

Expressions of Sceptical Topoi in (Late) Antique Judaism

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Expressions of Sceptical Topoi in (Late) Antique Judaism

Edited by
Reuven Kiperwasser and Geoffrey Herman

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Introduction

This volume collects papers presented on two different occasions. The first was a debate entitled “Scepticism in Qohelet,” which took place in the framework of one of the numerous activities held at the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies (MCAS), a DFG-Kolleg-Forschungsgruppe at the University of Hamburg directed by Prof. Dr. Giuseppe Veltri. This event was a “dialectical evening” held on 16 February 2016 and the presenters were Reuven Kiperwasser and Carsten Wilke, both affiliated with the centre at the time.

The second occasion was a workshop entitled “The Expressions of Sceptical Topoi in (Late) Ancient Judaism,” which was also held at the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies on 18 and 19 June 2016 and convened by Reuven Kiperwasser. The first two papers are based on the presentations at the dialectical evening, while the other five resulted from the workshop.

Both the “dialectical evening” and the workshop were directly inspired by Kiperwasser’s research in Hamburg, about which a few words of description are in order. The project consisted of two structural units: “Sceptical Meditations within the Book of Ecclesiastes in Rabbinic Midrash” and “The Embodiment of Scepticism in Rabbinic Narratives.”

In the rabbinic tradition, Ecclesiastes is regarded as a prophetic book composed by King Solomon. It contains verses expressing doubt about divine justice or even about God’s involvement in earthly events. It also articulates a pessimistic point of view concerning the nature of mankind as a whole. The earliest midrash had already sought to reconcile such tendencies with more familiar Jewish theological beliefs by ascribing to many of them a prophetic hidden meaning. The rabbis re-interpreted problematic verses, often apologetically. Does this mean that they sought to distance themselves from the doubts of Ecclesiastes, or that they perhaps found it inappropriate for the wise king to be a proto-sceptical thinker? Another question relates to the characteristics of rabbinic culture that are implied by such activity. What kind of sceptical reasoning was appropriate for the rabbis, and what needs of rabbinic culture did it serve? Exegetical phenomena are undoubtedly placed at the centre of rabbinic intellectual life, but it is important to bear in mind that behind the ongoing process of proposing different readings of the sacred texts is the constantly changing theological thought. Reading Ecclesiastes through a seemingly non-sceptical exegetical lens, rabbis express their own doubts, which, as will be argued within this volume, are sometimes quite similar to the inquiries of a sceptical theist.

The reader of rabbinic literature, therefore, should not only address rabbinic scepticism in a narrow sense, looking for direct expressions of ideas similar to those found in the works of Greek authors. Rather, as was argued within the framework of this project, one should approach the cultural expressions of scepticism manifest

in rabbinic *exegetical narratives based on verses from Ecclesiastes* and other such ostensibly problematic verses from the biblical wisdom literature.

This project was, to the best of our knowledge, the first systematic attempt to address sceptical modes of thought in rabbinic culture, as well as the first to explore their role in rabbinic thought in general. The second part of the project, the embodiment of scepticism in rabbinic narratives, was the inspiration and background of the lion's share of this volume. As part of an attempt to locate sceptical thought in rabbinic culture, Kiperwasser determined to analyse the representation of sceptical thinking in the ancient Jewish texts as a whole.

The term *scepticism* has its origins, as is well known, in the Greco-Roman realm. Philosophical scepticism questions the possibility of certainty in knowledge. Sceptical philosophers adopted different doctrines, but their ideology can be generalised as either the denial of the possibility of all knowledge or the suspension of judgement due to the inadequacy of the evidence. Sceptical ideas were shaped in the works of ancient Greek and Roman thinkers, leaving us numerous literary monuments, and scepticism was both a driving force in the development of past cultures and also the impetus for far-reaching scientific achievements and philosophical investigation. The first wave of sceptical thought was Pyrrhonism, founded by Pyrrho of Elis (ca. 360–270 BCE), and the second was the so-called Academic scepticism; namely, the sceptical period of ancient Platonism dating from around 266 BC. The interest of this approach seems to have dissipated in the course of the late Roman empire. An impressive revival of scepticism took place much later during the Renaissance and the Reformation, after the complete works of Sextus Empiricus were translated into Latin leading to far-reaching philosophical developments.

