

# 專文 ARTICLES

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## WISDOM, YAHWISM, CREATION In Quest of Qoheleth's Theological Thought

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### A. INTRODUCTION

One of the main difficulties facing Old Testament theologians is how to treat the wisdom literature; what is its relationship to the rest of the Old Testament and what is its place in Old Testament theologies. In the opening words of his book, entitled *Wisdom in Theology*, R.E. Clement clearly stated the well known fact in Old Testament wisdom studies, that "The question of the place that should be assigned to the wisdom writings of the Old Testament in a work of Old Testament theology has not so far been accorded any widely recognized consensus ... any attempt to consider the lasting theological significance of the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament encounters difficulties."<sup>1</sup> These difficulties also acknowledged by Leo Perdue, who in a recent title, *Wisdom & Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature*, attempts to delineate wisdom

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<sup>1</sup>R.E. Clement, *Wisdom in Theology* (Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1992), 13, 14.

theology in the biblical and extra-biblical traditions.<sup>2</sup>

Since Israel's theology has traditionally been regarded as being Yahwistic and Qoheleth, along with Job and Proverbs, formed the wisdom corpus of the Hebrew Bible, this essay will first probe into the relations between wisdom and Yahwism. As the concept of creation theology has been thought to be the shared concept between wisdom and Yahwism, I will follow to examine the compatibility and/or incompatibility of creation theology within the theological thought of Qoheleth. The quest for Qoheleth's theological thought, particularly within Israel's theology, would be enlightened by such an analysis. As pointed out by Frank Crüsemann, "the question of what Koheleth's place in society has to do with his thinking has hardly been raised ... and that is what is really interesting about him,"<sup>3</sup> the analysis will follow with a proposal regarding the social location of Qoheleth in Israel's society.

### *1. The Debate on Wisdom's **Place** in the Old Testament*

The relationship between Old Testament wisdom books and the rest of the Old Testament has generally been seen in two mutually exclusive ways. On one extreme, wisdom influence was claimed to be present everywhere in the non wisdom books. This was based on common vocabulary, subject matter and world view.<sup>4</sup> On the other extreme, Old Testament *Yahwism*, i.e. salvation history, was superimposed onto wisdom thought, thus misconstruing wisdom thought to be merely Israel's *response*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>(Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 20 where he argues the thesis that "creation theology and its correlative affirmation, providence, were at the center of the sages' understanding of God, the world, and humanity." Unfortunately this book came to me too late for interaction to be included into this essay.

<sup>3</sup>Frank Crüsemann, "The Unchangeable Word: The 'Crisis of Wisdom' in Koheleth," in *God of the Lowly*, ed. W. Schottroff and W. Stegemann (New York: Orbis Book, 1984), 57-77; trans. Matthew J. O'Connell from the German, "Die unveränderbare Welt. Überlegungen zure 'Krisis der Weisheit' beim Prediger," in *Der Gott der kleinen Leute* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1979).

<sup>4</sup>Donn F. Morgan, *Wisdom in Old Testament Traditions* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981); von Rad, "The Joseph Story and Ancient Wisdom," in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (London: Oliver and Boyd Ltd., 1966), 292-300.

<sup>5</sup>G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), "We can begin with the

The first extreme has prompted Crenshaw to investigate the issue of wisdom influence outside the wisdom corpus in his article, "Method in Determining Wisdom Influence upon 'Historical' Literature,"<sup>6</sup> in which he reaches negative conclusion concerning alleged wisdom influence in many texts outside the wisdom corpus. In response to the other extreme, he remarks that "the character of the wisdom corpus resists all attempts to impose Yahwism as the norm by which to assess its validity,"<sup>7</sup> even though it is not clear what the content of Yahwism is.

Murphy, approaches the issue differently, building on von Rad's insight that "the experiences of the world were for her [Israel] always divine experiences as well, and the experiences of God were for her experience of the world."<sup>8</sup> He suggests that<sup>9</sup>

The problem of the relationship between wisdom literature and other portions of the Old Testament needs to be reformulated in terms of a shared approach to reality .... It is not a question of the direct influence of the sages or of the wisdom literature, but rather of an approach to reality which was shared by all Israelites in varying degrees.

In response to Murphy, Whybray<sup>10</sup> rightly warns against the danger of

... reducing the concept of Israelite wisdom, outside the "wisdom books" proper, to no more than native common sense such as is to be found generally in human nature. All literature would then be "wisdom literature", in so far as it had any kind of intellectual content, and to say of any author's work that it showed traces of wisdom thought, would be to say no more than that he was not a fool.

Although Murphy may not want to describe all Old Testament literature as wisdom literature, nevertheless, Whybray's warning remains valid.

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assertion that the wisdom practised in Israel was a response made by a Yahwism confronted with specific experiences of the world" (307).

<sup>6</sup>J.L. Crenshaw, *JBL* 88 (1969), 129-142; Also in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom (SAIW)*, ed. J.L. Crenshaw (New York: KTAV, 1976), 481-94; "Prolegomenon," 9ff.

<sup>7</sup>J.L. Crenshaw, "In Search of Divine Presence: Some Remarks Preliminary to a Theology of Wisdom," *Rev Exp* 74 (1977), 353-69 (362).

<sup>8</sup>G. von Rad, *op. cit.*, 62.

<sup>9</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom-Theses and Hypotheses," in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien*, ed. J.G. Gammie, et al. (New York: Union Theological Seminary; Montana: Scholars Press, 1978), 35-42 (39).

<sup>10</sup>R.N. Whybray, "Prophecy and Wisdom," in *Israel's Prophetic Tradition: Essays in Honour of Peter Ackroyd*, eds. Richard Coggins, et al. (Cambridge: Cup, 1982), 181-99 (186).

Despite the fact that the relationship between the wisdom corpus and the rest of the Old Testament has yet to be adequately addressed, it is, nevertheless unwarranted to deny a place for biblical wisdom literature in Old Testament theology.<sup>11</sup> In the light of the two extremes mentioned above, the search for a relation between the wisdom corpus and the non wisdom books may be understood as a quest for a relationship between wisdom theology and Yahwistic theology - *wisdom and Yahwism*.

## 2. *Wisdom and Yahwism*

In his 1975 article "Wisdom and Yahwism," Murphy<sup>12</sup> discussed this issue and expressed dissatisfaction with the understanding of Yahwism that was based solely on the decalogue, the patriarchal promises, the Exodus and Sinai events, etc., and made the following bold challenge:

... Instead of inserting wisdom into Yahwism, with Yahwism as a kind of implicit deterrent of orthodoxy, one might rather turn the question around: How is Yahwism to be inserted into wisdom literature, into what was the daily experience of the Israelite?

This question would prompt one to investigate the nature of Yahwism. According to Murphy, the *Yahwism* that is to be *inserted* into wisdom should not only be "defined exclusively by the action of God in history: the patriarchal promises, the Exodus and Sinai events, etc.,"<sup>13</sup> but also the daily experiences of the Israelite as a responsible worshipper of Yahweh. To define Yahwism exclusively in terms of God's acts in history is too narrow because there were other areas of life not really touched by any of these, for example, personal diligence, self-control, attitudes towards the poor, pride, trust in one's judgment, etc. For Murphy, Yahwism exemplifies the total religious experience of the Israelite. This concept of Yahwism, however, runs the danger of

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<sup>11</sup>G.E. Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (Studies in Biblical Theology 8; London: SCM Press, 1952), seems to have ignored wisdom literature and indirectly denied it a place in his biblical theology. So is R.E. Clement in his *O. T. Theology: A Fresh Approach* (London: SCM Press, 1978).

<sup>12</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Yahism," in *No Famine in the Land: Studies in honor of John L. McKenzie*, eds. J.W. Flanagan and A.W. Robinson (Montana: Scholars Press, 1975), 117-26 (118).

<sup>13</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Yahism," 119-20.

being so broad as to include everything that is branded Israelite, thus making it too ambiguous and imprecise to be useful for a comparison with wisdom.

In his 1984 S.B.L. presidential address, Murphy attempts a more precise connection between Yahwism and wisdom, *via* the concept of creation theology within the framework of Old Testament theology, based on the understanding of Yahwism as the religion that embraces the total religious experience of the Israelite.<sup>14</sup> This idea of connecting creation theology to wisdom theology is, of course, nothing new (cf. W. Zimmerli<sup>15</sup>). This has been stated more recently by H.-J. Hermisson, "before we can ask about wisdom in Old Testament theology, we first have to ask about the place of creation theology in wisdom."<sup>16</sup> To evaluate the arguments of Zimmerli, Hermisson or Murphy, one will need to know, first of all, what creation theology is and how this facet of Yahwism, as distinct from redemptive history as another facet of Yahwism, has been integrated into wisdom thought. Secondly, one needs to delineate, if possible, the content of wisdom theology, which shares the concept of creation theology as a common denominator with Yahwism.

