IN SEARCH OF KOHELET

By
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Ecclesiastes is simultaneously one of the most popular and one of the most misunderstood books of the Bible. Too often one hears its key verse, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," interpreted as simply an injunction against being a vain person. The common English translation of this verse (Ecclesiastes 1:2) comes directly from the Latin Vulgate, "*Vanitas vanitatum, ominia vanitas*." However, the original Hebrew, "*Havel havelim, hachol havel*," may be better translated as "Futility of futilities, all is futile." Consequently, Ecclesiastes 1:2 is more a broad statement about the meaninglessness of life and actions that are in vain rather than personal vanity.

In addition to the confusion that often surrounds the English translation of Ecclesiastes 1:2, the appellation for the protagonist in Ecclesiastes also loses much in the translation. In the enduring King James translation of the Bible, the speaker in Ecclesiastes is referred to as "the Preacher," and in many other standard English translations of the Bible (Amplified Bible, New International Version, New Living Translation, American Standard Version) one finds the speaker referred to as either "the Preacher" or "the Teacher." However, in the original Hebrew and in many translations by Jewish groups, the narrator is referred to simply as *Kohelet*. The word *Kohelet* is derived from the Hebrew root *koof-hey-lamed* meaning "to assemble," and commentators suggest that this refers to either the act of assembling wisdom or to the act of meeting with an assembly in order to teach. Furthermore, in the Hebrew, *Kohelet* is generally used as a name, but in Ecclesiastes 12:8 it is also written as *HaKohelet* (the Kohelet) which is more suggestive of a title. Hence, *Kohelet* is "the assembler" who has put together wisdom and disseminated it to the people.

The proper Hebrew name for this book of the Bible is *Kohelet*, and in fact, the Greek word "Ecclesiastes" which means "convoker" is just an attempt to translate the Hebrew title directly into Greek. Throughout the rest of this paper, though, in order to avoid confusion, the term *Kohelet* will be used to refer the author of the book, and the text itself, along with the great, classical rabbinical commentary on it, will be referred to, respectively, as Ecclesiastes and Ecclesiastes Rabbah. The thrust of this work will be to search both Ecclesiastes and Ecclesiastes Rabbah on both on a scholarly and a personal level for the meaning of the text and to find some satisfactory answer to the question of "Who is *Kohelet*?"

THE AUTHORSHIP OF ECCLESIASTES

Ecclesiastes begins with the words, "*Divrei Kohelet ben David Melech b'Yirushalyim*, Words of Kohelet, son of David, King in Jerusalem." From this and Ecclesiastes 1:12, that identifies Kohelet as a king of Israel over Jerusalem, the common belief has always been that Solomon was that author. However, even the sages of the Talmud, did not believe that Solomon was the one who actually committed these words to written form.

> Hezekiah and his colleagues wrote Isaiah, Proverbs, the Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes. (B. Baba Batra 15a)

Presumably, this conclusion follows the Biblical tradition that it was Hezekiah who committed the Proverbs of Solomon to writing:

> These are the Proverbs of Solomon that the men of Hezekiah, King of Judah, copied out. (Proverbs 25:1)

However, the late nature of the Hebrew used in Ecclesiastes indicates that the writing occurred much later than the court of Hezekiah (circa 720 B.C.E.) and certainly no earlier than the mid-fifth century B.C.E. The presence of Persian loanwords, a variety of Aramaisms, and the particular style of the Hebrew all attest to a late authorship.

In addition to being a late work, it has also been speculated that the final work is the product of several authors. This is, in part, due to problems that seem to exist in the body of the text, problems which may have required emendation by later writers. While the section of the Bible known as *Ketuvim* (writings) was canonized by the sages of Yavneh around 90 C.E., the debate was ongoing regarding both Ecclesiastes' self-contradictory nature and whether the text rendered the hands "unclean." The latter was an idiomatic way of stating whether or not a work was divinely inspired. Contact with a holy work, such as the Torah, renders one's hands unclean.

> R. Meir says that Ecclesiastes does not render the hands unclean, and that about the Song of Songs there is a difference of opinion. R. Jose says that the Song of Songs renders the hands unclean, and about Ecclesiastes there is a difference of opinion. R. Simeon says that Ecclesiastes is one of those matters in regard to which Beth Shammai were more lenient and Beth Hillel more stringent, but Ruth and the Song of Songs and Esther [certainly] make the hands unclean! . . . R. Simeon b. Menasia said: Ecclesiastes does not render the hands unclean because it contains only the wisdom of Solomon. (B. Megilah 7a)

The sages of the Talmud were well aware of problems of faith and internal consistency that seemed to exist within the text of Ecclesiastes, and it is likely that for this reason, more than any other, that later writers may have been compelled to add to the text in order to make it more "religiously correct."

> Rab Judah son of R. Samuel b. Shilath said in Rab's name: The Sages wished to hide the Book of Ecclesiastes, because its words are self-contradictory; yet why did they not hide it? Because its beginning is religious teaching and its end is religious teaching. (B. Shabbat 30b)

However, by the time of the composition Ecclesiastes Rabbah, circa 700 C.E. or later, questions of both the authorship and the sanctity of Ecclesiastes had been resolved.

> Forthwith the Holy Spirit alighted upon him (Solomon) and he composed the following three Books: Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes. (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:1)

THE STRUCTURE OF ECCLESIASTES

At its core, Ecclesiastes extols the meaninglessness and unfairness of life. Some of the major themes explored are:

Life, in general, is characterized by futility (Ecclesiastes 1:2).

All words are wearisome (Ecclesiastes 1:8).

The senses are never satisfied (Ecclesiastes 1:8).

The pursuit of wisdom is futile, and increases in knowledge result in increases in pain (Ecclesiastes 1:18).

The pursuit of merriment is futile (Ecclesiastes 2:1).

The pursuit of wealth is futile (Ecclesiastes 2:11).

The wise man has no advantage over the fool since they experience the same death (Ecclesiastes 2:15-16).

A man works hard to acquire wealth, and then it is left to one who did not earn it (Ecclesiastes 2:21).

Toil and work result in grief and worry (Ecclesiastes 2:22-23).

Man has no advantage over the beast since they, too, experience the same death (Ecclesiastes 3:19).

All skillful labor is the result of men's envy of each other (Ecclesiastes 4:4).

Some men labor excessively for no purpose, having no companion, sibling nor child (Ecclesiastes 4:7-8).

A man has to leave all his wealth behind when he departs from the world (Ecclesiastes 5:14-15).

A righteous man will perish while a wicked man endures (7:15).

A wicked man will be remembered while a righteous man is forgotten (Ecclesiastes 8:10).

Clearly, Kohelet sees much in life that is lacking in fairness!

The world of Kohelet is a finite closed system as is suggested by his famous dictum, "There is nothing new under the sun (1:9)!" In such a system there exist only a finite number of possibilities, and hence, every event is ultimately a repetition of one that has happened before.

> Sometimes there is something of which one says, "Look, this is new!" However, it has already existed in the ages before us. (Ecclesiastes 1:10)

Each moment can be characterized as either a repetition or a permutation of what came before, and Kohelet seems to intuit the well-known mathematical fact that all permutations of a finite number of objects may be expressed in terms of repetitive cycles. Thus, Kohelet makes several references to the repetitive nature of the world:

> A generation goes and a generation comes. (Ecclesiastes 1:4)
>
> The sun rises and the sun sets. (Ecclesiastes 1:5)
>
> The wind goes round and round, and on its rounds the wind returns. (Ecclesiastes 1:6)

Some of the most famous passages from Ecclesiastes are actually just further evidence of Kohelet's despair, and they are the logical outcome of a finite, closed system that permits only endless repetition. Kohelet does not see humans as being in control of the world. Presumably, life was harsher for many people in his time, and presumably, people experienced more frequently the ephemeral nature of happiness. People, according to Kohelet, do not control their own destinies. Events occur because, in the cyclic round of things, it is simply their time, and the only causal agent is God.

