”²⁹ This dialogic/interacting dynamic fits in beautifully with Qoheleth’s monologic-dialogic mode of expression. Qoheleth is entering into free dialogue with the other speaking voices: that of the frame narrator in 1:1, 7:27, and 12:8–14; and the third unmerged utterance, the collective voice of the sages.

3.2. THE SAGES’ COLLECTIVE VOICE REPRESENTING THE ORTHODOXY OF “BLESSINGS AND CURSING”

This is the weighty collective voice that Qoheleth is responding to throughout the book (e.g., 3:1–8; 4:5–6, 9–14; 4:17–5:16 [Eng. 5:1–17]; 7:1–14, 16–22; 10:1–4, 8–20; 11:1–10; 12:1–7). Ecclesiastes is Wisdom literature with perspectives that are deeply embedded in the collective lived human experience under the sun. If we adopt the Bakhtinian view of dialogism and polyphony to the reading here, it becomes clear that Qoheleth engages in response to and in reply to this voice in a dialogic, dynamic way. The direction of the Qohelethic responses is not toward resolution or coming to terms with paradoxical outcomes; the continuous efforts of engaging in cycles of reflection and dialogue with the conflicting life situations/con-

27. Bakhtin, “The Problem of Speech Genre,” in *Speech Genre and Other Essays*, 60–102; Andrés A. Haye, “Living Being and Speaking Being: Toward a Dialogical Approach Intentionality,” *Integrative Psychological Behavior* 42 (2008): 157–63, esp. 160–61.

28. Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 281.

29. Alonso Schökel, *Manual of Hebrew Poetics*, 81.

clusions signify that this is an *ongoing* life process and is never meant to be *finalized*.

3.3. THE VOICE OF THE FRAME NARRATOR (1:1–2; 7:27; 12:8–14)

There is not much dispute that the structure of Ecclesiastes is hard to pin down. One common consensus does surface in the recent commentaries and reference works on the identification of a “frame narrator” (1:1; 7:27; and 12:8 [or epilogist]) who introduces Qoheleth in the third person and quotes him in a “direct speech” (1:1–2; 12:8).³⁰ The two direct speeches echo in an emphatic tone the same concluding theme: “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”

Through a detailed lexical and thematic study of the epilogue (12:9–14), Andrew Shead argues convincingly that, on the one hand, the epilogue shares coherent terms and themes with the rest of the book. On the other hand, the two framing key words **הבֹּל** and **יֵרָא** provide a certain direction to the message of Ecclesiastes, particularly by shaping the dynamic that exists between 12:8–12 and 12:13–14.³¹ The pain of the search for wisdom could not be resolved through understanding life under the sun. The wise way is to live in obedient fear of God, who knows and judges all.³² Michael Fox also supports the idea that in an effort to protect Qoheleth, the epilogist is combining **הבֹּל** and **יֵרָא** to present a composite view of reality: fear of God is the right attitude, along with the trust that God is “just.” However, to Roland Murphy, reading Ecclesiastes from the perspective of the epilogist as exemplified above is an “oversimplification” of Qoheleth’s ideological conflicts as echoed everywhere in his “I”-voice.³³

3.4. READERLY IDEOLOGY BY “STEPPING IN” TO THE THREE VOICES/IDEOLOGIES OF THE TEXT

In this analysis of the existence of the three voices in Ecclesiastes, three ideologies are potentially interacting within the text. The deep and reflec-

30. See Michael V. Fox, “Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qoheleth,” *HUCA* 47 (1977): 83–106; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, e.g., 74–79, 82–84, 102–7.

31. Shead, “Reading Ecclesiastes ‘Epilogically,’” 91.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (WBC 23A; Dallas: Word, 1992), lxx.

tive Qohelethic “I”-voice has the power to entice readers, to step inside³⁴ the text and engage us in the ongoing dialogue with the three-voice/ideology text (i.e., a consideration of the poetics, the affective elements of the voices upon the readers). As readers, we also bring in our perspectives to the text from our particular theological/confessional and ideological locations. It is then a matter of “interpretive choice” (pragmatics, i.e., constructing meaning) with potential ideological conflicts (i.e., “polemics”). The threefold reading dynamics as proposed by Murray are at work here.³⁵