### 3. *Wisdom and Creation*

The Creation faith of ancient Israel has generally been considered by scholars to be chronologically late - attested in Second Isaiah, the priestly writing and the late Psalms - and theologically secondary compared with the primary Old Testament concept of the history of salvation. Although von Rad has argued that creation faith was presupposed in the older tradition even if it appears more prominently in the later texts, he maintains that "the doctrine of creation was never able to attain to independent existence in its own right apart from soteriology."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Creation," *JBL* 104 (1985), 3-11 (3).

<sup>15</sup>"The Place and the Limit of Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 17 (1964), 145-58. In *SAIW*, 314-38.

<sup>16</sup>H.-J. Hermisson, "Observations on the Creation Theology in Wisdom," in *IW*, 43-57 (44)

<sup>17</sup>G. von Rad, "The Problem of the Old Testament Doctrine of Creation," in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and other Essays*, 131-43. In *Creation in the Old Testament (COT)*, ed. B.W. Anderson (London/Philadelphia: SCPCK/Fortress Press, 1984), 53-64 and noted by B.W. Anderson in "Introduction: Mythopoeic and Theological Dimensions of Biblical Creation Faith," in *COT*, 1-24 (7), "The independence of creation from soteriology, in his [von Rad'] view, came into Israelite

This subservient role of creation was strongly challenged by H.H. Schmid<sup>18</sup> who argued that creation theology has a much more central theological significance than has been generally realized - indeed, he sees it as the broad horizon of biblical theology as a whole, which is, of course, another issue.

Disagreeing with von Rad and Schmid, Zimmerli based on his study of the creation narrative in Genesis, particularly Gen 1:28 which legitimized humankind's going out to master the world, was the first to argue that "wisdom thinks resolutely within the framework of a theology of creation."<sup>19</sup> Despite Murphy's criticism that his approach is "too apologetic", Zimmerli, nevertheless, coined the phrase, "wisdom theology is creation theology."<sup>20</sup> Subsequently, scholarly interest in creation theology and its relation to wisdom theology acted as a catalyst for the general acceptance of creation theology as a basis for the understanding of wisdom theology within the framework of Old Testament theology.<sup>21</sup> Creation theology is thus deemed by many to be an important and potentially fruitful concept by which to understand the role of wisdom thought in the Old Testament.<sup>22</sup>

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faith through the influence of wisdom." G. von Rad's view is also found in Davie Napier's article, "On Creation-Faith in the Old Testament," *Interpretation* 10 (1956), 21-42.

<sup>18</sup>H.H. Schmid, "Creation, Righteousness, and Salvation: 'Creation Theology' as the Broad Horizon of Biblical Theology," trans. B.W. Anderson and D.G. Johnson, in *COT*, 102-17 (102); idem, "*Schöpfung, Gerechtigkeit und Heil: Schöpfungsteologie als Gesamthorizont biblischer Theologie*" *ZTK* 70 (1973), 1-19 (15); Also Theodore M. Ludwig, "The Traditions of the Establishing of the Earth in Deutero-Isaiah," *JBL* 92 (1973), 345-57 (357), argues that "creation faith in Deutero-Isaiah is not merely subsumed under election or redemption faith. The cultic tradition of creation appears to stand as an independent element in Deutero-Isaiah,..."

<sup>19</sup>W. Zimmerli, "The Place and the Limit of Wisdom," 148; In "*Ort und Grenze der Weisheit im Rahmen der alttestamentlichen Theologie*," in *Les sagesses du Porche-Orient ancien (SPOA)*, 121-37 (123), he states, "Soll diese Eigenart theologisch gekennzeichnet werden, so wird man sagen müssen: Die Weisheit des Alten Testaments hält sich ganze entschlossen im Horizonte der Schöpfung. Ihre Theologie ist Schöpfungs-theologie."

<sup>20</sup>W. Zimmerli, "The Place and the Limit of Wisdom," 148; James L. Crenshaw, "In Search of Divine Presence," 362; H.-J. Hermisson, "Observations on the Creation Theology in Wisdom," 43; R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom-Theses and Hypothese," 36-37.

<sup>21</sup>Of course, the tremendous number of scholarly studies on 'creation and wisdom' in Proverbs 8:22 has an intense impact on this issue. Gerhard Hasel in a recent article, "A Decade of Old Testament Theology: Retrospect and Prospect," *ZAW* 93 (1981), 165-83, includes creation theology as one of the criteria for determining the success of a biblical theology. Recent treatment of the issue can be seen in R.E. Murphy, "wisdom and Creation"; H.-J. Hermisson, "Observations on the Creation Theology in Wisdom."

<sup>22</sup>A point to note here, which I have not been able to interact with, is Leo Perdue's recent

However, although the majority of scholars would agree, Preuss rejects this understanding in a series of studies.<sup>23</sup> Along with Mendenhall, Preuss asserts that wisdom is a foreign body within the Hebrew Bible and therefore cannot be considered Yahwistic. In response to Preuss, Murphy comments that "Preuss poses the question in the wrong fashion since the fact of the matter is that Israel worshipped Yahweh as the creator."<sup>24</sup>

If, as most scholars had understood, creation theology is inseparable from *wisdom theology*, thus making wisdom and Yahwism related via the concept of creation theology, then the question needs to be addressed is what is *creation theology*? And how does it relate to *wisdom theology*, granted that *wisdom theology* is definable? Interestingly, as Crenshaw observed, "Astonishingly, to this day no one has devoted a full scale essay to this problem despite the constant refrain in scholarly works that wisdom thought and creation theology are inseparably bound together."<sup>25</sup> Neither had any one attempted to delineate the content of wisdom theology. Since then, there have been several studies investigating creation theology as it relates to wisdom thought.

The following will investigate what creation theology is, particularly

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title on Wisdom and Creation, who not only has identified four earlier major organizing principles: anthropology, cosmology, theodicy, and the dialectic of anthropology and cosmology, for approaching wisdom theology, but has also made a remarkable attempt to delineate the theologies of the wisdom books (Proverbs, Job, Qoheleth, Ben Sira, Wisdom of Solomon) under the conviction that "creation is truly at the 'center' of wisdom theology, meaning that creation integrates all other dimensions of God-talk as well as anthropology, community, thics, epistemology (both reason and revelation), and society." (35)

<sup>23</sup>H.-D. Preuss, "Erwägungen zum theologischen Ort alttestamentlicher Weisheitsliteratur," *EvT* 30 (1970), 393-417; *idem*, "Das Gottes bild der älteren Weisheit Israels," *VTSup* 23 (1972), 117-45; *idem*, "Alttestamentliche Weisheit in christlicher Theologie," in *Questions Disputées d'Ancien Testament*, ed. C. Brekelmans, BETL 33; Louvain: 1974), 165-81; cf. G. Mendenhall, "The Shady Side of Wisdom: The Date and Purpose of Genesis 3," in *A Light Unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob M. Myers*, eds. H.N. Bream, *et al.* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1974), 319-34 (324), also argues along this line, "With Solomon's charisma of wisdom, received at the old Gibeonite high place, almost certainly in connection with a pagan incubation ritual, the old pagan tradition of some gods as the source of royal or other wisdom was reintroduced into Palestinian politics. And this had nothing to do with the Yahwistic tradition, while the gods as the donors of technical wisdom goes back at least to old Sumerian myth."

<sup>24</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Yahwism," 117-18 (123); *idem*, "Hebrew Wisdom," *JAOS* 101 (1981), 21-34 (27).

<sup>25</sup>J.L. Crenshaw, "Prolegomenon," in *SA/W*, 1-45 (26).

in relation to wisdom thought, since the coined phrase "wisdom theology is creation theology" has gained popular acceptance. Its validity or legitimacy for understanding the wisdom corpus of the Hebrew Bible, particularly the book of Qoheleth will also be assessed.

### B. WHAT IS CREATION THEOLOGY?

Although Zimmerli coined the phrase "wisdom theology is creation theology," he never seems to have justified it by demonstrating the role of creation in wisdom thought.<sup>26</sup> Crenshaw correctly commented, "Any attempt to provide such an analysis of creation theology within the framework of wisdom needs to clarify the role of creation in the total thought of Israel before going on to demonstrate the distinctiveness of the function of creation theology in wisdom literature."