> To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven; a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace. (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)
>
> He (God) has made every thing beautiful in its time. (Ecclesiastes 3:11)
>
> In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, to the end that man should find nothing after him. (Ecclesiastes 7:14)

> Man is powerless over the spirit, to restrain the spirit, nor is there authority over the day of death. (Ecclesiastes 8:8)
>
> Like birds seized in a snare, so are men caught in the moment of disaster when it falls upon them suddenly. (Ecclesiastes 9:12)

While the first half of Ecclesiastes focuses more on Kohelet's message of futility, the second half contains many proverbs such as the following:

> A good name is better than good oil. (Ecclesiastes 7:1)
>
> It is better to listen to the rebuke of a wise man than to the song of fools. (Ecclesiastes 7:5)
>
> A single rogue can ruin a great deal of good. (Ecclesiastes 9:18)
>
> He who digs a pit will fall into it. (Ecclesiastes 10:8)
>
> Money answers everything. (Ecclesiastes 10:19)

To further complicate Kohelet's message, the text often seems to contain internal, contradictory messages. For example, in one place Kohelet will see no advantage to wisdom (Ecclesiastes 1:18) while in another place (Ecclesiastes 2:13) its advantage will be recognized.

> For with much wisdom comes much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases pain. (Ecclesiastes 1:18)
>
> And I perceived that wisdom is superior to folly as light is superior to darkness. (Ecclesiastes 2:13)

Similarly, it is hard to reconcile Kohelet's view of the overall futility of life with his final conclusion that the whole duty of man is to keep the commandments.

> The sum of the matter when all is said and done is to revere God and observe His commandments. This applies to all mankind, that God will call every creature to account for everything unknown, be it good or bad. (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14)

The former would seem to suggest that the latter is pointless. All in all, Ecclesiastes gives the impression that while there may have been one primary author, there were probably also several editors who emended the text in order to make it more politically or theologically correct. In particular, the ending was likely revised.

THE MISSION OF ECCLESIASTES RABBAH

As noted above, by the time of the composition of Ecclesiastes Rabbah, questions of the authorship and sanctity of Ecclesiastes had been effectively resolved. Since several centuries had passed since the canonization of Ecclesiastes, it was necessary to reaffirm both that Ecclesiastes was authored by Solomon and that it was a divinely inspired work. However, the textual problems remained. The genius of Ecclesiastes Rabbah lies in the way in which it skillfully reinterprets Ecclesiastes, changing it from a document of despair to one of hope. Additionally, by examining verses from Ecclesiastes one at a time, it further breaks up the coherency of the plain meaning of the text. In order to illustrate some of the various techniques used in Ecclesiastes Rabbah, a selection of ten representative passages from Ecclesiastes is presented below along with a discussion of how Ecclesiastes Rabbah treats them.

1. "Futility of futilities," said Kohelet, "Futility of futilities, all is futile." (Ecclesiastes 1:2)

   As previously mentioned, this opening verse sets the basic tone for the rest of the book. The key word for "futility" in the passage, *havel*, can be translated literally as vapor, breath, or steam. It is a metaphor for something that is of no consequence. We utilize similar figures of speech today such as when we say someone is full of hot air. Ecclesiastes Rabbah relates this passage in particular to Psalms 144:4, "Man is like a breath (*l'hevel*), his days are like a passing shadow (*k'tsel*)," and also to Ecclesiastes 6:12, "Who can possibly know what is good for man in life during the days of his futile (*hevlo*) existence which he spends as a shadow *(k'tsel*)." This sets the stage for a very astute discussion of what is futile and what isn't.

   One way to decide the futility of something is in terms of purpose. For example, consider the following passage from Ecclesiastes Rabbah:

   > R. Samuel b. Nahman taught in the name of R. Joshua b. Korah, "It may be likened to a man who sets on the fire seven pots, one on top of the other, and the steam from the topmost one has no substance in it." (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:3)

   In this case, steam from each of the first six pots serves the purpose of heating the one above it. However, what purpose does the steam from the last pot serve? Likewise, what purpose do our actions serve?

   Ecclesiastes Rabbah also makes a distinction between shadows that have substance and those that don't. For example, according to Ecclesiastes Rabbah, shadows cast by walls and shadows cast by date-palms both have substance to them. This is because their shadows are reflections of conditions that are relatively permanent. On the other hand, the following quote from Ecclesiastes Rabbah suggests that a person's life represents a different kind of shadow:

> Rav Huna said in the name of R. Aha, "Life is like a bird which flies past and its shadow passes with it." Samuel said, "It is like the shadow of bees in which there is no substance at all." (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:3)

The shadows of birds and bees have no substance because they each point to a presence that is transitory. Similarly, the life of man is, in general, seen as a shadow having no substance. However, Ecclesiastes Rabbah continues by providing a remedy to this lack of meaning. The verse, "Futility of futilities, said Kohelet, futility of futilities, all is futile (Ecclesiastes 1:2)," is seen as representing seven occurrences of the word "futile." This particular value is derived by counting each plural occurrence of this word twice. Ecclesiastes Rabbah relates these seven futilities to seven ages of a man's life. In the last stage, man is old and bent over like an ape. However, Ecclesiastes Rabbah goes on to claim that this final state does not apply to those who study Torah. The proof-text comes from First Kings:

> King David was old, advanced in years. (I Kings 1:1)

Ecclesiastes Rabbah points out that even though David was old, he was still king, with the presumption being that David retained a vitality superior to that of other people his age and that this was due to being well-versed in Torah. Thus, Ecclesiastes Rabbah begins its exposition of Ecclesiastes by immediately giving Torah as a remedy to the purposelessness that can often characterize a person's life.

Another point of interest is the relationship between the above opening passage from Ecclesiastes and the birth of Cain and Abel in Genesis. The Hebrew for Cain (*kuf-yud-nun*) is remarkably similar to *kinah* (*kuf-yud-nun-hey*), a Hebrew word for lamentation. Furthermore, the Hebrew spelling for Abel (*hey-bet-lamed*) is the same as that for *havel*, futility. What a fascinating occurrence of foreshadowing we have here! One the one hand, the names of Cain and Abel seem to foretell the sorrow that one son will cause and the premature ending that will befall the other. Quite often when someone passes away years before his or her natural time, we wonder what the purpose of so short an existence was. On a larger scale, though, the names of Cain and Abel also reflect the state of humanity's existence after the expulsion from Eden. This removal, according to the story, led to a life full of hardship and sorrow, and the presence of death causes all of us to, from time to time, question the meaning of our existence. As the Psalmist has said, "(Man's) days are like a passing shadow (Psalms 144:4)," and we all wonder whether the shadow our life will have any substance to it.

2. What profit does man have for all his labor in which he toils under the sun? (Ecclesiastes 1:3)

This particular passage, on the surface, simply asks a question that many of us have asked ourselves at one time or another. Namely, what is the point to what I am doing? Is there a greater meaning and purpose to my life? At first glance, the question seems to be purely rhetorical with the obvious answer being that there is no point to our constant labor. However, through a careful reading of the text,

Ecclesiastes Rabbah brings forth several astute arguments. First, a distinction is made between "his labor" (*amalo*) and "labor" (*amal*). The former is a particular term while the latter is universal. Thus, the sages of Ecclesiastes Rabbah make the case that while there may be no advantage or profit to a person's personal labor, there are activities that are universal that all should engage in and which do accrue merit. More specifically, it is considered universal that one should engage in the labor of Torah.

By using the phrase "under the sun" (*tachat hashamesh*) the author also leaves open the possibility that there may be other realms in which labor does have an advantage. In using this phrase, Kohelet may have been influenced by contemporaneous Greek philosophers who were well aware that "infinity" was difficult to reason about as it appeared to be outside of the realm of human experience. Consequently, Kohelet may simply have been restricting his discussion to the realm of the known. However, regardless of the original intent, Ecclesiastes Rabbah takes advantage of this terminology to argue that there is indeed something to be gained "above the sun," i.e. in the afterlife, from pious acts. Additionally, Ecclesiastes Rabbah goes on to make the point that God is continually giving to us, and it is we, in fact, who often fail to give back to God.

> I [God] cause the winds to blow, clouds to ascend, rain and dew to fall, make plants grow and ripen, and prepare a table before every individual and supply the needs of every individual and every person sufficient for his wants, and yet your refuse to being me the omer! (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:4)

All in all, Ecclesiastes Rabbah once again takes a statement of despair from Ecclesiastes and, by force of argument, creates a positive statement that concludes that there is indeed something to be gained from Torah and from benevolent and pious acts, and that our real needs are continually being met by a giving Creator.