4. WHAT WOULD A READING THAT IS “CROSS THE GRAINS” YIELD?

4.1. QOHELETH: READING ANCIENT ISRAELITE WISDOM IDEOLOGY “AGAINST THE GRAIN”

As mentioned previously, at least two levels of ideological critique are at work in reading a text like Ecclesiastes. The textual dynamic indicates that Qoheleth is using his reflective “I”-voice in dialogical response to the deep-rooted, underlying ideology upheld in traditional Hebrew wisdom—broadly speaking, “the order of things.” Within the text, Qoheleth loudly attests to the fact that his search for this “order” brings him utter disappointment. This sentiment is first declared in an emphatic fashion in 1:2 and then echoed also emphatically as a concluding statement in 12:8 before the missional epilogist jumps in (12:9–14), as an *inclusio* enclosing all his lifelong, ongoing explorations in 1:3–12:7. The most striking thing in his emotive response is that the senselessness and absurdity in humanity’s collective lived experience under the sun (e.g., 2:7; 3:16–17; 7:15; 8:12–14) are in essence the “commonalities”—a complete reversal of what the wisdom ideology upholds—the “order” of God’s ruling. That this “preacher” has been perceived as a skeptic, his voice as “cynical,” and

34. I employ the same “spacial metaphor” used by Alice A. Keefe in “Stepping In/Stepping Out: A Conversation between Ideological and Social Scientific Feminist Approaches to the Bible,” *Journal of Religion and Society* 1 (1999): 1–22. Keefe also noted that most feminist theological critics practice stepping outside the text, with the assertion that the Hebrew text is an androcentric representation, and thus “stepping outside” and reading “against the grains” is a necessity.

35. See Murray, *Divine Prerogative and Royal Pretension*, 22–23.

his engaged reflection as “ironic/pessimistic” literature³⁶ attests that he is responding to his “pretext” (the traditional Israelite wisdom ideology) in an “against the grain” fashion.

The existence of this “pretext” as Qoheleth’s “frame of reference” is evident in his responses to each of the life situations. He cites wisdom poems and axioms (3:1–8; 4:9–12; 4:17–5:6 [Eng. 5:1–7]; 7:1–12, 19–22, 29; 8:1–5, 17; 10:1–4, 8–20; 11:1–4); affirms the creation order and the order of God’s ruling (1:4–7; 2:26; 3:11, 14, 17–18; 6:2; 7:13–14; 8:6–8; 9:1; 11:5–6; 12:1, 7); and seeks to hold on to enjoyment in life, a gift from above (3:12–13; 9:7–10; 11:7–9). Yet the magnitude and absurdity of life drive the preacher to a weighty summary appraisal—seeking to make some sense out of the nonsensical in life is like “a chasing after the wind”—doomed to fail! (12:8 echoes 1:2). Simply going by the pretext’s “cause-effect” logic will lead to utter disappointment.

As a resistant explorer/seeker of the realities laid out in classical wisdom, Qoheleth’s loud remark in 10:5 touches on the core and true dynamic of his search for the order of things—“There is an evil [רעה] I have seen under the sun [השמש תחת], like an error [כשגגה] that comes from a ruler.” Three important elements of his search surface here: (1) his observation is grounded in humanity’s collective lived experience “under the sun”; (2) it appears to be an “evil error,” deviating from the norm;³⁷ and (3) he intentionally presents an existing “chaotic situation” (vv. 6–7).³⁸

4.2. READING “WITH THE GRAIN”: A READERLY CHOICE

The second level of ideological critical engagement I bring to the text is distinct from Qoheleth’s reflective response on three grounds. First, readers are interacting with the whole text of Ecclesiastes, including other merged or unmerged speaking voices (esp. the collective voice of the sages as well as the narrator/epilogist). Second, the reflective “I”-voice of Qoheleth has the power to entice readers’ engagement into his “I”-discourse, reading “with the grain” along his treatise (as Clines puts it, “writers and readers alike are not disinterested bystanders to their own activity, but promoters

36. See Izak J. J. Spangenberg, “Irony in the Book of Qohelet,” *JSOT* 72 (1996): 57–69.

37. In contrast with Prov 8:16, the norm in traditional wisdom is that it is by wisdom and not wealth that rulers rule.

38. Cf. discussion in Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 322–23.

of their own ideological causes”).³⁹ Third, Qoheleth, the collective voices of the sages, the epilogist, and contemporary readers alike all draw on the same locale in our ideological formations—collective lived experience “under the sun.” The context of this “I”-discourse entails an ideological critical endeavor arising out of our flesh-and-blood, lived experience, perhaps, in a more up-close and personal way.

For those engaging in ideological critique, to read “against the grain” is expected, particularly when we are dealing with a Hebrew text. However, when the three reading parameters are laid out for me, I find a reading that is “with the grain” both possible and natural. I witness the same chaotic situations Qoheleth describes and resonate with his summary appraisals. Reading Qoheleth’s “I”-voice with the momentum of “thinking out loud,”⁴⁰ I empathize with his disappointment and have a window into the understanding of his apparently unorganized, up-and-down moments in the discourse. His emotive responses have become my felt emotions.⁴¹ The cited wisdom materials throughout the book give the impression that there is still a certain movement in Qoheleth’s exploration—he seeks to make some sense out of the “chaos” and head back to the “norm.” As a true seeker of truth, this momentum positions him in a more healthy tension. One thing, however, is beyond denial: Qoheleth faces utter disappointment, and the result of his self-engaged explorations can be a “pain-embracing” process (8:16).