Crenshaw makes two observations, after surveying various scholarly opinions on the subject of creation theology: 1) "Creation cannot be divorced from the concept of chaos (H. Gunkel);" and 2) "Creation is not a primary datum of Israel's faith, but plays a subservient role to redemption (von Rad)."<sup>27</sup>

Schmid, however, rejects von Rad's view that creation is secondary in Old Testament theology, and argues that "the doctrine of creation, namely, the belief that God has created and is sustaining the order of the world in all its complexities, is not a peripheral theme of biblical theology but is plainly the fundamental theme."<sup>28</sup> He based his analysis on the concept of myth in creation in Israel's ancient Near Eastern neighbours and sees connections between *creation, order* and *justice*.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>H.-J. Hermisson thinks Zimmerli only understands his own statement from a negative point of view, and Hermisson attempts a positive appreciation of the statement in "Observations on the Creation Theology in Wisdom," 44.

<sup>27</sup>J.L. Crenshaw, "Prolegomenon," 26-27.

<sup>28</sup>H.H. Schmid, *op. cit.*, 111.

<sup>29</sup>H.H. Schmid, *op. cit.*, 104-105, states that "In short, ancient Near Eastern cosmic, political, and social order find their unity under the concept of 'creation' ... law (in the legal realm), nature (famine, drought) and politics (treat of the enemy) are only aspects of one comprehensive order of creation."



Taking his first observation, the concept of chaos, seriously, Crenshaw proposes three distinct points concerning creation and wisdom.<sup>30</sup>

1) the threat of chaos in the cosmic, political, and social realms evokes a response in terms of creation theology; 2) in wisdom thought, creation functions primarily as defence of divine justice; and 3) the centrality of the question of God's integrity in Israelite literature places creation theology at the center of the theological enterprise.

It is worth noting that in Crenshaw's exemplification of the second point, only Job, Proverbs and Ben Sirach are found appropriate, whereas Qoheleth is the major example for the first point.<sup>31</sup>

Although scholars generally understand biblical wisdom as a search for *order*, Murphy argues against it by suggesting<sup>32</sup>,

... As I see it, wisdom's alleged search for order is our modern reconstruction. It asks a question never raised by Israel: On what conviction is your wisdom based? Answer: on the order of the universe. Such an answer seems logical and probably correct; but Israel never asked it, nor consciously assumed the answer that we give to it. Secondly, the emphasis on order seems to me to be induced by an overreliance upon the parallelism between Egyptian Maat and Hebrew *הַקְּבֹדָה*.

But Murphy is not consistent in his view because *order* becomes a major theme in his formulation of "Wisdom - Theses and Hypotheses."<sup>33</sup> Equally ineffective is his view of wisdom as a "shared approach to reality" among the Israelite and the ancient Near Eastern people. In his 1984 presidential address, after criticizing the concept of creation and wisdom as articulated by von Rad, Westermann and Zimmerli as "mirror images" and accusing them of housing creation in an "insecure home",<sup>34</sup> Murphy proposes a two-fold concept of creation: "1) Creation as *beginnings*, and 2) Creation as the arena of human experience where people lived out their lives."<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup>J.L. Crenshaw, "Prolegomenon," 27.

<sup>31</sup>J.L. Crenshaw, "Prolegomenon," 26-35

<sup>32</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom-Theses and Hypotheses," 41, n. 4.

<sup>33</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom-Theses and Hypotheses," 35-36, "Biblical wisdom issues from the effort to discover order in human life."

<sup>34</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Creation," 4.

<sup>35</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Creation," 5ff.

Approaching the issue of creation theology differently, Anderson<sup>36</sup> argues for five theological dimensions of biblical creation faith, based on the function and role of mythopoeic language: 1) Creation of a People, 2) Creation and Order, 3) Creation and Creaturely Dependence, 4) Creation as Origination, and 5) Creation and New Creation. According to Anderson, not all of the five dimensions need be present at one time or in one text. It is one's task to understand how each is received in a particular circle or stream of tradition and to perceive how they are related in the Old Testament. It appears that Anderson's five theological dimensions of biblical creation faith follow closely the path of salvation history.

Another line of thought on creation theology is found in Hermisson's recent article, where he makes several observations based on Proverbs 10-29, the Wisdom Psalm 104, Psalm 89 and Job 38-41. He observes that<sup>37</sup>

... 1) Creation is the basis not only of regularity, but of a meaningful and satisfactory order of events in the world, a purposefulness of created beings and things, 2) the image of Yahweh's creative activity as the foundation of the orders of the world: meaningful and rational orders, and also at the borderline of cognition, a knowing which itself was created by Yahweh and thus properly associates with the orders and function, and 3) Creation did not only happen at the beginning of the world, but takes place continuously; therefore, the orders have not become rigid, but necessarily remain flexible.

For some unclear reasons, he does not include any passage from Qoheleth in his attempt to formulate a creation theology.

Attempting to distinguish *sacred* and *profane* wisdom, McKane and Scott argue that the old proverbs in the Old Testament were originally secular and were later transformed by the Yahwist into more religiously flavoured wisdom sayings.<sup>38</sup> This concept falls into the extreme of superimposing Yahwism onto wisdom thought, thus inviting the criticism

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<sup>36</sup>B.W. Anderson, "Introduction: Mythopoeic and Theological Dimensions of Biblical Creation Faith," in *COT*, 1-24.

<sup>37</sup>H.-J. Hermisson, "Observations on the Creation Theology in Wisdom," 46-47.

<sup>38</sup>William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970); R.B.Y. Scott, "Wise and Foolish, Righteous and Wicked," in *Studies in the Religion of Ancient Israel* (VTSup 23; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972), 146-65 (164), "McKane's distinction between sayings with or without religious content and terminology is justified, but can be carried further."

from Murphy that "a distinction between religious and secular is not applicable to Old Testament wisdom teaching,"<sup>39</sup> though "one cannot deny that the Israelite distinguished between the two but they are not separated as independent areas. The world, as the creation of God, is the arena of his activity and of human life."<sup>40</sup>

Jenks<sup>41</sup> proposes three basic theological presuppositions or principles that undergird even the oldest section of Proverbs, chapters 10-29:

- 1) That this is an orderly world, ruled by Yahweh, its wise creator; 2) That knowledge of this order is possible to the person who opens himself to wisdom, and 3) that the wise man who thus aligns himself with God's order will experience good things, while the fool will suffer for his folly.

Without going into detail, it is obvious to any reader that Qoheleth would disagree with all three of Jenks' theological presuppositions.

Another attempt to associate Qoheleth's theological thought with creation is that of Müller<sup>42</sup> who attempts to depict the thought structure (*Denkstruktur*) of Qoheleth by means of a phenomenological model and concludes that

The thought of Qoheleth is shaped by the structure of a *creator* religion; the weakness of his religious outlook is that the world order established by the heavenly creator falls victim to a value vacuum. The scepticism of Qoheleth matches this pessimistic ambience of his religion; it is so radical in its grounding in the ways of God that it ultimately prevents man from passing any judgment upon the creator and his world, and so opens the way to a theologically motivated joy in living. The background to Qoheleth in the history of thought is Palestinian

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<sup>39</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom-Theses and Hypotheses," 40; cf. F.M. Wilson, "Sacred and Profane? The Yahwistic Redaction of Proverbs Reconsidered," in *The Listening Heart*, eds. K.G. Hoglund, et al. (Sheffield: Journal for the Study Old Testament Press, 1987), 313-34.

<sup>40</sup>R.E. Murphy, *op. cit.*, 40-41, n. 3. He cites Ps 19; Job 28:24-27; Wis 13:1-19, as examples that manifested various aspects of the divine - even in the most 'worldly' things.

<sup>41</sup>Alan W. Jenks, "Theological Presuppositions of Israel's Wisdom Literature," *HBT* 7 (1985), 43-76 (44).

<sup>42</sup>H.-P. Müller, "Neige der althebräischen 'Weisheit'. Zum Denken Qohäläts," *ZAW* 90 (1978), 238-64. Müller attempts to "(1) die Denk-struktur des 'Predigers Salomo' mit Hilfe eines phänomenologischen Modells nachzeichnen, das auf ihn m. W. noch nicht angewendet worden ist, sie suchen (2) die geistesgeschichtlichen und zugleich politisch-sozialen Bedingungen zu prüfen, die Ausprägung dieser Denkstruktur bei Qohälät erklärbar machen; schließlich nennen sie (3) einige Motive, die die theologische Bedeutung der althebräischen Weisheit, wo sie blüht und wo sie zur Neige geht, für heutiges Verstehen erhellen könnten" (238).

Hellenism of the third century B.C. This allowed Egyptian and Mesopotamian motifs which were consistent with the spirit of the age to grow together into a unity. Its social location is to be found in a displaced Upper Class which was deprived of its power by the Diadochi and their collaborators.

It is doubtful that Qoheleth would be aroused by a theological motivation to enjoy life if he is a sceptic and his religion pessimistic. It is also difficult to perceive how Qoheleth could have believed in a world order established by the heavenly creator on the one hand, and believed such an establishment has fallen victim to a value vacuum on the other hand. Furthermore, it is most unlikely that Qoheleth would "prevent man from passing any judgment upon the creator and his world," for he does it himself in his concept of הַקָּל (absurdity). Müller does not see much of Yahwism in Qoheleth's thought, although he labels Qoheleth's theology as a *creator* or *originator* religion.