As is well known, early Jewish culture, in contrast to its Greco-Roman peer, avoided creating consistent representations of its philosophical doctrines. Jews of the first centuries of the common era, however, were engaged in persistent intellectual activity devoted to the laws, norms, regulations, exegesis, and other traditional areas of Jewish religious knowledge. An effort to detect sceptical ideas in ancient Judaism requires, therefore, a closer analysis of this literary heritage and its cultural context. In accordance with this, the aim of the workshop was to explore elements of sceptical thought in ancient and late antique Judaism through a new analysis of pertinent texts. The participants discussed a wide spectrum of texts: Jewish writings from the Second Temple period, rabbinic literature, magical texts, and the reflections of Jewish thought in early Christian and patristic writings. These textual corpora show little direct influence from Greek philosophical thought more generally and from sceptical thought in particular. Therefore, with the understanding that when reading Jewish texts in search of scepticism, we are to some extent looking for the equivalent of a concept taken from another culture, we nevertheless found it of heuristic value to embrace the term and concept as a hermeneutical lens through which to view classical Jewish culture.

It could be argued that the application of the philosophy of scepticism to the study of early Jewish thought is problematic, being, as it were, an eclectic and for-

eign cultural approach for the investigation of distant cultural phenomena. However, this argument does not present a challenge in our situation, since within the framework of this volume, our purpose is not to analyse the sceptical approach as a system of knowledge, but rather to employ certain basic components of sceptical thought in order to see whether there are analogies with chosen Jewish textual traditions. From a variety of the formal aspects of sceptical methodology, we concentrate mostly on presupposing a limited epistemology, reflections of doubt, a questioning spirit, and a rejection of dogma. These are the sceptical *topoi* disseminated among the texts produced by different communities of faith, which have often barely been recognised by readers.

We have deliberately chosen to use the term “*topoi*” (plural of *topos*) in the title of this volume, assuming that it is more suitable for expressing the rudimentary state of sceptical ideas in classical Jewish texts. The term “*topos*” is itself borrowed from ancient rhetoric. Its meaning was expanded by Ernst Robert Curtius in his ground-breaking *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter* (1948), and it has become a term for “commonplaces.” These commonplace features are the product of reworkings of traditional material, particularly the descriptions of standardised settings, but can be extended to almost any literary pattern. Early medieval Latin literature, for instance, inherited traces of motifs and fragments of plots from classical Greco-Roman literature and used them without being aware of their source. In this way, individual texts may include elements that were not invented by the author, but which rather belong to his or her culture. We aimed to find these modest manifestations of sceptical thought within the fields of classical Jewish culture and to shed light on them, employing modern methods of critical textual analysis. The collective efforts of the authors in this volume reflect this quest for expressions of these *topoi* in the various literary corpora.

Of the many historical intersections between philosophical scepticism and the Jewish tradition, the earliest possible and only canonical one is the Book of Qohelet (Ecclesiastes), which is traditionally attributed to King Solomon, but can be dated to the Hellenistic period on linguistic grounds. Under the aphorism *ha-kol hevel*, “all is vanity” (KJV), the author insists on the futility of any quest for knowledge, labour, virtue, or happiness and dismisses the belief in both divine providence and human agency. The book’s competing maxims of enjoying a meaningless life and fearing an incomprehensible God have intrigued Jewish and Christian exegesis since antiquity. Contemporary scholarly research is divided between a philosophical reading affirming that the author shared his sources and critical stance with the Greek sceptical tradition and a religious reading that places the book within Levantine and biblical reflections on theodicy and divine transcendence. Based on a new look at the reception, structure, and context of the book, Carsten Wilke, in the first paper, “Doubting Divine Justice and Human Knowledge: Qohelet’s Cultural Dialectics,” seeks to show that Qohelet’s inner contradictions should be read dialectically as a way of coping with a historical moment of economic expansion and cultural

transformation. Dating the book to the peak of Hellenisation in Jerusalem during the years 175 to 172 BCE, he argues that it took advantage of sceptical inquiry in order to encompass the claims of both biblical theism and Greek science.

