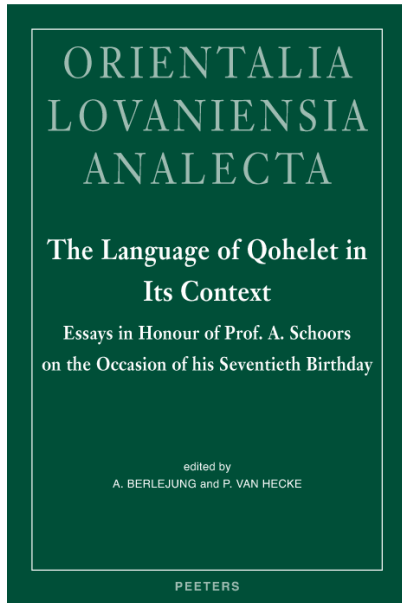


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The Language of Qohelet in Its Context: Essays in Honour of Prof. A. Schoors on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday

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The present Festschrift had its origins in a symposium held in October 2004 in Leuven and is in honor of Professor Antoon Schoors, a scholar who has dedicated much of his work to issues relating to the book of Qoheleth. The book begins with J. L. Crenshaw's essay "Qoheleth's Quantitative Language" (1–22), which examines the usage of *שׁוֹבֵל*, *יָשׁוּב*, and *אֵין*, numbers, and passages involving "non-specific quantitative words" such as *מְעַט* and *הַרְבֵּה*. According to Crenshaw, Qoheleth's "rich" use of quantitative language appears to reflect "an abandonment of the qualitative in life resulting from resigned subjectivism characterized by a pessimistic theory of knowledge" (19). In the end, he believes that the study of Qoheleth's quantitative language demonstrates the obscurity of his world (21).

In "The Language of Qoheleth and Its Historical Setting within Biblical Hebrew" (23–34), A. Hurvitz takes up the much-discussed issue of the peculiarities of Qoheleth's language. In particular, he interacts with the view—a minority position, to be sure, but vigorously argued by scholars such as I. Young—that Qoheleth's language need not be analyzed as postexilic or Late Biblical Hebrew (LBH) on linguistic grounds but rather that its unique character can be attributed to other factors such as genre, a distinctive authorial style, dialectical features, or the influence of foreign languages. After briefly discussing how

Hebrew scholarship has developed a general linguistic profile of LBH (24–25), he proceeds to evaluate the peculiarities of Qoheleth’s language in light of it. While certain features (such as the relative pronoun ψ) cannot be dated with certainty (31–32), other factors (such as the use of the word ןז and its cognates) can only be satisfactorily explained within a framework of chronological (diachronic) development. Hurvitz concludes that such cases function as “finger-prints” that “effectively establish the historical age of [Qoheleth’s] composition or its committing to writing” (32–34).

B. Isaksson’s “The Syntax of the Narrative Discourse in Qohelet” (35–46) focuses on the verbal syntax of the autobiographical narrative section of the book and as such is closely related to his 1987 monograph *Studies in the Language of Qoheleth, with Special Emphasis on the Verbal System*. He notes that the *qatal* form, with or without a prefixed *waw*, is the primary verb form used for narrating the autobiographical thread, rather than the *wayyiqtol* form. Yet he finds it “premature” to label this phenomenon an indication of a late date for the language (36). Instead, he attributes this to discourse function: *qatal* rather than *wayyiqtol* is utilized because the speaker is not interested in emphasizing sequentiality or temporal consecution (38). He then draws attention to a similar syntactical phenomenon in ancient Near Eastern inscriptions such as the Mesha and Kilamuwa stelae (40–43). A third section of the essay discusses background information in the narrative thread of Qoheleth. Although this can be expressed by nominal clauses, as it is throughout the Hebrew Bible, Isaksson argues (not convincingly, in my opinion) that it can also be expressed by means of infinitival clauses as well.