In view of the diversity, complexity and uncertainty of various scholarly understandings of creation theology, it is difficult, though may be appropriate, at this juncture to sum up what have been said about creation theology. The following is a collection of what some scholars have understood to be creation theology, their legitimacy and relevancy as well as appropriateness to Qoheleth's theological thought will be assessed accordingly.

1) Creation as *beginnings* (Murphy), 2) Creation and chaos; "the threat of chaos in the cosmic, political, and social realms evokes a response in terms of creation theology" (Crenshaw). 3) Creation, order, justice; "In short, ancient Near Eastern cosmic, political and social order find their unity under the concept of *creation* (Schmid); "this is an orderly world, ruled by Yahweh, its wise creator" (Jenks); "creation functions primarily as defence of divine justice" (Crenshaw); "the basis not only of regularity, but of a meaningful and satisfactory order of events in the world, a purposefulness of created beings and things" (Hermisson), and 4) "creation activity of God deals with the creation of man with human situations, or matters within man's sphere of activity" (Hermisson), thus creation may be understood "as the arena of human experience where people live out their lives" (Murphy).

### C. CREATION THEOLOGY AND QOHELETH'S THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT

Since his 1964 article, Zimmerli has continued to recognize wisdom as a *legitimate* element in Israel's theology. Perhaps he has realized the difficulty of applying his concept of creation theology and wisdom theology to Qoheleth and Job and urges the need for weighing the importance of Job and Ecclesiastes in the total view of wisdom.<sup>43</sup> Taking Zimmerli's point seriously, it remains difficult, if not impossible, for one to construe a consistent and total view of wisdom theology within the concept of creation theology, largely due to the apparent scepticism in Qoheleth, and perhaps Job. Hermisson, however, thinks that the difficulty is only an apparent smokescreen when he remarks that "anyone who sets out systematically to look for the theology of creation in the *proper* wisdom writings will arrive at a result which is disappointing at *first*."<sup>44</sup> He asserts that "creation is the basis of a meaningful and satisfactory order of events in the world, a purposefulness of created beings and things." But when he comes to Qoheleth, Hermisson confesses the incompatibility of such a concept of creation with Qoheleth, "for Ecclesiastes ... not all wisdom managed to resolve the perplexity over the good order and the incomprehensibility of the world and the aloofness of the creator God."<sup>45</sup> He also plainly admits that "[*creation*] *theology* is hardly presentable in the form of individual proverbs; therefore if only on the ground of their conformity to the literary type, one must not expect too much of the older collections of Proverbs, but must look for other texts."<sup>46</sup> It is not impossible that this comment of Hermisson also implies that Qoheleth does not conform to the convention of creation theology. Taking this hint as a departure, we will examine the elements of creation theology and assess its validity in Qoheleth's theological thought.

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<sup>43</sup>W. Zimmerli, "Erwägungen zur Gestalt einer alttestamentlichen Theologie," in *Studien zur alttestamentlichen Theologie und Prophetie: Gesammelte Aufsätze II* (Theologische Bücherei 51; Munich: Kaiser, 1974), 27-54 (45-7); cf. R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Yahism," 125, n. 4.

<sup>44</sup>H.-J. Hermisson, "Observations on the Creation Theology in Wisdom," 43.

<sup>45</sup>H.-J. Hermisson, "Observations on the Creation Theology in Wisdom," 54.

<sup>46</sup>H.-J. Hermisson, "Observations on the Creation Theology in Wisdom," 44.

### 1. Creation as *Beginning*

Although creation as the *story* or *doctrine* of *beginnings* is one of Murphy's two proposed elements for creation theology, he states that "the contribution of wisdom on this score has been ambiguous because of the uncertainty of the translation of חָכָם (craftsman or nursling?) in Prov 8:30."<sup>47</sup> Despite Murphy's assigning a central role to this text in his articulation of creation as *beginning*, it is not easy to see why he does so, especially when, following von Rad,<sup>48</sup> he perceives in Prov. 8:22-31 a divine origin for *lady Wisdom*, identifying her as the *Lord*.

Anderson is more explicit in his discussion of creation under the theological dimension of *Creation and Originality*. Situating himself on the priestly creation story and Job 38, he argues that "the story speaks of a new beginning in God's purpose, that 1) a cosmic order that is without blemish and is harmonious in all its parts, and 2) it portrays the radical dependence of the cosmic order upon the transcendent Creator."<sup>49</sup>

What is Qoheleth's response to the above concept of creation as beginning? To be sure, Qoheleth has never doubted it, in fact he even affirms the concept of *creation as the beginning* which stresses that God is the creator who brings the world into existence (Qoh 1:4-7; 3:11; cf. 12:1). But he is even more concerned with the purpose and meaning of human activity within such a created world, of which he either concludes with the rhetorical question "who knows?" Expecting a negative answer (Qoh 2:19; 3:21; 6:12; 8:1) or cannot find out (Qoh 3:11; 7:14,24,27-29; 8:17). Qoheleth's understanding of creation in terms of *order*, as described by Anderson, is limited only to the order of the cosmic events; he is never sure of the human events. This is contrary to the ancient Near Eastern view of creation and order which saw a direct relation between cosmic order and social-ethical order, which will be discussed later.

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<sup>47</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Creation," 5.

<sup>48</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Creation," 9, but Murphy thinks von Rad has not gone far enough just by identifying wisdom with 'order'. He draws on von Rad's interpretation of Prov 3:19 that "God established the earth into wisdom, not by wisdom," and goes on "to identify the Lady Wisdom with the Lord, as indicated by her very origins and her authority."

<sup>49</sup>B.W. Anderson, *op. cit.*, 15.

## 2. Creation and Chaos

The understanding of creation theology in terms of order and chaos came about largely as the result of mythological interpretation of the creation story. The struggle between the creator and chaos, good and evil, light and darkness, the oppressor and the saviour are well known in ancient Near Eastern mythologies. Without going into the whole arena of the battle motif, the sea monster and the struggle with chaos motif in ancient Near Eastern myths, one wonders whether Qoheleth needs any of these mythologies in his reflection of daily human experience? In his Poem of Time (3:1-8), there are opposite pairs, but his presupposition is far from the battle motif between the creator and chaos. Neither does he, in his description of the cycle of activity (1:4-11), especially when he describes the sea (1:7), have in mind the battle between Ba`lu and the sea god, Yammu, of the Ugaritic myth. Neither do the struggles between the rich and the poor, the wise and the fool, the strong and the weak, the righteous and the wicked, etc., exemplify the struggles between chaos and order. They merely describe Qoheleth's observations of the various facets of daily human experience. They hardly reflect any battle motif between order and chaos.

However, Crenshaw sees the intrusion of chaos in Qoh 7:29, where he suggests that "The meaning of the verse is clear in spite of these difficulties (הַשְּׁבוּן, 7:29; הַשְּׁבוּן, 7:25,27). It asserts that humankind alone is responsible for the corruption of the order of the created world."<sup>50</sup> One wonders whether Crenshaw reads too much of the order and chaos motif into Qoheleth. Nowhere in Qoh 7:29 is humanity identified with the force of chaos in creation. Qoheleth merely asserts that humankind have chosen to pursue their own (corrupted) way despite the intention of the creator to create them *upright*. Qoheleth, in his concept of הַבֵּל, promotes the idea that absurdity abounds in human activity. He never implies that humankind's non-*uprightness* is the cause of the absurdity in human activity. Despite the fact, as recognized by Qoheleth, that God has made everything *beautiful* (יָפֵה, 3:11), human activity is haunted by absurdity. Certainly the יָפֵה in 3:11 does not grow out of a victory battle of any kind. If there is any sense of chaos in Qoheleth, it is to be sought

<sup>50</sup>J.L. Crenshaw, "Prolegomenon," 28.

in his concept of הָבֵל (i.e. 3:16; 6:2; 7:15; 8:10,14) and his exposition on the idea of irregularity (9:11; 10:6-9; 11:1,4). But even in them, chaos is only perceived from the human's point of view because the occasions where chaos - absurdity and irregularity - occurs are in the hands of God (יְהוָה, 3:11; 9:11,12) and God is never perceived by Qoheleth as chaos. Qoheleth's view of the absolute sovereign creator who gives and takes is never envisaged in the battle motif between chaos and order in ancient Near Eastern mythologies.

### 3. Creation, Order, Justice

The concept of order in creation is forcefully argued by Schmid,<sup>51</sup> on the basis of his studies of ancient Near Eastern mythological texts and Egyptian wisdom literature. Drawing implications from the myth of creation and its relation to the New Year's Festival, Schmid argues a close relationship between creation and order.