3. A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth endures forever. And the sun rises and the sun sets, and then to its place it rushes, and there it rises again. It goes toward the south and veers toward the north. The wind goes round and round, and on its rounds the wind returns. All the rivers flow into the sea, yet the sea is not full. To the place where the rivers flow, there they flow once more. (Ecclesiastes 1:4-7)

   This series of verses should be considered in conjunction with Ecclesiastes 1:9, "There is nothing new under the sun!" They express the observation that, in a finite world, events must eventually repeat themselves. In many respects this is also a statement of despair from Kohelet as it appears to deny personal control and creativity. This view that events cycle endlessly and happen of their own accord or by the hand of God is reinforced by later verses in Ecclesiastes:

   > Whatever has been is what will be, and whatever has been done is what will be done. (Ecclesiastes 1:9)

> Everything has its season, and there is a time for everything under the heavens. A time to be born, a time to die, . . . a time for war, and a time for peace. What gain, then, has the worker by his toil? (Ecclesiastes 3:1-10)
> He [God] has made every thing beautiful in its time. (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

While the verses between Ecclesiastes 3:1 and 3:11 are among those passages most often quoted from this work, they nevertheless express the viewpoint that in a finite world repetition must occur and that things just happen in their own time of their own accord. However, once again Ecclesiastes Rabbah is able to reinterpret the message of Ecclesiastes in a more positive light. If events are to forever repeat themselves, then that means that positive events will also recur. Consequently, "A generation goes and a generation comes," also means that as one leader departs, another will take his place.

> The generation which comes in your days and the sage who is in your days should be like the generation which has passed and the former sages which preceded you. (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:8)

Furthermore, Ecclesiastes Rabbah interprets the statement that "the sun rises and the sun sets" to mean that when one righteous man departs the world another immediately takes his place. The text accomplishes the dual purpose of not only assuring the people that there will be continuity in leadership but also the more self-serving purpose of legitimizing the authority and stature of the present generation of rabbis.

The statement in Ecclesiastes 1:4 that "the earth endures forever" seems at first glance to hint that there does exist something permanent within this world of constant change. Possibly this is a reference to God who is often symbolized by a rock.

> He is the Rock, His work is perfect, for all His ways are law and justice. (Deuteronomy 32:4)

However, it is also possible that this mention of the earth's endurance is just a reiteration of passages from Psalms.

> He established the earth upon its foundations, so that it shall never totter. (Psalms 104:5)

> Your faithfulness continues throughout all generations; you established the earth, and it stands. (Psalms 119:90)

Either way, Ecclesiastes Rabbah does not fail to take advantage of the opportunity to give a positive interpretation to the passage while simultaneously promoting its own agenda. The text points out that a generation decays because it does not abide by the

commandments whereas the earth endures because it does abide by them by following natural laws.

> A generation, for the reason that it does not abide by the commands of the Holy One, blessed be He, decays, whereas the earth which abides by the commands of the Holy One, blessed be He, does not decay. (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:9)

Another interpretation given is that all references to earth and the land are metaphors for Israel.

> R. Samuel, in the name of R. Paltia of Naveh, derives the identification of earth with Israel from the following verse, "And Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, he and his children were priests for the tribe of the Danite, up until the day the land was exiled (Judges 18:30)." Can the "land" go into captivity or be moved? It alludes in fact to Israel who is called "land," as it is said, "And all nations shall call you happy and blessed, for you shall be a land of delight, says the Lord of Hosts (Malachi 3:12)." (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:9)

Consequently, once more Ecclesiastes Rabbah is able to bring forward a more positive message from the text by emphasizing both the importance of the commandments and the endurance of Israel.

Another portion from these verses above that begs for explanation is the statement, "All the rivers flow into the sea, yet the sea is not full." In Ecclesiastes Rabbah, a fanciful explanation is given that ocean water is able to absorb all other kinds of water.

> When they arrived at Rome, Hadrian asked them, "What are the waters of the ocean?" They (R. Eliezer and R. Joshua) replied, "It consists of water which absorbs water." He said to them, "Is it possible that the rivers should run into it without it becoming full?" They answered, "It absorbs all the water in the world." He said to them, "I will not believe you until you prove it to me." They took the water which they had drawn from the ocean, filled a flask with it and then poured further water into it which was absorbed by the ocean water. According to the opinion of R. Eliezer, all water is drawn from the ocean, and according to the opinion of R. Joshua, all water returns there. (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:15)

At first glance this looks like unbelievably bad science. However, it is well-known that in the Bavli that water is a metaphor for Torah

> Water means nothing but Torah, as it is written (Isaiah 55:1), "Ho, everyone that is thirsty, come you for water." (B. Baba Kama 82a)

This relationship between water and Torah is also mentioned in Ecclesiastes Rabbah 11:1. Similarly, in Song of Songs Rabbah 1:19 we find a beautiful and lengthy discourse on the many ways in which Torah and water are alike.

- Just as rain **water** comes down in drops and forms rivers, so with the **Torah**; a man learns two *halachahs* (laws) today and two tomorrow, until he becomes like a flowing stream.

- Just as **water** has no taste unless one is thirsty, so the **Torah** has no taste unless one labors at it

- Just as **water** leaves a high place and flows to a low one, so the **Torah** leaves one whose spirit is proud and cleaves to one whose spirit is lowly.

- Just as **water** does not keep well in a vessel of silver or gold but in the commonest of vessels, so the **Torah** resides only in one who makes himself like a vessel of earthenware.

- Just as with **water** a great man is not ashamed to say to a lowly man, "Give me a drink of **water**,'" so with the words of the **Torah**, a great scholar must not be ashamed to say to a lesser one, "Teach me one chapter, or one statement, or one verse, or even one letter."

- Just as **water** makes plants grow, so the words of the **Torah** nurture everyone who labors over them as they require.

- Just as **water** is a source of life for the world, as it says, "A fountain of gardens, a well of living waters (Song of Songs 4:15)," so the **Torah** is a source of life for the world, as it says, "For they are life unto those that find them and health to all their flesh (Proverbs 4:22)."

- Just as **water** restores the soul, as it says, "But God cleaved the hollow place which was in Lehi and there came water out of it; and when he had drunk... he revived (Judges 15:19)," so does the **Torah**, as it says, "The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul (Psalms 19:8)."

- Just as **water** purifies man from ritual uncleanness, as it says, "And I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean (Ezekiel 36:25)," so the **Torah** cleanses an unclean man of his uncleanness, as it says, "The words of the Lord are pure words (Psalms 12:7)."

- Just as **water** cleanses the body, as it says, "He shall bathe himself in **water** (Leviticus 17:15)," so the **Torah** cleanses the body, as it says, "Thy word is purifying to the uttermost (Psalms 119:140)." (Song of Songs Rabbah 1:19)

However, it is in Tractate Sukkah of the Bavli that one finds the definitive connection between Torah, water, and the above passage from Ecclesiastes Rabbah.

> R. Zera or, according to others, R. Hanina b. Papa said, "Come and see that not as the standards of mortal man are the standards of the Holy One, blessed be He. According to the standards of mortal man, an empty vessel is able to contain [what is put into it], and a full vessel cannot contain anything that is added to it. But according to the standards of the Holy One, blessed be He, a full vessel is able to contain what is added to it, while an empty one cannot. As it is said, 'And it shall come to pass, if you shall listen diligently, if you listen, you will continue to listen, but if not, you will not listen (Deuteronomy 28:1).'" (B. Sukkah 46a)

From the above passages it follows that there is no limit to the amount of Torah that one can absorb. Furthermore, in Genesis Rabbah 1:4 we discover the tradition that the Torah preceded the creation of the world based upon the following passage from Proverbs:

> The Lord created me at the beginning (reishit) of His way, as the first of His works of old. (Proverbs 8:22)

This serves as the starting point for later Kabbalistic elaborations that God created the world using the Torah. Consequently, the statement that all waters come from the ocean and return to the ocean in the above passage from Ecclesiastes Rabbah can be restated to say that all creation comes from the Torah and all will return to the Torah.

4. All words are wearying. (Ecclesiastes 1:8)

As is typical of Ecclesiastes Rabbah, it reinterprets the above passage so that it only applies to particular situations. One interpretation it gives is that the verse only applies to idle talk, and this is something which is certainly part of common experience. Often times much of conversation is just talk for the sake of talk and serves no deeper purpose.