J. Joosten discusses the place of Qoheleth’s language within the diachronic development of Biblical Hebrew in “The Syntax of Volitive Verbal Forms in Qoheleth in Historical Perspective” (47–61). Focusing specifically on the issue of verbal usage and word order, he begins by noting that volitive verb forms in preexilic Classical Biblical Hebrew (CBH) occur in clause initial position in about 95 percent of occurrences and that nonvolitive *iqtol* almost always occurs in clause-internal position. In contrast, in the book of Qoheleth volitive verb forms are clause initial in about 50 percent of the cases. Joosten argues that this phenomenon cannot be attributed to genre, since other wisdom books such as Proverbs match the profile of CBH in this regard, and neither should it be attributed simply to an author’s idiosyncrasies, since the same trend is discernible in LBH and Qumran texts (54–56). Joosten also discusses *weyiqtol* forms, which are almost always volitive in CBH but in Qoheleth seem to function basically as a free variant for the *weqatal* form (57). As is the case with the morphosyntax of the volitive forms, this situation is paralleled with other LBH texts as well as Ben Sira and Qumran texts. All in all, this blurring of the morphosyntactic distinctions of CBH in the book of Qoheleth is only convincingly explained as part of the diachronic development of the Hebrew verbal

system, which eventually resulted in the greatly simplified verbal system of Mishnaic Hebrew.

In “Meaningful Ambiguities in the Book of Qoheleth” (63–74) T. Krüger deals not so much with outright philological problems but rather with intentional ambiguities on the part of the author, which he illustrates by examining Qoh 5:7–8; 8:1–9; and 10:20. All of these passages, Krüger observes, speak in some way of issues of power and authority and are capable not merely of *different* interpretations but indeed of *contradictory* ones: there is “on the one hand an attitude of affirmation, fear, and opportunism towards power and authority, and on the other hand an attitude of criticism, distance, and even a kind of anarchism (or maybe theocratism)” (72). He goes on to argue, however, that ultimately “the texts do not leave the ambiguities open, but they seem to guide the readers from an affirmation of power and authority to a more critical view.” This is to be understood as a deliberate strategy on Qoheleth’s part: apparently he was writing at a time when caution was necessary “with regard to the expression of one’s opinions, especially if these opinions were critical of the ruling classes” (73). Following Lohfink, he suggests that circa 205 B.C.E. under the regime of Ptolemy V best fits these circumstances, though frankly I find it difficult to imagine *any* circumstances in which such criticism would be anything but dangerous.

“Laisse aller ton pain sur la surface des eaux: Étude de Qohélet 11,1–2” (75–89), by J.-J. Lavoie, reexamines one of many notoriously difficult passages in the book. The primary difficulty with these verses is not text-critical or philological but rather exegetical in nature. Lavoie provides a structural analysis of these verses (75–78), then proceeds to survey and critique a number of different interpretations, which variously take them as an exhortation to practice generosity toward the poor (a view with an ancient pedigree, being found in rabbinic literature, the Targumim, and early Christian writings), a call to sow seed (83–84), a summons to go fishing (84–85), an allusion to the cult of Adonis (85) or to the practice of divination (85–86), a reference to maritime commerce (86–87), a call to “seize the day” (87), or simply an urging to commit an absurd or senseless act. Lavoie explores the last-mentioned option a bit further, noting that Qoh 11:1–2 contains a paradoxical statement (see Prov 26.4–5) according to which a senseless act (11:1a) can have a positive result (11:1b), whereas a prudent act (11:2a) has no guarantee of success (11:2b). This highlights the point that is repeated in the immediate context that one “does not know” (עֲדָתָא לֹא; see vv. 2, 5, 6) what the result of an action will be. The act of “casting bread upon the waters” was thus, even for the ancient reader, intended to be a senseless act (which explains why later commentators have been so baffled by the statement), and to follow Qoheleth’s advice would be to confess the fact that people are fundamentally in the dark as to the future outcome of many of their daily activities.

“The Verbs **מצא** ‘To Find’ and **בקש** ‘To Search’ in the Language of Qohelet. An Exegetical Study” (92–120) is the title of an essay by L. Mazinghi, though the driving interest of the article appears to be epistemology (see 92) rather than lexicography. The various sections of the essay treat, in turn, the “experiential value of the verb **מצא**” (93–97), the “theological value of **מצא** and **בקש** in Deuteronomic, Prophetic and Late Wisdom Texts” (97–103), “Finding” and “Searching” in Qoheleth (104–15), and the nature of the adversaries that Qoheleth apparently had in view (115–18). In Mazinghi’s opinion, Qoheleth is polemicizing against apocalypticism (represented by, e.g., the Enochic tradition) as well as against traditional wisdom (represented by, e.g., Prov 1–9). In his conclusion (118–20) Mazinghi again emphasizes the experiential and epistemological nature of the verb **מצא** in Qoheleth, and he sees Qoheleth as restoring the experiential sense of the word that it had in the language of earlier wisdom (118). With regard to Qoheleth’s epistemology, Mazinghi claims that one result of this study is that it emerges that Qoheleth “is much less a revolutionary than is often believed” (119). While I agree with this overall assessment of the allegedly “radical” nature of Qoheleth’s thought, I do not think that an examination of either **מצא** or **בקש** can provide much of a basis for it. Given the nature of this volume, I was also puzzled by Mazinghi’s failure to mention Schoors’s own study of **מצא** in his massive second volume of *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words*.