First, he argues that in all ancient Near Eastern nations, "creation faith did not deal only, indeed not even primarily, with the origin of the world. Rather, it was concerned above all with the present world and the natural environment of humanity now."

Secondly, he argues that "the order established through creation and newly constituted every year is not only the renewal of nature; it is just as much the order of the state." This he claims to be found in the motif of the battle against chaos which belongs to creation typology. He argues that<sup>52</sup>

... In Mesopotamia, Ugarit, and Israel the *Chaoskampf* appears not only in cosmological contexts but just as frequently - and this was fundamentally true right from the first - in political contexts. The repulsion and destruction of the enemy, and thereby the maintenance of political order, always constitute one of the major dimensions of the battle against chaos. The enemy are none other than a manifestation of chaos which must be driven back.

Thirdly, he argues from the Code of Hammurabi, especially the prologue, and the Babylonian *Enuma elish*, that "legal order belongs to

<sup>51</sup>H.H. Schmid, "Creation, Righteousness, and Salvation," in *COT*, 103-5.

<sup>52</sup>H.H. Schmid, "Creation, Righteousness, and Salvation," in *COT*, 104.



the order of creation."

Thus he concludes that "ancient Near Eastern cosmic, political, and social order find their unity under the concept of *creation*." This, he explains<sup>53</sup>

... why in the whole ancient Near East, including Israel, an offence in the legal realm obviously has effects in the realm of nature (drought, famine) or in the political sphere (threat of the enemy). Law, nature, and politics are only aspects of one comprehensive order of creation.

With reference to wisdom and creation, Schmid sees "a close connection between cosmic and social-ethical order," especially in the realm of ancient Near Eastern wisdom. To him, "the realization of the ethical-social dimension in wisdom is nothing other than the realization of the original order of creation." This concept, Schmid and others believe, "was given conceptual expression in ancient Egypt, where Maat, the concept for the order of creation, is at once the central concept in both legal literature and wisdom literature."<sup>54</sup>

This concept of Schmid is challenged, not only by Murphy's statement, as pointed out earlier, "wisdom's alleged search for order is our modern reconstruction,"<sup>55</sup> but also finds incompatibility in Qoheleth's theological thought. Although in the formal sense of the book, Qoheleth appears to be searching for an order, in substance, Qoheleth actually seeks to argue through his observation and experience concerning the activity of humankind who live in a world of absurdity (הֶבֶל), where act and consequence has little relationship. Qoheleth's aim is never in search of a cosmic order, although he observed the fact that the natural world exists according to its own course (1:4-7). It is doubtful whether Qoheleth entertains Schmid's idea that "an offence in the legal realm has effects in

<sup>53</sup>H.H. Schmid, "Creation, Righteousness, and Salvation," in *COT*, 105.

<sup>54</sup>On this score, H.H. Schmid, "Creation, Righteousness, and Salvation," in *COT*, 115, n. 8, draws support from Otto Eissfeldt, *Prolegomena zur Frage der Gesetzgebung und Rechts-sprechung in Ägypten*, 150, "The central concept, around which all the powers of government are oriented and which in the juridical sense may be regarded as the most general element of law, is *Maat*"; H. Brunner, *Die Weisheitsliteratur*, 93, "The central concept of wisdom teaching is that of *Maat*, 'law', 'justice', 'the primal power'; and S. Morenz, *Ägyptische Religion*, 120, " ... the Egyptian ethic and its innermost aspect is Maat."

<sup>55</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom-Theses and Hypotheses," 41, n. 4; "Wisdom and Yahism," 120ff.

the realms of nature (draught, famine) or in the political sphere (threat of the enemy)." Neither does Qoheleth perceive the world in Jenks' terms: "this is an orderly world, ruled by Yahweh, its wise creator," or as Hermisson understands it, "creation is the basis not only of regularity, but of a meaningful and satisfactory order of events in the world, a purposefulness of created beings and things." It would be an affront to Qoheleth's wisdom, if creation is thought to have been perceived by him as "primarily a defence of divine justice," to use Crenshaw's words.

Concerning the legal and socio-ethical dimensions of order in creation, no doubt social justice has been a major theme in ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature as well as in the Old Testament.<sup>56</sup> Although social injustice, i.e. political oppression (4:1), the reward of the wicked, the suffering of the righteous (3:16; 5:7), is observed as a fact of life by Qoheleth, neither he nor God ever try to make right what is crooked or to establish the correlations between *right* and *crooked* (1:15; 7:13). Instead, he simply acknowledges their existence and unchangeability since the authority is with God whose activity is unknown to humankind (8:17). Social injustice is a phenomenon that is inscrutable, unpredictable and beyond human ability to mutate. The concerns of Qoheleth are not with the origins of evil, the cause and effect of the existence of social injustice (though he mentions it in passing in 8:11) or the doctrine of retribution. Rather he is concerned with the art of survival (7:16-18; 8:12-13) in a world where injustice abounds and act has little relation to consequence. He is even more concerned with the formulation of one's course in life - to enjoy life while opportunity exists - knowing and accepting that the existence of injustice and death comes upon both righteous and wicked indiscriminately. In fact, Qoheleth's ultimate search for meaning in life is the *יתרון* of existence. Thus, Schimd's understanding of social justice and creation seems incompatible with Qoheleth's theological thought.

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<sup>56</sup>Léon Epsztein, *Social Justice in the Ancient Near East and the People of the Bible*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1986), 140, is a recent attempt to survey the subject and concludes "the quest for social justice, which elsewhere came sharply to a halt (Mesopotamia, cf. T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 1976) or suffered a long eclipse (Egypt), was to be pursued by the people of the Bible almost without interruption down to our own days."

#### 4. *Creation as the arena of human activity*

The concept of creation as the arena of human activity where people live out their lives is proposed by Murphy as part of his two-fold concept of creation. He understands "creation to be the whole range of existing things, from humans to ants, not excluding the abyss and Leviathan. This is the world open to human experience." Hermisson sees the older proverbs promote a similar idea, that the "creation activity of God deals with the creation of man, with human situations, or matters within man's sphere of activity." While defining creation in terms of the *arena* or *sphere* of human activity is broad enough to include practically "everything under the sun", it runs the danger of being too vague and ineffective as a meaningfully and useful concept. No doubt, Qoheleth is aware of the sphere of human existence and activity, as reflected in the prologue (1:4-7) where he describes the continuous active world of natural phenomena within which humans exist and act. But if that is creation theology, it would be saying nothing more than the obvious (perhaps, creation theology is the statement of the obvious). Surely Qoheleth's theological thought is more profound than merely identifying the sphere of human experience, which he does only in the prologue. He is more fascinated by what is happening within the arena of human activity. Understanding creation as "continuous and ongoing, providing the fundamental parameters within which humans live and die," as Murphy<sup>57</sup> and Hermisson<sup>58</sup> did, is only peripheral to Qoheleth's thought. To discover whether anything endures within the sphere where "one generation goes and one generation comes" is one of his tasks and his firm conclusion is that nothing endures forever; no enduring remembrance, no enduring profit (Qoh 1:3-11, 14).

#### 5. *Conclusion*

Creation theology, as conceived by various scholars to be the theology of Wisdom, both with its complexity, variety and sophistication, has fallen short of being the centre of the theological thought of Qoheleth. It is surprising to realize how little attention has been paid to the wisdom

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<sup>57</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Creation," 6.

<sup>58</sup>H.-J. Hermisson, "Observations on the Creation Theology in Wisdom," 47.

of Qoheleth in the course of formulating wisdom theology. Zimmerli's concern still is clear and loud. What constitutes the heart of wisdom theology will remain an open question until a comprehensive theological framework of the wisdom corpus (Job, Proverbs, Qoheleth, Ben Sira, Wisdom of Solomon) is provided. Wilson rightly comments that "Whatever the abstract possibilities of relating wisdom to creation, whatever the religious function of wisdom in other ancient Near Eastern cultures, the theology of wisdom in Israel must be understood in terms of the elaborations of this theology in Israel's own wisdom literature."<sup>59</sup>

Although being an ancient sage, and perhaps being aware of the wisdom of his neighbour, Qoheleth's wisdom hardly conforms to the Egyptian Maat or the order and chaos motif. He observed, experienced and acknowledged the existence of the cosmic and social events in his world. He acknowledged אֱלֹהִים as the wise Creator (cf. Qoh 12:1) who has made everything beautiful in its own time, yet who is hidden from human wisdom (3:11; 7:14; 8:17; 11:5). Creation is something Qoheleth accepts as fact, but it is marginal to his theological thought structure. As observed by Vriezen, "He reasons from personal experience and on that basis all that he can retain is belief in the Creator ... Even so we should not simply call him a sceptic."<sup>60</sup> Qoheleth's theological thought has prompted Vriezen to remark further that "No wonder, then, that the history of the canon shows that Ecclesiastes was always considered a *border-line* case as regards canonicity."<sup>61</sup>

Qoheleth's concern is to understand the world of reality and to determine what is the best course for him and humankind within the realities of life. In the process of understanding the reality of the world of human activity by means of observation, experiment, reflection and meditation, he formulated a theological framework. If Vriezen's remark is correct, and Qoheleth is not a sceptic, why then is Qoheleth "considered a *border-line* case as regards canonicity?" Perhaps, this has nothing to do with his scepticism. But in either case, the nature of Qoheleth's theology

<sup>59</sup>F.M. Wilson, "Sacred and Profane? The Yahwistic Redaction of Proverbs Reconsidered," in *The Listening Heart*, 314-34 (329).