The second paper in this volume, “‘Matters That Tend towards Heresy’: Rabbinic Ways of Reading Ecclesiastes,” deals with how the main message of Ecclesiastes—its scepticism—is perceived by the modern reader. Earlier scholarship assumed that references to efforts to proscribe the Book of Ecclesiastes in rabbinic literature stemmed from the rabbis’ inability to cope with its sceptical tendencies and attest to a struggle over its acceptance within the canon. Kiperwasser claims that the rabbis accepted the closed canon, with all its twenty-four books, and did not question the inclusion of any of the books therein. They were in fact unaware of how the process of canonisation had been conducted and the reasons for the acceptance of certain exceptional books, such as Ecclesiastes. And yet, as sensitive readers and experienced exegetes, they felt that the book was different. For this reason, it received plenty of attention from the rabbis and featured extensively in their exegetical art form. The stories of the difficulties in accepting Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs essentially come as a defence of their enormous appeal and broad exegetical use as valuable resources for interpretation. The rabbis were fully cognisant of Ecclesiastes’s unconventionality and aspired to produce etiological explanations in order to account for its oddity.

The third paper, “Wisdom Scepticism and Apocalyptic Certitude; Philosophical Certitude and Apocalyptic Scepticism,” which analyses the attitude towards scepticism in Jewish literature of the Second Temple period, is by Cana Werman. The paper begins by discussing writings from the beginning of the Hellenistic era which express sceptical notions based on the recognition that man cannot comprehend God’s role in the world. These include Ecclesiastes, where God is pictured as being detached from the world, the Book of the Watchers of 1 Enoch, and the biblical Book of Daniel, where evil heavenly forces rebel against God. The paper further points to two kinds of works that grappled with similar challenges but made an effort to avoid scepticism. The first group is semi-apocalyptic compositions such as the *Aramaic Levi Document* and the *Apocryphon of Jeremiah*, where calamity and disaster are considered not as the consequences of a God who is removed from humanity, but rather as the result of human deeds and misbehaviour. The second collection is formed of works that adopted philosophical ideas claiming that God’s sovereignty over the world can be perceived by the mind’s eye.

The fourth paper, “Reasonable Doubts of the ‘Other’: Jewish Scepticism in Early Christian Sources” by Serge Ruzer, is devoted to reading early Christian sources which describe polemical encounters with “unbelieving Jews.” Such encounters, whether real or imagined, attribute to the Jews a rejection of Christian beliefs. This paper posits the question of whether such descriptions faithfully represent a real external rival, or, alternatively, whether they are tailored to overcome an internal problem of the Christian outlook, conveniently disguised as a struggle with the eter-

nal Jewish Other. Discussing a few representative examples, this study highlights a meaningful dynamic in the focus of the supposed Jewish scepticism. Thus, it takes us from Jesus's resurrection through claims about his messianic mission and stories of his miraculous birth to insistence—in spite of the obvious delay in the Parousia—on his future triumph and all the way up to theological concepts. While various combinations of the internal and external directions of the polemic are definitely possible, the paper takes a particular interest in the cases where the disbelief is perceived not as resulting from Jewish spiritual corruption, but rather as a reasonable, “sceptical” reaction, for example, in light of the absence of sufficiently convincing external signs of salvation. It is argued that especially in such cases, behind the scepticism of the “Other” might be looming the Christians' own internal doubts.

Geoffrey Herman, in his paper “Idolatry, God(s), and Demons among the Jews of Sasanian Babylonia,” argues against the opinion of many earlier scholars that for the Jews in the Second Temple period and afterwards, an interest in gods and the issue of idolatry was not a major factor in their beliefs. This paper considers the situation with respect to the Jews in Sasanian Babylonia in light of the polytheistic religious scene. Non-Jewish evidence points to a pervasive polytheistic religious culture that embraced numerous deities, some of which were demonised. The Jewish magical material from Babylonia indicates an awareness of and an engagement with these deities and demons among some of the Jews. The Babylonian Talmud also speaks of idolatry as a contemporary issue for Babylonian Jews, or interprets biblical sources, which suggest its continued relevance for them. In view of all this evidence, the paper argues that polemical and other reflections on idolatry in the Babylonian Talmud would appear to be more significant than previously assumed. The rabbis, it would seem, being a part of this religious world, accepted many of the assumptions of their non-Jewish contemporaries regarding the reality of demons perceived by others as gods and were grappling with a tangible religious reality that was impinging upon their world.