In “The Use of **הבל** as an Indicator of Chaos in Ecclesiastes” (121–41), D. Rudman discusses the meaning of this key word in the book of Qoheleth, noting that, even though **הבל** has a wide semantic field, the meaning of “breath” or “vapor” is actually quite rare. Rudman argues that an often overlooked common feature of its usage in the Hebrew Bible is “its regular appearance in contexts where the author is trying to express the idea of a thing or course of action being chaotic” (122). After a survey and critique of recent scholarship on **הבל** (122–26), Rudman turns to examine the biblical material, beginning with broader observations on the theme of creation, which contains “the idea of imposing order where there was previously disorder,” and the theme of chaos (127–30). Next he examines the use of **הבל** in the Hebrew Bible, which occurs in contexts of idol polemic, transience, death, and so on (130–34). His conclusion is that, despite **הבל**’s “concrete” meaning of “breath/vapour,” the real link between all (or most) of its usages in the Hebrew Bible is that **הבל** indicates “something that is either subject to or governed by chaos” (134). In light of this he reexamines a number of passages in Qoheleth in order to demonstrate that themes of order versus chaos are present (134–39).

“Qohelet’s Use of the Word **ענין**: Some Observations on Qoh 1,13; 2,23.26; 3,10, and 8,16” (143–55), by A. Schellenberg, focuses “in particular on those passages where [**ענין**] is used in the context of statements about human cognition” (143–44). In five out of its eight occurrences in the book, it emerges that “in none of them Qohelet is concerned with the

human bustle or endeavor in general, in fact, what he specifically has in mind is the endeavor to acquire *knowledge*” (145). To demonstrate this point, Schellenberg undertakes an examination of Qoh 1:13; 2:23, 26; 3:10; and 8:16; on page 154 she includes some brief remarks on instances in which the term does *not* appear to be used with reference to the topic of cognition (4:8; 5:2, 13). Wittgenstein’s dictum that “the meaning is in the use” notwithstanding, I found it difficult to tell whether Schellenberg was actually claiming that this cognitive-epistemological sense was part of the word’s lexical meaning or whether it represented merely a noteworthy idiosyncrasy of Qoheleth’s usage.

A. Schüle’s “Evil from the Heart: Qoheleth’s Negative Anthropology and Its Canonical Context” (157–76) runs counter to the view found in much of the scholarly literature that maintains that Qoheleth’s thought stands outside of, or at least on the fringe of, that which is found in the Law and the Prophets. On the contrary, Schüle maintains: “It is becoming increasingly clear that Qoheleth’s particular way of thinking is represented in more Old Testament texts than one might at first glance perceive” (158). To explicate this point he examines the concept of the “heart” in order to compare Qoheleth’s thought vis-à-vis other Old Testament texts. A consideration of the theme in Qoheleth (159–65) reveals a variety of statements on the subject, ranging from negative assessments regarding its profound sinfulness (e.g., Qoh 9:3) to its legitimate role in the search for wisdom (e.g., 1:17; 2:3; 10:2). This apparent diversity of opinion is not to be taken as evidence of theological inconsistency on Qoheleth’s part nor of opposing voices with whom Qoheleth is engaging in debate. Instead, Schüle makes the intriguing suggestion that this is to be explained intertextually: Qoheleth is interacting with the Primeval History of Gen 6–8, which simultaneously presents individuals such as Noah as “righteous” (Gen 7:1) while at the same time acknowledging the widespread effects of sin on humanity (e.g., Gen 6:5–7). Schüle insists that Qoheleth “is not simply plucking individual sentences from the flood narrative.... Rather, he is *referring to* a theology that, in its basic concern, is similar to his own” (168). He goes on to discuss the relationship between this realistic anthropology and the more hopeful perspective on humanity found in prophetic texts such as Jeremiah’s “new covenant” and Ezekiel’s “heart of flesh” (169–71); Schüle argues that these are not theological traditions in conflict but rather that Qoheleth’s perspective helps to clarify and to prevent misunderstanding of the prophetic tradition. As such, Qoheleth is “an intriguing and indispensable communication partner in any discourse about evil and the goodness of God” (171). A final section of this stimulating essay explores not only similarities but also differences in perspective between Qoheleth and the Primeval History of Gen 6–8 (171–76).