<sup>60</sup>Th.C. Vriezen, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (London: Lutterworth, 1967), 270.

<sup>61</sup>Th.C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology*, 2nd ed. (Massachusetts: Charles T. Branford Co., 1970), 84.

would be a crucial factor. What is Qoheleth's theological perspective, anyway? Would his theology label him a Yahwist? anti-Yahwist? Or *middle-of-the-road*? Where does he stand theologically in Israel's theology?

#### D. QOHELETH'S THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

In order to determine the position of Qoheleth's theological thought within Israel's theology, one needs to delineate his theological perspectives. The following will first assess the theological perspectives of Qoheleth with a view to understanding whether he is a Yahwist or an anti-Yahwist or somewhere in between. Having established that the theology of Qoheleth is neither an authentic Yahwistic nor anti-Yahwistic theology, I will attempt to propose an alternative statement of his theological position which hopefully would truly represent his theology as one that does not contain a polemic against Yahwism in its broadest sense, but one that is faithful to the daily experience of most Israelites.

##### 1. His Awareness of Yahwism

Despite the alleged scepticism and pessimism in Qoheleth's theological thought, there is evidence that possibly reflects his awareness of the Yahwism of his day, as can be seen in his awareness of the book of Genesis and the Mosaic Law code.

##### a. His Awareness of Genesis

In his observations of cosmic and social-ethical events, Qoheleth seems aware of Genesis 1-11. In fact, Hertzberg has suggested that Qoheleth might have had the book of Genesis in front of him when he composed the book.<sup>62</sup> Whether Qoheleth follows Genesis indiscriminately or with other intentions in mind needs to be studied. However, it is clear that he accepts the fact that God (אלהים) has created the world and

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<sup>62</sup>H.W. Hertzberg, *Der Prediger* (KAT 17; Gütersloh Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1963), 230, "das Buch Qoh ist geschrieben mit Gn 1-4 vor den Augen seines Verfassers; die Lebensanschauung Qoh's ist an der Schöpfungsgeschichte gebildet."

humankind should fear him (3:11; 12:1).

(1) *Qoheleth and Genesis 1-3*

The הָבֵל theme in Qoheleth has been regarded as one of the crucial themes in the theological thought structure of Qoheleth. If one reads the book with Genesis 1-3 in mind, the הָבֵל theme can be seen as Qoheleth's doubt concerning God's purpose in creation: especially in Gen 1:2f where God creates a "good" (טוֹב) world out of the "formless" (תְּהוֹ) and "void" (בְּהוֹ) cosmos. This is not the same as saying that Qoheleth does not believe God has a purpose. Far from it, Qoheleth never questions God's purpose in creation (cf. 3:11; 7:14, 29a); rather, he is doubtful if anyone can know and find out the purpose and meaning of it, let alone knowing how God works. Hiddenness is the theme of God's activity in Qoheleth's thought. Despite his doubtfulness, it is difficult to establish that Qoheleth is equating the *void* (בְּהוֹ) and *formless* (תְּהוֹ) with the *absurd* (הַקְּבֵל); he will not go as far as to say that God should not have created the cosmos out of the originally *void* and *formless* situation (Gen 1:2). Neither is he, in his concept of absurdity, suggesting any relationship with mythology concerning the struggle between God the Creator and the opposing forces which continues to this day. Although Qoheleth never doubts God's omniscience and omnipotence, he still falls short of being a pious Yahwist<sup>63</sup> who accepts the knowability of God's purpose in creation, perhaps through the law and salvation events. By denying the knowability of God, Qoheleth stands at a distance from the camp of Yahwism.

(2) *Qoh 1:3-11; 3:1-11; 7:13 and Gen 8:20-22*

In observing the circularity of the natural order and marvelling at the beauty of nature (1:4-7; 3:11) within which humans conduct their activities, Qoheleth could have Genesis 1 and 8:21f. in mind, "And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odour, the Lord said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man ... While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day

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<sup>63</sup>R.N. Whybray, "Conservatisme et radicalisme dans Qohelet," in *Sagesse et Religion, Colloque de Strasbourg* (October 1976) (Presses Universitaires de France, 1979), 65-81 (81), has a similar conclusion, "c'est le point de vue d'un juif de l'époque pour qui ni l'introversion des super-pieux ni les fantaisies eschatologiques de l'esprit apocalyptique ne peuvent résoudre les problèmes de la vie quotidienne. Mais ce point de vue n'est ni une hérésie ni un rejet des croyances juives en faveur d'une philosophie étrangère."

and night, shall not cease." As in Genesis 1 and 8, Qoheleth undoubtedly perceives order in nature as created by God. However, instead of affirming the end of the cursing, as promised by God after the flood, and the beginning of a new era of blessings, as the Yahwist might have seen it, Qoheleth states that "what has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done" (1:9); history is capable of repeating itself with little mutation. However, that is not to say that Qoheleth understands nature as a "Soulless mechanism which is regardless of human woes and human wishes and is without any discernable purpose,"<sup>64</sup> as Eichrodt did. Besides affirming the hiddenness of God's activity in creation (3:11; 8:17a), Qoheleth makes no attempt to develop a theology of creation.

After the Poem on Natural Phenomena (Qoh 1:4-7) and Poem on Time (Qoh 3:1-8), although Qoheleth asserts that "God has made everything beautiful in its time" (3:11a), a sense of the burdensome in creation is being injected through his idea of the hiddenness of God's activity and the reality of the absurd in human activity. It is not certain if the curse on Adam and Eve, if not on humanity (Gen 3:14-19), has any influence on Qoheleth's thought.

Those pairs of opposites in Qoh 3:1-8 reflect Qoheleth's honesty in his observation of the realities of life, rather than explaining away those undesirable occasions in life based on the principle of rewards and punishments, or suppressing them under the central theme of the redemptive acts of God in Yahwism. This seems to demonstrate the difficulty of subsuming Qoheleth's thought under that of Yahwism.

(3) *The Curse Gen 3:17-19; Qoh 5:14-16; 7:29; 8:11; 9:3; cf. 2:26b*

A. B. Caneday recently purports to have understood Qoheleth's theological presupposition from the point of view of the curse under which creation lies:

The difficulty of interpreting this book is proportionally related to one's own readiness to adopt Qoheleth's presupposition - that everything about this world is marred by the tyranny of the curse which the Lord God placed upon all creation.

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<sup>64</sup>W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament, II*, 161; cf. C.C. Forman, "Koheleth's Use of Genesis," *JSS* 5 (1960), 256-63 (257)

If one fails to recognize that this is a foundational presupposition from which Ecclesiastes operates, then one will fail to comprehend the message of the book, and bewilderment will continue.<sup>65</sup>

It may be true that Qoheleth affirms the existence of evil in daily human activity (Qoh 7:20, 29: 8:11; 9:3), but he seldom goes into a serious search for the origins of evil. His affirmation of the existence of evil comes largely as a result of his observation of human activity, and not through philosophical reasoning or mythologizing; his epistemology is unique in this sense.

His belief that upon death humankind who are made of dust shall return to dust (Qoh 12:7; 3:20), as in Gen 2:7 and 3:19, has prompted scholars to compare Gen 3:17-19 with Qoh 5:14-16; 7:29; 8:11; 9:3, and argue for a theology of *original sin* in operation within Qoheleth's theological presupposition. One wonders if that is a Christian reading of the book? Although Qoheleth may have been aware of the Yahwist's concept of curse and punishment in Gen. 3:14-19, there is no reason to read in 7:29, "God has made humankind upright, but they have sought out many devices," the doctrine of *original sin*. Neither is that the reason for Qoheleth to emphasize the subject of human "toil" (עָמַל) (Qoh 1:2; cf. Gen 3:17 "in toil" בְּעֵצְבוֹן ). In fact, עָמַל in Qoheleth often means "activity", except in a few instance where "hard labouring" as "toil" is perceived (Qoh 4:8). There need not be any correlation between Qoheleth's emphasis on the subject of human toil and humans' return to dust, and the cause and cost of sin as perceived by the Yahwist in Gen 3:14-19. If in fact Qoheleth does mention the curse of sin, it is to be found in 2:26b where the sinners are *cursed* to toil without enjoying the fruits of their toiling. But this is different from the *curse* of Genesis where the sinners are cursed to toil in order to survive on the fruits of their toil. In this case, it seems beyond Qoheleth's ken to know the origins of human toil. Qoheleth has not shown keen interest in adapting the Yahwist's theology of humankind as beings created in God's wisdom, neither has he set out deliberately to oppose the Yahwist. Maybe Qoheleth does not even concern himself with the Yahwistic or any theology of sin?