The sixth paper, “Facing Omnipotence and Shaping the Sceptical Topos” by Reuven Kiperwasser, is a narratological inquiry into late antique rabbinic stories told from the point of view of sceptical theists. Sceptical theists accept that we can know general truths about God but deny that we can know the reason for God's decision to act in a particular way in any given case. A sceptical theist will maintain his belief in God but will deny his involvement in the politics of evil. However, the rabbinic narrator's approach is different. God is involved in the world and is aware of the existence of evil; however, despite being omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent, God has decided not to change anything in the world. These theological ideas are embodied in narratives in rabbinic literature. This paper aims to show how behind the narrative fabric, serious doubts about how God controls the world are revealed, yet notwithstanding the intensity of such doubts, no expressions of disrespect for accepted religious values appear.

The final paper in this volume, “If a Man Would Tell You,” is by Tali Artman-Partock. It examines the groups of texts in rabbinic literature which start with varia-

tions of the phrase that appears in the title, arguing that it functions as a discursive marker that signals doubt in a rabbinic teaching which paradoxically serves to eradicate doubt about rabbinic authority. The texts often serve to reinforce the sense of belonging and the favoured status of the members of the rabbinic group as interpreters of the Bible, so much so that they might accept as true arguments that would normally be conceived as challenges to accepted rabbinic theology and epistemology.

The product of our joint efforts is offered to the reader in the hope of both expanding and intensifying a scholarly discussion on expressions of doubt and religious enquiry in Jewish sources in particular and in antiquity more generally. We would like to express our immense appreciation to the Maimonides Centre, and especially to Prof. Dr. Giuseppe Veltri, both for supporting the conference and for supporting us in this publication of the proceedings. This is also a suitable opportunity to thank the staff of the centre in Hamburg—Karolin Berends, junior professor Dr. Racheli Haliva, Dr. Patrick Koch, Dr. Anna Lissa, Yonatan Meroz MA, Dr. des. Felix Papenhagen, Dr. Bill Rebiger, Silke Schaeper M.L.S., Prof. Dr. Stephan Schmid, Dr. Michela Torbidoni, and Maria Wazinski MA—and the fellows of the centre in Hamburg in 2016, namely Prof. Marietta Horster, Prof. Dr. Almut Renger, and Dr. Libera Pisano, and others who attended and participated in the workshop.

Carsten L. Wilke

Doubting Divine Justice and Human Knowledge: Qohelet's Cultural Dialectics

Julius Guttman was explicitly reluctant to begin his narrative of Jewish philosophical thought with Qohelet. He argued that this biblical book, which is also known as Ecclesiastes, may document the first known encounter between Jewish literature and Greek philosophy, but that it was a failed encounter, since the biblical author proved unable to understand philosophical ways of thought; worse, he even maintained his utterly “un-Greek” disrespect for the human cognitive faculties, denying their power, nobility, and efficiency.¹

Our conception of antique intellectual culture has evolved, and we are more likely to acknowledge that cognitive pessimism and the sceptical quest are as much a part of Greek thought as the Platonic and Aristotelian systems. Qohelet has often been represented in analogy with the Greek Sceptics,² and Charles Whitley even sensed this dimension in the author's moniker: if Qohelet “is to be represented by one term in English, perhaps ‘The Sceptic’ would have some measure of adequacy.”³ As I will argue in this chapter, Qohelet does indeed stand on the threshold of Jewish philosophising, and of Jewish scepticism in particular, and there are good reasons to locate him inside rather than outside of the doorway. What I will undertake here is a reappraisal of the book's dialectic quest based on a review of its reception⁴ and a new hypothesis about its structure and date.⁵ By “dialectics,” I mean the procedure of explaining a text on the basis of its unresolved inner contradictions. For example, Hans-Georg Gadamer's dialectical ethics reflect the tension between the immanent “other” and the transcendent “good-beyond-being” in opposition to ethi-

1 Julius Guttman, *Die Philosophie des Judentums* (Munich: Ernst Reinhardt, 1933), 27: “Die ebenso ungrüchische Verwerfung der Erkenntnis, das Wort, daß Mehrung der Erkenntnis Mehrung des Schmerzes ist.”