K. Smelik’s very short essay, “God in the Book of Qoheleth” (177–81), is essentially a comparison of his own earlier study on the word אלהים with its treatment in the second volume of Schoors’s *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words*. Smelik notes that a

fairly limited number of verbs are used with **אלהים** as the subject (e.g., **עשה**, **נתן**, and **שפט**), and he concludes that this “reflects Qoheleth’s special view on God.” When he compares Qoheleth to the Torah and the Prophets, Smelik notes that two important semantic fields are absent: “the word of the LORD” and “salvation by the LORD.” From this he concludes that God is “keeping silent” in the book of Qoheleth (180): “In the Book of Qoheleth, God is giving, God is acting, God is judging, but He does not bring salvation. On the contrary, He puts man into despair by leaving him in darkness in regard to the main questions in life.” Thus the book intends to make clear the limitations of our knowledge of God.

P. J. Tomson contributes “‘There Is No One Who Is Righteous, Not Even One’: Kohelet 7:20 in Pauline and Early Jewish Interpretation” (183–202), which accurately summarizes the subject matter. The basis of the essay is that Rom 3:10 is a “free but not unsuccessful rendering” of the Hebrew text of Qoh 7:20 (186). I would have liked to see much more substantial argumentation in support of this identification, as this is essentially assumed in the essay rather than demonstrated. Thomson summarizes the general reception of Qoheleth in ancient Judaism, which is implied by factors such as the fragments found among the Dead Sea Scrolls and possible references to Qoheleth in Ben Sira, 1Q27, and the apostle Paul and is made much more explicit in the rabbinic literature. Tomson cautiously concludes that it seems to be the case that “Qohelet was reasonably accepted in late Second Temple Jewish society” (187). The essay then examines Paul’s use and interpretation of Qoh 7:20 in Rom 3:10 (191–99) and surveys rabbinic expositions of the verse (199–202).

The final contribution is “The Verbs **ראה** and **שמע** in the Book of Qohelet: A Cognitive-Semantic Perspective” (203–20), by P. van Hecke. In this essay the author seeks to utilize the approach of cognitive semantics to better understand the frequency and the usage of the verbs **שמע** and **ראה** (the former is relatively rare and is never used of Qoheleth’s own actions, whereas the latter is quite common and is frequently used of them). Van Hecke begins with a concise description of cognitive linguistics and semantics (204–8): “Its basic tenet is that the meanings of words should be understood against the background of the conceptual systems that humans have, or put more simply: that the meaning of our words reflects the way we think” (205). The author seeks to contrast this approach with structuralist semantics as well as with historical (etymology-based) semantics. The author then discusses general conceptual distinctions between visual and auditory perception (209–11) and describes the semantic structure of **שמע** and **ראה** in Biblical Hebrew (211–14). Van Hecke argues that the verbs are similar in that both possess “static, perceptual” meanings (“to hear,” “to see”) as well as more “intentional, active” meanings (“to listen to,” “to look at”). He then focuses on how these two verbs are used in the book of Qoheleth in particular (214–20). In the course of this discussion the

author makes the interesting comment that there is a “conceptualization of intellectual inquiry as (metaphorically) moving towards the object of that inquiry” (215), a point that he claims is borne out by the occurrence of **ראה** with a number of auxiliary verbs of motion such as **פנה**, **סבב**, and **שוב** (215–17). The author’s basic finding, which is repeated a number of times in the article, is that **שמע** “as a cognitive term is more receptive, viz. understanding what is given,” whereas **ראה** “implies activity and intentionality which fit very well with Qohelet’s project of active examination and observation, as it is expressed by many of the first-person verbs in the book” (214; see also 218, 220).

The volume concludes with indices of authors, references, subjects, and Hebrew lexemes. It is an attractive volume, with only occasional typographical errors. Like any Festschrift, the essays vary in quality, though some are truly outstanding (e.g., Joosten). The essays will of course be of varying interest depending upon one’s particular field of study. Nevertheless, it is a very fitting tribute to the dedicatee, and anyone interested in the language or exegesis of the book of Qoheleth should find stimulating reading here.