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<sup>65</sup>Ardel B. Caneday, "Qohleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?" *Grace Theological Journal* 7 (1986), 21-56 (21).



### *b. His Awareness of the Mosaic Law Code*

The Mosaic dogma of reward and retribution as another facet of Yahwism has been thought by some to be Qoheleth's theological presupposition. His recognition of the sovereignty and freedom of God to give and take has been seen as an defence of authentic Yahwism. But if one examines more closely Qoheleth's sayings concerning reward and retribution, act and consequence, one will find that though the dogma may be what Qoheleth wishes to see implemented, he finds no enforcement of the dogma by God (Qoh 3:16; 7:15; 8:14). The freedom of God's sovereign act to reward and punish was not seen in a positive light but as an arbitrary act. Although he may be challenging the conventional dogma of retribution, Qoheleth is not in any way trying to introduce another set of rules to govern social ethics or to harmonize the dogma of retribution with his observation. The alleged *golden mean* teaching of Qoheleth in Qoh 7:16-17 is actually a *survival tactic* of Qoheleth; the rule for *staying alive*. In fact Qoheleth prefers being wise and righteous rather than being a fool (Qoh 2:13-14; 7:19).

The closest that Qoheleth comes to the Yahwism of the Mosaic covenant is his emphasis on *fearing God* (יִרָא אֱלֹהִים) (Qoh 3:14; 5:6; 7:18c; 8:12,12; 12:13), but even here, he also demonstrates an independent understanding by employing a formula different from that of Proverbs, *fear Yahweh* (יִרָאֵת יְהוָה) or of traditional Yahwism. Also expressed is his unique combinations of fearing god and staying alive (5:6; 7:18; 8:12,13) and fearing God and keeping his commandment (12:13).<sup>66</sup>

### *2. His Use of Yahwistic Language*

Qoheleth's use of creation *language* or vocabulary is peculiar. Although Hertzberg has suggested that Qoheleth might have the book of Genesis in front of him when he composed the book,<sup>67</sup> Qoheleth's choice of creation language may cast doubt on such idea.

<sup>66</sup>In *The Courage to Doubt* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 193, R. Davidson understands Qoheleth's concept of fearing God as a surrender before the unknown God and such a "thought brings a chill into his [Qoheleth's] sensitive soul."

<sup>67</sup>H.W. Hertzberg, *Der Prediger*, 230, "das Buch Qoh ist geschrieben mit Gn 1-4 vor den Augen seines Verfassers; die Lebensanschauung Qoh's ist an der Schöpfungsgeschichte gebildet."

The use of creation language other than the Priestly and Yahwistic creation terminologies might reveal something about Qoheleth's intention to dissociate his language from that of conventional Yahwism.<sup>68</sup> For example, the normal Priestly and Yahwistic use of *create* (בָּרָא) and *good* (טוֹב) are replaced by *made* (עָשָׂה) and *beauty* (יָפֵה) (Qoh 3:11; cf. Gen 1). The preference for אֱלֹהִים rather than יְהוָה throughout the book is most noticeable, especially in the *fear God* (יִרָא אֱלֹהִים) formula which is different from Proverbs' *fear of Yahweh* (יִרְאֵת יְהוָה).

In his advice for religious life in Qoh. 4:17-5:6, Qoheleth's religious (cultic) language demonstrates his familiarity with the characteristics of worship, i.e. sacrifices and vows in ancient Israel (as well as the ancient Near East). They also reveal that he might have been deliberately leaving out the name of Yahweh in his close quotation from Deut 23:22-24 (Evv 21-23) in Qoh 5:3-5 (Evv 4-6); especially when quoting Deut 23:22a (Ev 21a), "תִּדְרֹךְ נֶדַר לַיהוָה אֲלֶיךָ כִּי-" (When you vow a vow to the lord your God)," in Qoh 5:3a (Ev 4a), "כַּאֲשֶׁר תִּדְרֹךְ לַאֱלֹהִים" (When you vow a vow to God)." His use of other religious language includes, "the house of God" (4:17) and "the holy place" (8:10) where he discusses his observations on the relation between act and consequence.

It is also a characteristic of Qoheleth to assign different meanings to the same word at different context. The rare word חֲשׁוֹבוֹן (devices) in Qoh 7:29 and the ambiguous term עֲלָם in 3:11, together with a handful of other words with multiple meanings, i.e. הֶבֶל (absurd, ephemeral), עֲשָׂה (toil, activity), strongly suggest a play on the different meanings of the words by Qoheleth to achieve ambiguity for its own aims.<sup>69</sup>

### 3. Social Justice and Reality

Social justice has been recognized to be a common theme in ancient

<sup>68</sup>R. Davidson, *op. cit.*, 189ff., reaches a rather similar conclusion by comparing Qoheleth's attitude to the natural world (Qoh 1:5-7) with that of the Psalmists (Pss 8, 136, 104) who praise and marvel at creation.

<sup>69</sup>Ruth Page has formulated an interesting theological framework under the title *Ambiguity and the Presence of God* (London: SCM Press, 1985). With support from Ecclesiastes, she argues that "in an ambiguous world some action is unavoidable and even desirable, and that although it is finite it can be worthwhile" (23f.).

Near Eastern wisdom literature and is deeply rooted in its mythology.<sup>70</sup> Though the Hebrew notion of justice has reference to a specific mode of life lived by Yahweh worshippers as seen in the Mosaic and Prophetic traditions, Qoheleth's concept of justice is neither related to mythology nor framed in the Yahwistic context. His understanding of social justice is formulated through his observations on human activity. He acknowledges what he has observed regarding justice and injustice as mere fact in life's reality. This acknowledgement becomes the necessary data in the formulation of his theological thought, as his approach to reality in daily human experience.

In Qoh 4:1-3, after expressing emotionally his concern for those who are being oppressed, Qoheleth merely goes on to accept the fate of the oppressed and praises those who do not have to learn of social evil. He does not condemn the injustice as the prophets do, neither does he try to make straight what is crooked (Qoh 1:15; 7:13). But his philosophy of life is far from being one of resignation or pessimism. Instead, he urges those who are young to treasure their opportunity to enjoy life all they can; that is a gift of God who has approved it (Qoh 2:24a; 3:12; 3:22a; 5:17-18; 8:15a; 9:7-9; 11:7-12:1).

Although Qoheleth realizes that God is the one who determines who gets what and when, he observes that there is no observable pattern or guideline in God's activity, it is hidden away from humankind (11:5). Seeing no relationship between act and consequence, Qoheleth's notion of justice does not conform to Yahwism in either the Mosaic or prophetic traditions, especially in their concept of reward and retribution. Although he seems to suggest a different ethical approach to life that is based on the principles of fearing God, staying alive (7:16-18; 8:12-13), and enjoying life (11:9), that is not in contradiction with Yahwism nor does it merely follow the *golden mean* principle of Hellenistic thought. By advising one to fear God, stay alive and enjoy life, he is encouraging positive action in human activity despite life's reality in the unjust social world.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>70</sup>Léon Epsztein, "Social Justice," 3-42.

<sup>71</sup>Ruth Page has an interesting thesis in *Ambiguity and the Presence of God*, 24, where she argues that "action is unavoidable and even desirable as response to the exigencies of life in a

#### 4. *The Arbitrariness of God's Activities*

The activity of God, according to Qoheleth, seems arbitrary because it shows no observable pattern or guideline that explains act and consequence. His actions are inscrutable even to faithful Yahwists who claim according to their Yahwism to know God. But in opposing traditional Yahwism Qoheleth is not saying that there is no God or "God is Dead". Instead, he affirms that God is at work (Qoh 3:11; 7:14) and is actively involved, for example, in the giving and taking of wealth (5:19; 6:2) according to God's own will in the arena of human activity (cf. Qoh 2:24-26; 5:18-20; 6:2a).<sup>72</sup> But humankind cannot know or find out how or when God gives and takes (8:17; 11:5). The hiddenness of God expressed in Qoheleth is a far more concrete fact than the temporary emotional expression of the prophets, for example, Isaiah, in Isa 8:17, "Yahweh concealed his face," or Deutero-Isaiah in Isa 45:15, "Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself." It satisfies Qoheleth to bow before the "mighty one" (Qoh 3:14; 6:10; 7:13-14) and to advise others to fear God with a hope that one will be blessed (7:26b; 8:12-13), though no one knows how or when.