The notion that the “frame narrator” in the text introduces Qoheleth in 1:1–2 and 7:27 and provides some sense of continuity within a lengthy “I”-discourse is well taken. I find the role of the epilogist in 12:9–14 as a protector for Qoheleth difficult to follow. The moral upheld by the epilogist is at odds with the deep, reflective momentum in this “I”-discourse. In a way, it disrupts the vein of Qoheleth’s arguments—that there is no order of things in human experience under the sun—a total chaos. All human efforts to search for this order will be “a chasing after wind” (2:26). In

39. Clines, *Interested Parties*, 24.

40. See Barbara M. Leung Lai, “Ecclesiastes,” in *Global Perspectives on the Old Testament* (ed. Mark Roncace and Joseph Weaver; Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson, forthcoming).

41. Along the line of the “empirics” of reading, I have argued elsewhere regarding the affective impact of the text on readers. See Leung Lai, *Through the “I”-Window*, esp. 154–59; idem, “Hearing God’s Bitter Cries (Hosea 11:1–9): Reading, Emotive-Experiencing, Appropriation,” *HBT* 26, no. 1 (2004): 24–49.

this respect, reading Ecclesiastes “with the grain,” the epilogue is an overly simplistic attempt toward a quick fix for the limits of wisdom. As with the book of Job, it is an open ending. Readers find it difficult to come to a closure of the senselessness of life laid “raw” in front of us with such a heavy statement—“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep his commandments—for this applies to every person” (12:13). This conclusion deconstructs the whole ethos spelled out in Qoheleth’s burdensome “I.” It silences the inquiring voice of all “faith-seeking-understanding” inquirers!

4.3. READING “CROSS THE GRAINS”: TOWARD A COLLECTIVE MESSAGE OF ECCLESIASTES

Two distinct ideologies surface in the two different directional readings exemplified above. First, Qoheleth holds on to the ideology that all attempts to search for the order of things in this chaotic world will meet with sheer disappointment. Second, the ideology ingrained in the text—“fear God and keep his commandments”—is required for all humanity. God’s work (מעשה, 12:14) is beyond our understanding but ultimately is just (משפט, 12:14; cf. also 1:4–7; 2:26; 3:11, 14, 17–18; 6:2; 7:13–14; 8:6–8; 9:1; 11:5–6; 12:1, 7).⁴² Qoheleth seeks to embrace both in all “flesh” but finds it burdensome and oppressive. The epilogist seeks to defend the latter by underscoring twice in the “afterword” of Qoheleth’s reflective “I”-discourse: “And more than that” (שהיה ויתר, v. 9) and “and more than these” (ויתר מהמה, v. 12). Two sets of ideology are presented side by side. My attempt is neither to seek to harmonize (or synthesize) the two conflicting ideologies nor to pick one against the other as a hermeneutical choice. A reading that is “cross the grains” or “crossing the grains of both ideologies” may help to put the two side by side together as a coexisting reality. The woodworking imagery of the production of plywood fits in beautifully to this endeavor. By placing the veneers with wood grains running against each other and gluing them together at right angles perpendicular to each other, I aim at uncovering the existence of the many cross-graining fibers that constitute Ecclesiastes—that is, the collective message of the book.

42. Shead, “Reading Ecclesiastes ‘Epilogically,’” 89.

To Roland Murphy, “everygnomic saying needs a balancing corrective.”⁴³ Leo Perdue is perceptive in proposing the “dialectic of cosmology/theodicy and anthropodicy” as the best approach to the study of Wisdom literature. The two apparently contrasting concepts should be held in true dialectic to each other.⁴⁴ In the context of the commonality—“humanity’s experience under the sun”—all interested parties (speaking voices in Ecclesiastes and contemporary readers) can witness the coexistence of the two sets of reality. Upholding both ideologies and being sustained in this dialectic tension is the moral of Ecclesiastes.

Timothy Walton suggested that, as one of the three readerly interpretive choices, readers “can allow the truth of both perspectives to remain side by side and confess that a solution to how these can both be true escapes us, even the wisest among us (cf. 8:17).”⁴⁵ I have just made that informed choice.

43. Identified as his “axiom”; cf. “Murphy’s Axiom: Every Gnostic Saying Needs a Balancing Corrective,” in *Urgent Advice and Probing Questions* (ed. James L. Crenshaw; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1995), 344–54.

44. Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 48.

45. Walton, “Reading Qohelet,” 130.