The word *devarim* can be translated as either "words" or "things," and using the latter understanding, Ecclesiastes Rabbah interprets the passage to mean that in many occupations there is no end to the number of things about which one may learn.

> A woman of Caesarea once took her son to a cook and said to him, "Teach my son the trade." He replied to her, "Let him stay with me for four years and I will teach him a hundred dishes made from eggs." He stayed with him four years and was taught a hundred dishes made from eggs. The cook said to her, "Let him stay with me another four years and I will teach him another hundred dishes made from eggs." (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:23)

Another interpretation given of the passage is that it refers to words of heresy. The text at this point relates the story of how Rabbi Eliezer was once arrested for heresy, and in so doing, gives a particular caution against listening to the words of Christians.

> Once I was walking up the main street of Sepphoris when there came toward me a man named Jacob of Kefar Sekaniah who told me something in the name of Jesus the Nazarene which pleased me, "It is written in your Torah, 'You will not bring the hire of a harlot, or the price of a dog, into the house of the Lord your God for any vow (Deuteronomy 23:19).'" … I replied, "In that case, what is to be done with them?" He said to me, "Let bath houses and privies be made with them." I exclaimed, "You have said an excellent thing!" … On that account I was arrested for heresy. More than that, I transgressed what is written in the Torah, "Remove yourself far away from her, and come not close to the door of her house (Proverbs 5:8)." (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:24)

In order to fully understand this story, it is important to know what was taking place in history at the time of the compilation of Ecclesiastes Rabbah. This was a time of persecution by Christianity and forced conversions in Spain and Byzantium. Consequently, the ancient story of Rabbi Eliezer addresses concerns that were contemporary with the time of the composition of Ecclesiastes Rabbah.

It is also important to realize that Rabbi Eliezer was no ordinary scholar. As a student of Rabban Jochanan ben Zakkai and as the teacher of Rabbi Akiba, he was a sage among sages. Rabban Jochanan ben Zakkai once remarked, "If all the sages of Israel were on one side of a scale and Rabbi Eliezer ben Horkenus on the other, then he would outweigh them all (Pikei Avot 2:8)." Accordingly, the story of the charges of Eliezer's heresy gains even more importance due to the stature of the man against whom the allegation has been made. The message appears to be that even the greatest among us can be led astray if care is not taken, and that one should stay far from a transgression.

Stories such as this one have sometimes led to a xenophobic fear in Judaism of contact with other cultures. On the one hand, contact can be a contributing factor to assimilation, but on the other hand, isolationism also has its problems. It can result in a smaller world with fewer possibilities for growth, and without continual renewal and growth, decay is inevitable. Given these twin perils of assimilation and isolationism, what criteria then can be used to determine proper contact and discourse with other cultures? Perhaps the answer lies in the concept of "l'shem shamayim," for the name of heaven. This concept is discussed in the excerpt below from Pirkei Avot:

> What kind of argument is in the name of Heaven? Such was the argument between Hillel and Shammai. What kind of argument is not in the name of Heaven? Such was the argument of Korah (Numbers 16) and his congregation. (Pirkei Avot 5:17)

Thus, arguments that are for the sake of truth can be beneficial, but arguments that are merely thin facades for hidden agendas can lead one far from the truth.

Finally in this section, Ecclesiastes Rabbah even makes reference to the fatigue that can result from Torah study. However, the text goes on to explain that this only refers to the beginning of one's study and not to the state of knowledge that will eventually result.

> Even words of Torah weary a man. At first a man enters the house of study to learn Torah. There they teach him that what he thought unclean is clean and vice versa. But he does not know that through all this weakening of his strength he will eventually be able to deduce by reasoning and analogy, and decide issues for himself concerning what is unclean or clean and what is forbidden or permitted. (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:27)

In summary, Ecclesiastes Rabbah once again takes a universal statement (All words are wearying.), and reinterprets it to refer to only particular situations. In this manner, Ecclesiastes Rabbah both reduces the scope of the statement and redirects its import towards particular agendas.

5. The eye is never sated with seeing. (Ecclesiastes 1:8)

The plain meaning of the text is that no matter how much a person sees, they always want more. In fact, elsewhere in Ecclesiastes Rabbah (3:12) it is stated, "Nobody departs from the world with half his desire gratified." Nevertheless, the text interprets this particular passage in a more positive light by linking it with our inability to fully see God. More specifically, it takes advantage of the opportunity to reconcile the following two Biblical texts:

> For since the world began, no ear has heard, and no eye has seen a God like you. (Isaiah 64:4)
>
> Surely the Lord God will do nothing without revealing His secret to His servants the prophets. (Amos 3:7)

The first passage suggests the impossibility of seeing God while the second implies that there is some sort of perception that takes place. Ecclesiastes Rabbah explains by saying:

> How did they see? R. Berekiah said, "As one peeps through a crack in the door." (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:27)

Again Ecclesiastes Rabbah provides a positive interpretation to an otherwise negative piece of text. However, the skill with which Ecclesiastes Rabbah is able to frequently present this manner of argument can also make its conclusions somewhat suspect. A case in point is the life of the Talmudic sage Rabbi Meir. A disciple of both Rabbi Akiba and Elisha ben Abuya, Rabbi Meir was known as the premier expounder of *halachah* in his generation. In fact, it is said (B.Eruvin 13b) that "Meir" was not his original name, but rather one that was assumed because of its Hebrew meaning of

"one who gives light." Given such ability, it is amazing, at first glance, that the law was generally not determined according to his views. However, the Bavli explains (B. Eruvin 13b) that Rabbi Meir was so skilled in halachic debate that he could prove that something ritually clean was unclean, and something unclean was, in turn, ritually clean, and furthermore, his peers were unable to penetrate the depths of his arguments. Consequently, while not being able to disprove his conclusions, they also could not trust them.

In a similar manner, Ecclesiastes Rabbah is rife with pilpulistic perspicacity. However, to focus on the veracity of its arguments may be to miss the point. Instead, it should perhaps be taken as a given that the surface interpretations of many of the statements of Ecclesiastes need to, out of necessity, be changed to more positive statements to make them compatible with the rest of Torah. Consequently, the conclusion is reached before the argument, and the arguments, in spite of their cleverness, are only an afterthought. Nonetheless, one should appreciate the skill in which one truth is substituted for a more ignoble one.

6. A twisted thing cannot be made straight. (Ecclesiastes 1:15)

   Consider the work of God; for who can make that straight that which he has made crooked? (Ecclesiastes 7:13)

   Taken together these passages seem to imply a certain fatalistic view of life. What has happened has happened and can't be undone. The passages seem to be rhetorical requiring no particular response. Nevertheless, Ecclesiastes Rabbah treats these verses as questions begging to be answered, and this leads to one of the most beautiful and far-reaching thoughts in this work.

   In response to Ecclesiastes 1:15, the text says the following:

   > In this world he who is crooked can be made straight and he who is wanting can be numbered, but in the Hereafter he that is crooked cannot be made straight and he that is wanting cannot be numbered. (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:34)

   Thus, Ecclesiastes Rabbah uses this text to promote the importance of *teshuvah* (repentance) while still in this life.

   The commentary to Ecclesiastes 7:13 is a particularly beautiful *midrash* that foreshadows even more strongly our duty towards what was formalized in sixteenth century Kabbalah as the concept of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world.

   > When the Holy One, blessed be He, created the first man, He took him and led him round all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him, "Behold My works, how beautiful and commendable they are! All that I have created, I have created for your sake. Take care that you do not corrupt and destroy my universe for if

> you corrupt it, then there is no one after you to repair it. (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:20)

Since the Hebrew wording states that there is not anyone to repair it after you rather than just simply that no one can repair it, there is the suggestion that one can indeed repair that which they themselves have corrupted. Furthermore, our life experience teaches us that it is often only we who can undo the damage that we have done either to ourselves or to others.