#### 5. *His Concept of Joy*

Qoheleth's concept of joy is mostly ignored by the Torah where *law* has been the centre of Yahwism. The noun שמחה (mirth, joy) occurs 94 times in the Hebrew Bible but only 3 times in the Torah (Gen 31:27; Deut 28:47; Num 10:10). The verb שמח occurs 11 times in the Torah out of 154 occurrences and שמח only once in Deut 16:15 out of 21 occurrences in the Old Testament.

Although it is not certain if Qoheleth had Num 10:10 in mind, Qoh 5:18-19, "For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart" (5:19), certainly modifies the idea of remembrance as it relates to joy in Num 10:10, "On the days of your gladness (שמחתכם) ... you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; they

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mutable, malleable and ambiguous world."

<sup>72</sup>According to J. J. Dreese's analysis, of the 30 occurrences of God as the subject of a verb in Qoheleth [1:13; 2:26 (2x), 13:10, 11 (3x), 14 (2x), 15, 17 (2x, read *sam* for *sham*), 18; 5:5 (2x), 17, 18 (2x), 19; 6:2 (2x); 7:13, 14, 29; 8:15; 9:7; 11:5, 9; 12:7, 14] the verbal root נתן (to give) occurs ten times and the root עשה (do) seven times.

shall serve you for remembrance before your God: I am the Lord your God."

Similarly, Qoheleth's concept of sinner, as Gordis puts it, "a sinner is he who fails to work for the advancement of his own happiness,"<sup>73</sup> is a twisted version of Deut 28:47, that one would deserve punishment if one "did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart." Although pleasing God by observing the Mosaic law code has always been the ultimate goal of the Yahwist, Qoheleth challenges such understanding by commanding one to seek enjoyment in life as one's life goal because enjoying life is doing the will of God (Qoh 9:7). That is a challenge rather than an antithesis to Yahwism.

However, it would be an affront to Qoheleth's wisdom if one thought of him as a hedonist. Qoheleth's encouragement to enjoy life is conditioned by responsibility in one's action to seek enjoyment because God will judge (Qoh 2:26b; 11:9; 12:14). Here Qoheleth again twists the idea of judgment in Deut 28:47 to suit his concept of joy.

#### *6. His Concept of Wisdom and Wealth*

Qoheleth's concept of wisdom is most interesting due to his honesty and bluntness in admitting the vulnerability of wisdom (9:18b) which other wisdom conventions dare not admit (cf. Prov 15:33). He exhibits a similar attitude towards wealth, "the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money" (7:12; cf. Prov 16:16) and "money answers everything" (10:19) a position which makes him different from other biblical wisdom thought (cf. Prov 23:4,5).

#### *7. His Concepts of Profit and Portion*

These two concepts are rarely touched by Yahwism perhaps due to the concept of Yahweh's ownership as creator. As the two concepts are rooted in the commercial world, it is not difficult to perceive why the commercial interest among post-exilic Jews had been a challenge to the post-exilic prophets and the great conservative Yahwist Ezra. The accumulation of wealth as the main activity among the post-exilic Jews

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<sup>73</sup>R. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 91.

was interpreted by the prophets as a challenge to Yahweh's ownership and providence (cf. Haggai and Malachi). But Qoheleth's search for enduring profit is something new not only to Yahwism, but also to the post-exilic Jews who indulged in material wealth. The conclusion that human activity has no enduring profit and therefore is absurd would certainly provoke strong protest from the commercially minded Yahwist and non-Yahwist alike. However, the acknowledgement of a portion in human activity as God's gift to humankind in their activity may be seen as a compromise with the Yahwist's work ethic (cf. Exod 19:9).

### 8. Conclusion

The theological perspectives of Qoheleth as analysed above demonstrated that Qoheleth is not a hardline conservative Yahwist, nor yet a radical anti-Yahwist. Qoheleth's theological perspective, though reflecting a knowledge of Yahwism, is faithful to the reality of the daily experience of most Israelites. He never attempts to be dogmatic with his theology, like a hardline conservative Yahwist such as Ezra. His theology is unique and personal. It touches tangentially on the Yahwistic faith, yet does not totally rebel against or conform to it. His theology has distanced itself from both the Yahwistic circle and the non-Yahwistic circle. His faithfulness to his observations and experiences of life, and his studying of various wisdom and religious ideas (cf. 12:9), prompted him to formulate or reformulate his theological thought as well as positions on religious and social issues. In this moment of formulation or transition, his theology is a kind of *liminal* theology.

With this kind of unconventional theological thought, where does Qoheleth locate in Israel's society?

Davidson calls Qoheleth a radical conservative.<sup>74</sup> Whybray argues that Qoheleth, though living in the Hellenistic world and well aware of Hellenistic philosophical thought, is nevertheless a radical Jewish wisdom thinker, rather than an importer of foreign concepts.<sup>75</sup> Identifying Qoheleth's thought within the background of Palestinian Hellenism of

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<sup>74</sup>R. Davidson, *Courage to Doubt*, 184-202; cf. R. Gordis, "Its Religious Vocabulary," in *Koheleth*, 87-94.

<sup>75</sup>R.N. Whybray, "Conservatisme et radicalisme dans Qohelet," 81.

the third century when the process of amalgamation between various social cultures and religions was taking place, Müller argues that Qoheleth's "social location is to be found in a displaced Upper Class which was deprived of its power by the Diadochi and their collaborators."<sup>76</sup> G. von Rad sees Qoheleth as one who pitched his camp on "the farthest frontiers of Yahwism."<sup>77</sup>

Where does Qoheleth stand in the social and religious world of Israel? How was Yahwism being represented in Israelite society? The idea that Israel is a monolithically Yahwistic society has been challenged by Morton Smith who argues that there were two parties in post-exilic Palestine: the *Yahweh-alone* party and the syncretistic cult of Yahweh.<sup>78</sup> If Morton Smith is correct in depicting post-exilic Israelite society as religiously pluralistic society which mainly consist of two groups, with the *Yahweh-alone* party being the dominant one, then the conversion of members of the syncretistic cult into the politically powerful *Yahweh-alone* party was almost unavoidable. Thus, the crossing of individuals between *religious camps* for various political, religious or social reasons is not impossible, and most probably it characterizes the social-religious situation of Qoheleth's time.

By pitching his camp at the farthest frontiers of Yahwism, it is probable that Qoheleth's theology reflects a thought process which has either gradually distanced him from conventional or conservative Yahwism. As *wisdom* is known to be a movement, rather than a static phenomena, and if the canonical and the non-canonical wisdom books form some kind of development, Qoheleth stands right in between them. It may not be difficult to conceive that if Qoheleth was a little more to the left, he might be out of the canon, and if he was a little more right, he may have already enjoyed a position better than his present one in the canon. Thus, it is not impossible that Qoheleth is a *liminal intellectual*, one who is temporarily detached from his previous attachment and has not yet found a settlement. He is in between, perhaps going through a

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<sup>76</sup>H.-P. Müller, "Neige der althebräischen 'Weisheit'," 263.

<sup>77</sup>G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol 1, 458

<sup>78</sup>*Palestinian Parties and Politics That Shaped the Old Testament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 83.

transition. Such transitional period is identified by the modern social anthropological term as *liminality*. If *liminality* characterizes Qoheleth's situation,<sup>79</sup> Qoheleth may well be a *liminar* or *liminal intellectual* who practices a *liminal theology*.

### ABSTRACT

The essay, in quest of Qoheleth's theological thought, probes into the relationship between Yahwism, wisdom and creation, arguing that creation theology, as an important concept of wisdom theology, is insignificant in Qoheleth's thought. The theological thought of Qoheleth reflects neither conservative Yahwism nor radical anti-Yahwism. The uniqueness of Qoheleth's thought leads to the identification of *liminality* as the social setting for Qoheleth, who as a *liminal intellectual*, practices a *liminal theology*.

### 撮要

本文旨在探討傳道者的神學思想。作者的進路是從研究耶威主義、智慧神學和創造神學彼此間的關係入手，他認為智慧神學是創造神學這主要思想，在傳道書中的地位卻不顯著。傳道者的神學思想既不屬傳統保守耶威主義派，亦不依附於極端反對耶威主義之陣營，因其思想獨特，處於邊緣位置，故作者稱它為邊緣神學。

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<sup>79</sup>Cf. Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 11; Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 95; Leo G. Perdue, "Liminality as a Social Setting for Wisdom Instructions," ZAW 93 (1981), 114-26.