2 Martin Alfred Klopfenstein, “Die Skepsis des Qohelet,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 28 (1972): 97–109.

3 Charles F. Whitley, *Kohelet: His Language and Thought* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1979), 6.

4 I have used the overviews by Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, “Kohelet: Stand und Perspektiven der Forschung,” in *Das Buch Kohelet: Studien zur Struktur, Geschichte, Rezeption und Theologie*, ed. Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997), 5–38; and Jean-Jacques Lavoie, “Où en sont les études sur le livre de Qohélet?” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 69, no. 1 (2013): 95–133; Jean-Jacques Lavoie, “Où en sont les études sur le livre de Qohélet (2012–2018)?” *Studies in Religion* 48,1 (2019): 40–76.

5 The present article develops ideas that were exchanged during the dialectical evening held at the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies in Hamburg on 16 February 2016, when the two theses presented below were respectively defended by Reuven Kiperwasser (who at that time was affiliated with Humboldt University of Berlin) and myself.

cal reasoning founded on one essential principle, such as divine lawgiving or the self-sufficient human subject.⁶

As has often been remarked, Qohelet diverges from Jewish tradition through its generic and depersonalised conception of the divine, which acts through deterministic forces such as time, fortune, and fate. He never mentions the Israelite God by name, nor does his book refer to divine law, the Torah, the ideas of creation, revelation, redemption, or other dimensions of historical religion. His view of cultic religion, expressed in 4:17–5:7, is cautious at best, and ethical religion is discarded outright.

Qohelet also, however, diverges from what we might associate with the Greek ideal of autonomous human knowledge. Man cannot know anything for certain, nor can he influence the world through his activity. As a conclusion, the author recommends that one suspend the quest for knowledge, power, and perfection and instead enjoy life without any wish to understand, dominate, or improve it. This quintessential (im)moral conclusion is reiterated in the body of the text on seven (or rather, as we will see below, ten) occasions. The very end of the text at 12:1–8, 12–14, however, is a chapter on theistic morals.

In sum, while arguably marking the start of a controversy between biblical theism and Greek science, the book expresses ideas that are strongly at variance with both. As James L. Crenshaw succinctly put it: “The author of Ecclesiastes lacked trust in either God or knowledge. For him nothing proved that God looked on creatures with favor, and the entire enterprise of wisdom had become bankrupt.”⁷ Our dialectic reading will have to address one basic observation—namely the presence of multiple contradictions in Qohelet’s thought—which, with appropriate contextualisation, will lead us to disagreements both between eastern Mediterranean wisdom traditions and within them.

Harmonistic, Agonistic, and Dialectical Approaches

As a deliberately sceptical text, Qohelet is a model case for the possible strategies we can use to deal with internal contradiction, which the ancient rabbis already considered to be the major crux of the book.⁸ One strategy proceeds by logical de-

⁶ Lauren Swayne Barthold, *Gadamer’s Dialectical Hermeneutics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 127.

⁷ James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 127.

⁸ *b. Šabb.* 30b: “His words contradict one another”; compare Abraham ibn Ezra on Eccl 7:3: “In one place it may say something and in another the exact opposite is said.” *Sefer Qohelet: im Perushei ibn Ezra*, edited by Mordechai Shaul Goodman (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 2012). On the Talmudic quotation, see below.

duction, either fitting the author's thought into a coherent norm or imagining a harmonic balance of opposites. For historical-critical scholars, only a single stroke of the pen was necessary to dismiss the pietistic conclusion as a conformist gloss and to keep a more or less coherent text built around the hedonistic ethics that are made explicit in its main part. On the other side, theologians have often felt obliged, following their religious convictions and duties, to explain away the central parts of the book or to diminish their relevance. Crenshaw, for instance, finds Qohelet's insistent commendation of earthly pleasure to be "empty" of meaning and does not believe that the author seriously intended to promote it.⁹ A good example of a harmonistic reading is given by Alexander A. Fischer, who in 1997 argued that Qohelet could have been both a sceptical philosopher and a Jewish sage:

Indeed, both issues, scepticism and the fear of God, are vital to our understanding of Qohelet's teachings. While attempts have repeatedly been made to pit the one against the other and to thereby reduce the book to a one-way interpretation, we will be sure to show that the fear of God and scepticism go together in this work and that they depend on one another.¹⁰

From a modern theological perspective, it may not be much of an issue whether we believe in or deny divine providence, but classical exegesis did not treat this point with the same nonchalance. Both the rabbis and the Church Fathers had strong feelings about the contradiction between ethical attitudes that would follow from Qohelet's calls to enjoy a meaningless life while simultaneously fearing an incomprehensible God.¹¹ In their approach, which we may call agonistic, the Book of Qohelet was interpreted as a debate in which an impious sceptic voices his objections to faith and is finally vanquished by a pious opponent. In the thirteenth century, Menahem ha-Meiri wrote that Qohelet "mentions in a number of places views that contradict fundamental beliefs such as reward and punishment and God's providence in his world; but he mentions these views so as to use knowledge to search for the correct path."¹² The great majority of Qohelet's speculative propositions could thus be explained away as counter-truths concocted by the unruly antagonist, the conclusion in chapter 12 being the only straightforward expression of the book's true message. Following this tradition, later Jewish commentators read Qohelet as a dialectical controversy between the good and evil impulses.¹³ Modern Christian

⁹ Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 138–40.

¹⁰ Alexander A. Fischer, *Skepsis oder Furcht Gottes? Studien zur Komposition und Theologie des Buches Kohelet* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997), 1.

¹¹ For a survey of patristic interpretations, see Elisabeth Birnbaum, "Qohelet," *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 28 (2017): 523–36.

¹² Menachem ha-Meiri, *Perush 'al Sefer Mishlei*, ed. Menachem Mendel Zahav (Jerusalem: Otsar ha-Poskim, 1969), on Prov 1:1.

¹³ See the interpretation of Eccl 9:7–10 in Joseph Albo, *Sefer ha-'Ikkarim*, 4.28, developed in Menasseh ben Israel, *De la fragilité humaine et de l'inclination de l'homme au péché*, trans. Henry Méchoulan (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1996), 143–44.

scholars since Johann Gottfried Herder have likewise assumed a clash between various worldviews on Qohelet's pages, possibly in the form of an internal dialogue. In 1875, Franz Julius Delitzsch wrote: "One might therefore call the Book of Koheleth, 'The Song of the Fear of God,' rather than, as H. Heine does, 'The Song of Scepticism;' for however great the sorrow of the world which is therein expressed, the religious conviction of the author remains in undiminished strength."¹⁴ At the turn of the twentieth century, with the then-fashionable search for various redactional layers, Paul Haupt assumed that an Epicurean Sadducee and a Stoic Pharisee successively intervened in the redaction of the text,¹⁵ while Arthur Lukyn Williams read it as a dialogue between a *hakam* and a *hasid*.¹⁶ In all these constructions, the text's final voice recommending the fear of God overrules the cheerful commendations that the book expresses elsewhere. Some dialogue constructions have also been proposed in recent years,¹⁷ but twentieth-century scholarship has generally preferred to discard the unwelcome passages of the text as "glosses" or "quotations."¹⁸

The third and last approach is dialectical: it chooses to state Qohelet's contradictions as strongly as can be and to leave them unresolved. As a revealing example, allow me to quote a forgotten booklet by an Israeli author, Asher Sakal, who in 1959 expressed this perceived opposition with particular emphasis. For Qohelet, "God is an omnipotent entity that acts arbitrarily, uncontained by any legal order. In his world, being righteous does not help, and being evil does not harm, since God could not care less about a man's good or evil deeds." All Jewish exegesis, Sakal claims, was written in order to fit this provocation into the norms of dogmatic biblical theology. However, all of these efforts have been futile, and Qohelet's words against God's providence and justice, as well as against man's moral nobility, can in no way be reconciled with the understanding that Jewish tradition was used to giving them.¹⁹ As James Alfred Loader argued in his *Polar Structures in the Book of*