In summary, rather than taking a defeatist attitude towards the above passages, Ecclesiastes Rabbah takes them as questions that require an answer, and it answers very much in the affirmative that it is we who have the power to change things for the better. This stance is also hinted at in the story of Jacob who later became known as Israel. Jacob (*Ya'akov*) was so named because when he and his brother Esau were born, he was grasping his brother's heel (*akav*). However, the Hebrew word for "heel" also means crooked and deceitful (*akov*), and trickery and deceit certainly characterized much of the early part of Jacob's life. After Jacob's mysterious encounter, though, with a being with whom he had to wrestle throughout the night, Jacob's name was changed to "Israel." This latter name is related to *yashar* which means straight and honest. Thus, through his struggle, Jacob was able to straighten that which was crooked within him. Ironically, though, while his soul was straightened, his body gained a limp. However, is it not always the case that true gains only come after great effort, and that our wounds are also signs of our victories? The story in the Torah ends with Jacob being blessed after having struggled with God, and it is often the case that blessings come to us only after we toil for them. A passage with meaning parallel to this is also found in Ecclesiastes 7:3.

> Sorrow is better than laughter for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. (Ecclesiastes 7:3)

While Ecclesiastes Rabbah upholds the power of repentance in its interpretation of the above passages from Ecclesiastes, there are nevertheless, examples of those who lived their lives eschewing such tansformative change. One of the most famous such examples is that of Elisha ben Abuyah who is often referred to simply as *Aher*, the other. Elisha ben Abuyah was a teacher of Rabbi Meir, but he is best known for having lost his faith in Torah. The story begins with a well-known incident recorded in the Bavli.

> Four men entered *pardes* (the orchard), Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, *Aher*, and Rabbi Akiba. Rabbi Akiba said to them, "When you arrive at the stones of pure marble, do not say, 'Water, water.'" For it is said, "He that speaks a falsehood shall not be established before my eyes." Ben Azzai looked and died. Of him, scripture says, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints." Ben Zoma looked and became demented. Of him, scripture says, "Have you found honey? Eat as much as is sufficient for you lest you be filled therewith and vomit." *Aher*

> mutilated the shoots (became a heretic). Rabbi Akiba departed in peace. (T. Hagigah 2:3 // B. Hagigah 14b)

It is unclear what kind of journey these sages undertook, but the word *pardes* offers a suggestion. Its numerical value in Hebrew is 344 which is the same as the Biblical word *l'suach*, to meditate.

> And Isaac went to meditate (*l'suach*) in the field toward evening, and, looking up, he saw camels approaching. (Genesis 24:63)

Consequently, perhaps it was deep meditation upon the Torah that led to such a variety of results. Intense study has led to such consequences before. There have been those who have rejected a religion after a deep study of it, there have been many who have become delusional in their religious endeavors, and it is even conceivable that a person can damage their life through excessive study. There are two additional supports of this interpretation. One is the verse, "Your shoots are an orchard (*pardes*) of pomegranates. (Song of Songs, 4:13)." An explanation given by Song of Songs Rabbah 4:26 is that this verse refers to the Torah and other gifts given by God to Israel. Moreover, there are references in the Jerusalem Talmud (Y Hagigah 2:1) to the role that Torah played in *Aher's* apostasy. The story is related of a man who climbs a tree and sends away the mother bird before taking the children. However, upon coming down from the tree the man is bitten by a snake and dies, thus contradicting the promise of Scripture, "If, along the road, you chance upon a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs and the mother sitting over the fledglings or on the eggs, do not take the mother together with her young. Let the mother go, and take only the young, in order that you may fare well and have a long life (Deuteronomy 22:6-7)." The failure of the Torah to literally live up to this promise caused *Aher* to lose his faith.

7. With much wisdom comes grief, and he who increases knowledge increases pain. (Ecclesiastes 1:18)

It is often the case that greater abilities result in greater burdens, and Ecclesiastes Rabbah acknowledges this by quoting the proverb, "According to the camel is the load (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:37)." However, Ecclesiastes Rabbah also utilizes a device that it successfully uses in other instances. It shows that this verse lacks a universal application by arguing that some have indeed increased wisdom to their advantage while others have done so to their disadvantage.

> There have been some who increased wisdom to their advantage and others who increased it to their disadvantage. They who increased it to their advantage were Moses and Solomon, and they who increased it to their disadvantage were Doeg and Ahithophel. (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:37)

Doeg and Ahithophel both conspired against David at different times and places. Doeg informed King Saul of David's activities while David was fleeing from him,

and as a consequence, King Saul had Doeg lead a bloody attack against the *Kohanim* (priests) of the city of Nob who had assisted David. In later years when David had become king, his advisor Ahithophel conspired against him with his son Absolom. Furthermore, it is written in Midrash Shocher Tov, "Doeg and Ahithophel may be likened to a house full of straw. After some time, the master of the house plastered it. Nevertheless, the holes were full of straw. When the plaster fell off, the straw began to emerge from the holes. So, too, were these men. They learned all the fine points of the Torah, but their hearts were full of folly (Shocher Tov 119:50)." Consequently, Doeg and Ahithophel increased their knowledge to their disadvantage.

What Ecclesiastes Rabbah accomplishes with its argument, though, is that it shows once again that the above statement from Ecclesiastes is not a universal statement about the human condition, but rather something that occurs only in particular cases. As a result, the negative impact of the statement is greatly reduced.

8. There is nothing better for a man than he enjoy food and drink and find satisfaction in his work. (Ecclesiastes 2:24)

   Then I commended enjoyment, because a man has no better thing under the sun than to eat and to drink and to be joyful, and that this should accompany him in his labor all the days of his life which God gives him under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 8:15)

   On the surface these two passages suggest that the most we can do is to simply enjoy life as best we can with good food, good drink, and good times. However, through a very skillful application of word play, Ecclesiastes Rabbah argues that the text actually refers to Torah and good deeds.

   > All the references to eating and drinking in the book signify Torah and good deeds. R. Jonah said, "The most clear proof of them all is, "A man has no better thing under the sun than to eat and to drink and to be joyful, and that this should accompany him in his labor (*amalo*)." The last word should be read as *olamo* (his world), in this world. "All the days of his life" alludes to the grave. Are there then food and drink in the grave which accompany a man to the grave? It must then mean Torah and good deeds. (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 2:28)

   Once more, Ecclesiastes Rabbah has taken an ostensibly negative statement and turned it into a positive.

9. A feast is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, but money answers everything. (Ecclesiastes 10:19)

   This passage is reminiscent of the modern dictum that money talks! Ecclesiastes Rabbah, though, gives it a much more positive understanding by interpreting money as alluding to charity.

> Sometimes a man's prayer is answered, and at other times he is not answered. At those times when he uses his money for charity he is answered, as it is said, "So shall my righteousness (charity) answer for me (Genesis 30:33)." But at those times when he does not use it for charity, it accuses him, as it is stated, "To have false witness against him (Deuteronomy 19:16)." (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 10:19)

The complete reference from Deuteronomy describes the case of one who bears false witness and the punishment for it. In this context, the money itself accuses one who pretends to use it for charity but doesn't. In modern vernacular, one might say, "Follow the money!" More specifically, though, the explanation provided by Ecclesisastes Rabbah reiterates the belief that our actions have consequences and that even our money will testify for or against us. In this regard, the authors of Ecclesiastes Rabbah repeat the message found elsewhere in Ecclesiastes that we are ultimately accountable for our actions.

> Follow the path of your heart and the sight of your eyes, but be aware that for all these things God will call you into account. (Ecclesiastes 11:9)

10. Cast your bread upon the waters for after many days you will find it. (Ecclesiastes 11:1)

As mentioned earlier, the latter half of Ecclesiastes contains many proverbs and sayings, and this is but one of many. However, Ecclesiastes Rabbah spends a great deal of time discussing this short passage, and in so doing, it elevates it in importance. At the start of its discussion, the text equates water with Torah by repeating the same argument that is found in B. Baba Kama 82a.

> If it is your desire to practice charity, bestow it upon those who labor in Torah, because "the waters" means nothing else than words of Torah, as it is said, "Ho, every one that thirsts, come you for water (Isaiah 55:1)." (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 11:1)

It should also be noted that the Bavli equates charity to all the other commandments combined, and that *gemilut hasadim*, acts of loving kindness, are considered even superior to charity.

> Charity is equivalent to all other religious precepts combined. (B. Baba Bathra 9a)

> Our rabbis taught, "In three aspects are acts of loving kindness superior to charity. Charity can be done only with one's money, but acts of loving kindness can be done with one's person and one's money. Charity can be given only to the poor, but acts of living kindness can be given both to the rich and the poor. Charity can be given only to the living, but acts of loving kindness can be done both to the living and the dead. (B. Sukkah 49b)

In the Torah, bread and water are symbols of hospitality and benevolence. For example, in Genesis 18:4-5, when three strangers were seen near Abraham's tent, Abraham's first act was to offer them water and bread, and in Exodus, when the Israelites were afraid that they would starve, God caused bread to rain down upon them from the heavens.

> And the Lord said to Moses, "I will rain down bread for you from the sky, and the people shall go out each day and gather that day's portion." (Exodus 16:4)

Compare this, too, with the following passage from Isaiah.

> As the rain or snow drops from heaven and returns not there, but soaks the earth and makes it bring forth vegetation, yielding seed for sowing and bread for eating, so is the word that issues from My mouth. It does not come back to Me unfulfilled. (Isaiah 55:10-11)

In this passage we see an illustration of the ensuing "return" that occurs following God's act of giving. Consequently, it should not be at all unexpected that when we imitate God by casting our "bread upon the waters" that it should subsequently return to us. Ecclesiastes Rabbah 10:1 presents several stories to illustrate how acts of charity and kindness are eventually returned in a positive way to the person who initiated them. For example, in one of them Rabbi Akiba comes across a scholar who has survived a shipwreck. He asks him what good deeds he possessed that saved him from drowning. The scholar replies that upon boarding the ship he gave a loaf of bread to a poor man, and the poor man said to him, "As you have restored my life to me by your gift, so will your life be restored to you." The acts of giving and receiving, reward and punishment, create divine symmetry in the world of Ecclesiastes Rabbah.

ECCLESIASTES RABBAH REVISITED

The mission of Ecclesiastes Rabbah is not so much to explain the text of Ecclesiastes as it is to reinterpret it. As seen from the examples above, it accomplishes this in a variety of ways. In virtually all instances the strategy is to show that the more negative statements of Ecclesiastes refer to particular situations as opposed to having universal application. Additionally, Ecclesiastes Rabbah does what it can to promote what, by this time, has become the rabbinical agenda, i.e. the importance of Torah and values such as kindness and charity, the promise of reward in a world to come, and the authority of the current generation of leaders. However, even when there seems to be no particular rabbinical agenda associated with a passage, Ecclesiastes Rabbah still demonstrates that the passage has only limited application. For example, in Ecclesiastes 9:2 one reads, "All things come alike to all. There is one event to the righteous and to the wicked." Ecclesiastes Rabbah 9:1 explains that this refers to Noah and to Pharaoh, both of whom, according to tradition, were attacked and injured by a lion. An additional explanation given is that this passage refers to Aaron's sons and to Korah and his company. One group was righteous and the other wicked, but both entered the Tabernacle and were burnt. The stratagem

employed is to show that the passage is limited in scope. It is analogous to someone today taking a contemporary aphorism such as, "The good die young," and then listing particular examples of good people who died young. By so doing, it is demonstrated that the maxim refers only to certain people and, by implication, that it is not to be applied universally.

THE KABBALAH OF ECCLESIASTES

At some point, the search for Kohelet and his message must, of necessity, become a very personal one. The text is too powerful to leave one unaffected upon an in-depth reading. To attain a greater personal understanding of the manuscript and its message, *gematria*, Jewish numerology, may be utilized. The term *gematria* comes from a Greek word for "measure." It has the same word origin as the more familiar word "geometry," and in Kabbalah, it is a natural outgrowth of Judaism's fairly unique practice of letting the *aleph-bet* double as the number system. As a consequence of this custom, every word has a numerical value, and the mystical view is that words and expressions that have the same numerical value will be related in other ways as well. To the true believer, every numerical correspondence displays the hand of God, while to the skeptic, such word play is the height of folly. I, however, take a point of view that is intermediate between these two extremes. It is virtually certain that in many texts there are patterns that have been inserted on purpose such as those psalms that use the *aleph-bet* as an acrostic and begin each new line with the next letter in sequence. However, the odds are just as great that many other patterns in texts have occurred purely by chance. Unfortunately, there is no iron-clad test that allows one to differentiate between these two circumstances. Consequently, I search for meaningful coincidences without regard to their possible origin. A meaningful coincidence in this context is any *gematria* or word play that helps one make a consequential connection that would not have been made otherwise. In this manner, the import of the text evolves and expands in a natural way without having to appeal to any *deus ex machina*, and fortunately, Ecclesiastes is rife with such meaningful coincidences.

The primary explanatory *gematriot* in Ecclesiastes involve the number 216 which appears in several places in Ecclesiastes. This number is the *gematria* of the key theme of Ecclesiastes, "Futility of futilities, all is futile (Ecclesiastes 1:2)." This is also the *gematria* of the very first word of the text, *Divrei* (words of, my words). In chapter 12 of Ecclesiastes, verses 9 through 13 appear as an addendum, and the text seems to properly end with verse 8. When ended at this point, the entire corpus of Ecclesiastes contains 216 verses. Additionally, the finally words of Kohelet are again, "Futility of futilities, all is futile." Thus, the text begins and ends with the number 216, it contains 216 verses, and the essential message of Ecclesiastes has a *gematria* of 216.

The number 216 is equal to 3 times 72, and one finds both numbers mentioned in the Zohar in regard to names of God.

> "He (Habakkuk) received indeed two embracings, one from his mother and one from Elisha, as it is written, "and he put his mouth upon his mouth" (II Kings

> 4:34). In the Book of King Solomon I have found the following: He (Elisha) traced on him the mystic appellation, consisting of seventy-two names. For the alphabetical letters that his father had at first engraved on him had flown off when the child died; but when Elisha embraced him he engraved on him anew all those letters of the seventy-two names. Now the number of those letters amounts to two hundred and sixteen, and they were all engraved by the breath of Elisha on the child so as to put again into him the breath of life through the power of the letters of the seventy-two names. And Elisha named him Habakkuk, a name of double significance, alluding in its sound to the twofold embracing, as already explained, and in its numerical value (*chet*+*bet*+*kuf*+*vav*+*kuf* = 8+2+100+6+100) to two hundred and sixteen, the number of the letters of the Sacred Name. By the words his spirit was restored to him and by the letters his bodily parts were reconstituted." (Zohar I:7b)

In this Zoharic text a connection is drawn between 72 and 216 by asserting that the cumulative numerical value of the 72 names of God is 216. Another allusion to 72 may be found in Genesis Rabbah:

> R. Eleazar said in R. Jose's name: The Holy One, blessed be He, promised our forefather that He would redeem his children with these two letters (*dalet-nun*, *din*, judgment); but if they repented, He would redeem them with seventy-two letters. R. Judan said: In the passage, "[Or hath God assayed] to go and take Him a nation from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, and by wonders, and by roar, and by a mighty hand, and by an outstretched arm, and by great terrors (Deuteronomy 4:34)," you will find seventy-two letters; and should you object that there are seventy-five, deduct the second 'nation,' (*goy*, gimmel-vav-yud) which is not to be counted. R. Abin said: He redeemed them by His name, the Name of the Holy One, blessed be He, consisting of seventy-two letters. (Genesis Rabbah 44:19)

The reference above to *din* (judgment) is particularly interesting as this is one of the qualities used to describe the left side of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. On the right side one finds the *sephirah* of *chesed* (love, kindness, mercy), and on the left side is the *sephirah* generally referred to either as *din* (judgement) or as *gevurah* (strength, might). Interestingly, the *gematria* of *chesed* (*chet*+*samach*+*dalet* = 8+60+4) is 72, and the *gematria* of *gevurah* (*gimmel*+*bet*+*vav*+*resh*+*hey* = 3+2+6+200+5) is 216. This suggests that names, letters, and values related to 72 refer to God's mercy while the number 216 refers to judgment and to the harsher side of existence. Furthermore, one of the expanded spellings of the Tetragrammaton (*yud-vav-dalet* + *hey-yud* + *vav-yud-vav* + *hey-yud* = 10+6+4+5+10+6+10+6+5+10) has a numerical value of 72, thus suggesting a primary connection between God and mercy.