¹⁴ Franz Julius Delitzsch, "Einleitung das Buch Koheleth," in *Biblischer Commentar über das Alte Testament. Vierter Theil: Poetische Bücher. Vierter Band: Hoheslied und Koheleth* (Leipzig: Dörffling und Franke, 1875), 185–97, here 190; translation in Franz Julius Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, trans. M. G. Easton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1891), 183. Delitzsch misquotes Heinrich Heine, who in 1854 referred to Job, not Qohelet, as the "Canticles of Scepticism." See Friedrich Ellermeyer, "Randbemerkung zur Kunst des Zitierens: Welches Buch der Bibel nannte Heinrich Heine 'das Hohelied der Skepsis'?" *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 77, no. 1 (1965): 93–94.

¹⁵ Paul Haupt, trans., *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1905), 2–4.

¹⁶ Arthur Lukyn Williams, trans., *Ecclesiastes in the Revised Version with Introduction and Notes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 56–57.

¹⁷ T. A. Perry, *Dialogues with Kohelet: The Book of Ecclesiastes* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

¹⁸ For the latter approach, see Robert Gordis, *Kohelet—The Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes*, 3rd augmented ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

¹⁹ Asher Sakal, *Sefer Qohelet: Shenei panim, peshuto shel miqra mi-zeh vehashqafat hakhmei Yisra'el mi-zeh* (Holon: A. Sakal, 1959), 10–11.

Qohelet (1979), we should also abstain from minimising the book's inner contradictions, but should rather try to understand them as elements of a systematically self-contradictory kind of thought.²⁰

Competition between these options for meeting Qohelet's ideological challenge runs throughout the entire history of exegesis. For modern critics, the problem is also linked to different possible means of contextualisation. In sociological terms, we are dealing with a "multi-cleavage" situation, in which the logical problem of intratextual conflict overlaps with sociocultural contradictions that may ultimately be identified with the difference between Greek and Jewish ethnicity.

The Hellenistic and Orientalist Theses

The question of whether a hedonistic or an ascetic mood—and hence a secular or a religious meaning—should ultimately prevail in the interpretation of Qohelet also drives the debate about its proper cultural context. To put the matter in Straussian opposition, the "joy of life" option appears linked to Athens, while the "fear of God" alternative is associated with Jerusalem.

Since the Enlightenment period, Qohelet's readers have employed considerable bilingual erudition in order to prove that the book owes its linguistic and intellectual singularities to Greek language, literature, and philosophy. Preceded in this endeavour by Harry Ranston (1925),²¹ in 1973, Rainer Braun published what is still the most extensive collection of textual parallels which allegedly prove that there were Greek influences on many features of the book's phraseology, worldview, and general mood.²² Braun's observations on these parallel motifs were largely accepted and frequently reissued,²³ but scholars have not yet reached any consensus about them.²⁴

Parallels with expressions from archaic and classical works such as those of Homer, Hesiod, Theognis, Sophocles, and Euripides may suggest an acquaintance with the Greek canon. However, Braun's key observation is that the philosophical

²⁰ James A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1979); Jinyung Kim, *Reanimating Qohelet's Contradictory Voices: Studies of Open-Ended Discourse on Wisdom in Ecclesiastes* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

²¹ Harry Ranston, *Ecclesiastes and the Early Greek Wisdom Literature* (London: Epworth Press, 1925).

²² Rainer Braun, *Kohelet und die frühhellenistische Popularphilosophie* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1973).

²³ A sample of the most convincing observations appears in studies such as Otto Kaiser, *Der Mensch unter dem Schicksal: Studien zur Geschichte, Theologie und Gegenwartsbedeutung der Weisheit* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1985), 138–39, and Leo G. Perdue, *The Sword and the Stylus: An Introduction to Wisdom in the Age of Empires* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 234–36.

²⁴ Reinhold Bohlen, "Kohelet im Kontext hellenistischer Kultur," in *Das Buch Kohelet*, 249–73, here 255.