The fact that 216 is 3 times 72 also seems important in explaining the relationship between the harsh side of life (216) and the merciful side of life (72). For example, consider the following passage from the *Sefer Yetzirah*, The Book of Formation:

> With 32 wondrous paths of Wisdom engraved Yah, the Lord of Hosts, God of Israel, the Living God, King of the Universe, Almighty God, Merciful and Gracious, High and Exalted, dwelling in eternity, whose name is Holy, and He created His universe with three books, with text (*sepher*), with number (*sephar*), and with communication (*sippur*). (Sefer Yetzirah 1:1)

A crucial point in the above passage is that the words for the three principles used to create the world all have the same three letter root, *samach-pey-resh*, and the *gematria* of this root is 340, which is identical to the *gematria* for *shem* (*shin-mem*), name. This is important because the name of God is often used to refer to the created world as opposed to those ineffable, transcendent aspects of God. For example, the Kabbalistic Tree of Life represents the structure of the created universe, and has been linked with the sacred four letter name of God (*yud-hey-vav-hey*) by letting *yud* represent the *sephirot* of *keter* and *chokmah*, the first *hey* correspond to the *sephirah* of *binah*, the *vav* which has a numerical value of 6 correspond to the next six *sephirot*, and the final *hey* correspond to the concluding *sephirah* of *malchut*.

If we now put the pieces of this puzzle together, then we can conclude that the essence of the creation is to have one thing opposite another (text versus number, right brain versus left brain) and a dynamic communication between the two poles. This is represented in the above verse from the *Sefer Yetzirah* by the principles of *sepher*, *sephar*, and *sippur*, and because each word has the same three letter root, it is hinted that each principle is really the same, and that the opposites and the exchange that takes place between them are all manifestations of a single name of God. The principle of one thing opposite another and communication between them is stated elsewhere in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, and it is also related back to Ecclesiastes.

> "Also God made one opposite the other (Ecclesiastes 7:14)." Good opposite evil, evil opposite good. Good from good, evil from evil. Good defines evil and evil defines good. Good is kept for the good ones, and evil is kept for the evil ones. Three: Each one stands alone, One acts as advocate, one acts as accuser, and one decides between them. (Sefer Yetzirah 6:4-5)

As stated above, the *Sefer Yetzirah* suggests that the opposites and the communication between them are all manifestations of the same unity, and this is also suggested by Ecclesiastes.

> Be pleased when things go well, but in a time of misfortune reflect. God has made the one as well as the other so that no man should find nothing after Him. (Ecclesiastes 7:14)

In the cosmology of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, it is the soul represented as either *nephesh* or *ruach* that serves as the connecting link between opposites.

> Heaven was created from fire, earth was created from water, and air from breath/soul (*ruach*) decides between them. (Sefer Yetzirah 3:4)

> These are the three mothers, *aleph*, *mem*, *shin*, . . . a proof of this: true witnesses in the universe, year, soul (*nephesh*). (Sefer Yetzirah 6:1)

> Three mothers, *aleph*, *mem*, *shin*, air, water, and fire. Fire is above, water is below, and air of breath/soul (*ruach*) decides between them. (Sefer Yetzirah 6:2)

If we equate our soul with conscious awareness, then we can appreciate that it is in consciousness that disparate entities such as good and evil, space (universe) and time (year), or Doeg and David can be combined.

The pattern of opposites and an intermediary can also be modeled mathematically by positive and negative numbers on a number line with zero standing in between. The concept of zero was a late addition to the current number system. This is understandable since in all cultures numbers were originally created for counting, and as it says in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, "Before one, what do you count (Sefer Yetzirah 1:7)?" The concept of zero also did not fit easily into the philosophical systems of the Mediterranean cultures, and the closest the Greeks came to it was through their mythological concept of *Chaos* as a shapeless and disordered state that preceded creation. The corresponding Biblical concept would be *tohu va'vohu*, chaos and void.

> With a beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was chaos and void. (Genesis 1:1-2)

Genesis goes on to describe how God follows this state of chaos and void with creative acts that make separations between opposites such as light and darkness, day and night. The emergence of creation out of a primal state of chaos is also reiterated by the following verse from the *Sefer Yetzirah*.

> He formed substance out of chaos (*tohu*), and made nonexistence into existence. (Sefer Yetzirah 2:6)

In a similar manner, in modern mathematics, all of the numbers, positive and negative, can be created from logical manipulation of the null set, the set-theoretical version in mathematics of zero and the void. However, what is particularly interesting is that the *gematria* of *tohu va'vohu* is 430 which is the same as that of *nefesh*, the soul. Thus, just as zero stands in between the opposites of positive and negative and is primal in modern mathematics, so does the soul serve as the connecting link between opposite parts of creation while residing outside of the world of objective physical reality.

If we now combine all of these hints from the various *gematriot*, then the following story may be created regarding Ecclesiastes and Ecclesiastes Rabbah. While all things come from the one God, the number 72 represents those experiences that we would characterize as good or merciful, and the number 216 represents the harsher side of reality. Clearly, Ecclesiastes focuses on the latter. However, because of the more positive interpretation that is presented in Ecclesiastes Rabbah, one could say that this work represents the 72 side of the text. Additionally, since 216 is 3 times 72, we might conclude that harshness

of the world is created by the division of God's oneness into the pattern of two opposites and communication between them. However, the fact that each of the three parts is represented by 72 reminds us that God's mercy underlies all the apparent severity of creation.
An additional lesson may be drawn from the following passage in Ecclesiastes.

> He has also put a world/eternity into their minds so that man cannot comprehend what God has done from beginning to end. (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

The word for world or eternity in this passage is spelled defectively (*ayin-lamed-mem*) without the letter *vav*. As a result, its spelling is identical to a word meaning to hide or conceal. Additionally, the *gematria* of the defectively spelled word for "world" is 140 which is the same as that of *hikahel* (*hey-kuf-hey-lamed*), the verb "to assemble" from which the appellation *Kohelet* is derived. Finally, this may all be related back to the number 216 by the following passage from Deuteronomy:

> You shall place My words upon your heart and upon your soul. (Deuteronomy 11:18)

The Hebrew for "My words" is *divarai* (*dalet*+*bet*+*resh*+*yud* = 4+2+200+10) which has a numerical value of 216.

The story told by *gematria* now becomes clearer. The world of creation is one of harshness as compared to the oneness of God. This world is created, on a personal level, by that mechanism that God has put into our hearts (or minds as the word *lev* may also be translated) that performs the action of assembling a coherent reality out of the myriad perceptions that bombard it. However, this process of assembly also has the effect of concealing the underlying unity of creation. Rather than seeing a single, merciful principle that underlies the seer, the seen, and the interplay between the two, we often see only the separation that appears to shatter this unity, and thus, we experience the world only in terms of suffering and futility and alienation. However, when we understand that the knower, the known, and the act of knowing do not exist separately from one another, then this unity is restored.

THE SCIENCE OF ECCLESIASTES

Perhaps one of these reasons why Ecclesiastes has endured is that, like with many other books of the Tanach, it can be interpreted and reinterpreted in so many different ways. In this section we'll look at portions of Ecclesiastes through the lens of modern science and psychology.

As has been discussed above, Ecclesiastes spends much of its time discussing the cyclic nature of events. In mathematics, however, cycles are related to the science of permutations. For example, consider the following three permutations of the letters a, b, and c: *abc, cab, bca*. These three permutations can be generated by a rule that tells us to replace the second letter with the first, the third letter with the second, and the first letter

with the third. If we apply this rule repeatedly to the arrangement *abc*, then we will cycle endlessly through the above three permutations. In a similar manner, all permutations of a finite set of objects may be expressed mathematically in terms of combinations of repetitive cycles. With regard to Ecclesiastes, though, this connection between cycles and permutations is a hint that the meaning of the text may be more easily unraveled if we permute the verses of the text in order to group together those with a similar meaning. By so doing, a variety of themes become more apparent. Furthermore, we can identify an attempt by Kohelet to both characterize the apparent meaninglessness of life and a solution to this meaninglessness

Again, as previously mentioned, one of the problems that Kohelet identifies is that regardless of whether one is good or bad, death is the final outcome.

> The wise man's eyes are in his head, and the fool walks in darkness--and yet I perceived that one event happens to them all. Then said I in my heart, "As it happens to the fool, so will it happen even to me; and why was I then more wise?" Then said I in my heart that this also is vanity. For of the wise man, even as of the fool, there is no memory forever, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. Indeed, the wise man must die just like the fool! (Ecclesiastes 2:14-16)
>
> For that which happens to the sons of men happens to animals. Even one thing happens to them. As the one dies, so the other dies. Yes, they have all one breath; and man has no advantage over the animals: for all is vanity. All go to one place. All are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. (Ecclesiastes 3:19-20)
>
> Yes, though he live a thousand years twice told, and yet fails to enjoy good, don't all go to one place? (Ecclesiastes 6:6)
>
> It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men, and the living should take this to heart. (Ecclesiastes 7:2)
>
> All things come alike to all. There is one event to the righteous and to the wicked; to the good, to the clean, to the unclean, to him who sacrifices, and to him who doesn't sacrifice. As is the good, so is the sinner; he who takes an oath, as he who fears an oath. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one event to all: yes also, the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead. (Ecclesiastes 9:2-3)
>
> Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in She'ol, where you are going. (Ecclesiastes 9:10)

In the parlance of modern mathematics, we would refer to death as an *attractor*. In non-technical terms, an *attractor* is a final destination for a process that is approached

regardless of the sequence of events or path that is taken. For example, if we start a marble rolling at the top of a large bowl, then we know that gravity will make the marble eventually wind up at the bottom of the bowl. It doesn't matter whether the marble rolls straight to the bottom or if it first makes several orbits around the side of the bowl. The bowl's bottom remains its destiny, and for that reason we refer to its final state at the bottom as the *attractor* for this scenario.

Complementary to the concept of an *attractor* is that of a *repeller*. Just as, in some sense, a system will over time move closer to its *attractor* (if any), so will it also move further away from any *repellers*. In the example given above of the marble and the bowl we can think of the bottom of the bowl as the *attractor* and the top of the bowl as the *repeller*. Every marble, no matter its path, will move closer to the bottom and away from the top. Similarly, regardless of whether we take a good or a bad path in life, every moment moves us further away from our birth and closer to our death. Death is the *attractor* and the moment that gives us life in this world is the *repeller*. Understandably, Kohelet sees this as a possible cause for concern.

On an individual level we can understand much of our own lives in terms of *attractors* and *repellers*. For each of us there are those things we dislike and those things we keep coming back to. For instance, in my life mathematics has been an *attractor* and a mainstay that I have continually returned to. On the other hand, brussel sprouts are definitely a *repeller* to me! In general, our likes and dislikes are the *attractors* and *repellers* that guide our lives, and they help define the directions we will take in life. They impart to us a sense of destiny and give our lives meaning on a personal level. Yet, in spite of that, as Kohelet observes, all of us will have to eventually face and come to terms with the ultimate *attractor* of death.

There are many things that Kohelet sees futility in, and the passages below highlight another universal *attractor* that might be referred to as "entropy."

> For in much wisdom is much grief; and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow. (Ecclesiastes 1:18)
>
> Don't be overly righteous, neither make yourself overly wise. Why should you destroy yourself? Don't be too wicked, neither be foolish. Why should you die before your time? (Ecclesiastes 7:16-17)
>
> Furthermore, my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh. (Ecclesiastes 12:12)

In thermodynamics, entropy is a measure of the amount of thermal energy that is unavailable for work. Typically, the amount of energy in a closed system remains unchanged. However, the amount that is available for actual use tends to decrease over time. For example, imagine putting a hot rock into a pan of cold water. At the start of this process the hot rock possesses a considerable amount of energy that may be used to heat the water. Eventually, though, this heat will become evenly distributed throughout

the water. The water becomes lukewarm. All the original energy is still there, but because the system is now at a constant temperature throughout, the energy is no longer in a useable form. Entropy has increased.

In more general terms, entropy has come to be associated with the amount of randomness in a system and with increases in disorder and decay. Highly ordered systems are associated with low entropy while random systems represent higher levels of entropy. The amount of entropy in the universe always tends to increase because so many processes that result in an increase in entropy are irreversible. For instance, the heating of the water above by using a hot rock is irreversible. We never see the process reverse itself by going from a lukewarm rock and water back to a heated rock and cold water. In this way, the laws of thermodynamics define time arrows that point in only one direction. Even though Ecclesiastes Rabbah provides different interpretations, nonetheless, it seems that Kohelet understood in practical terms that some processes are irreversible.

> That which is crooked can't be made straight. (Ecclesiastes 1:15)
>
> Consider the work of God, for who can make that straight, which he has made crooked? (Ecclesiastes 7:13)

Kohelet also seems to understand the concept of entropy in terms of the decay and deterioration that accompany any process (Ecclesiastes 12:12). Just as exercise initially breaks down muscle tissue, so does some amount of deterioration or decay accompany every effort that a person may make. Consequently, why should a person accelerate this process through too much study or too much effort to be righteous?

Given that it is the nature of the universe that entropy and disorder always increase, a persistent question has always been how highly organized complex structures such as ourselves could ever come into existence. In 1977, Ilya Prigogine was awarded the Nobel Prize in chemistry for his work in nonequilibrium thermodynamics that addressed this very issue of how complex structures can arise while simultaneously contributing to the overall increase in entropy. The key to his theory is that if a system is open to exchanging energy with its surrounding environment, then it can attain a high degree of local organization while simultaneously adding to the overall amount of entropy in the universe. Prigogine uses the example of a modern city. The city is a highly organized structure, but it is able to remain so only because of the constant flow of goods in and out of it. The city retains its ordered state while, nonetheless, contributing to the overall disorder in a larger area. However, once the flow of goods and supplies stop, then structures in the city can no longer be replenished and decay eventually sets in. In thermodynamics, stable systems that can exchange energy with their surrounding environment in such a way are called *dissipative structures*.

In Judaism, the positive benefits of exchanging energy with the surrounding environment have long been recognized. Such exchanges may be summed up by the single word *tzedakah* (charity). In a very real sense, charity is an exchange of energy in monetary form, and in the Talmud, charity is paramount.

> Charity is equivalent to all the other religious precepts combined. (B. Baba Bathra 9a)

In Ecclesiastes, references are made to the positive benefits of charity and maintaining the exchange of energy.

> Cast your bread on the waters, for you shall find it after many days. Give a portion to seven, yes, even to eight, for you don't know what evil will be on the earth. If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth. (Ecclesiastes 11:1-3)

> In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening don't withhold your hand, for you don't know which will prosper, whether this or that, or whether they will be equally good. (Ecclesiastes 11:6)

As these passages suggest, charity, in practice, is not simply a one-way street. Instead, charity opens up a flow of energy that eventually returns to us just as the mist that rises from the earth eventually returns as rain.

> And a mist went up from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground. (Genesis 2:6)

The exchange of energy with the surrounding environment is only one step, however, in the preservation of complex structures. Such exchanges merely help to replenish our supply of useable energy. To be fully effective, however, that energy must be utilized for repair and renewal of existing structures, and the end result of such repair is essentially a "resetting of the clock." For example, death is an *attractor* that we all move closer to, but through exercise and proper diet we can momentarily restore our youth, reset the clock, and mover ourselves further away from death. In the example of the marble and the bowl, resetting the clock would amount to picking the marble up and setting it once again at the top of the bowl. The marble's final fate is not avoided, but it is postponed.

Judaism suggests that one "resets the clock" through the performance of *mitzvot*. By following the commandments, death is avoided and health is restored.

> Whoever keeps the mitzvah shall not come to harm. (Ecclesiastes 8:5)

> And said, If you will diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God, and will do that which is right in his sight, and will give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon you, which I have brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord that heals you. (Exodus 15:26)

> You shall walk in all the ways which the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which you shall possess. (Deuteronomy 5:30)

> Let your heart retain my words; keep my commandments, and live. (Proverbs 4:4)

> Charity saves from death, as it is written, Righteousness [zedakah] delivereth from death. (B. Baba Bathra 10a)

Another concept from modern science and mathematics that is apropos to this discussion of Ecclesiastes is that of *sensitivity to initial conditions*. This refers to situations where a small change becomes magnified over time. For example, we now know that, even with sophisticated computers, it is impossible to predict the weather more than a few weeks in advance because small errors in the measurement of temperature or wind speed lead to very different meteorological results over time. This is often referred to as the *butterfly effect*, the notion that something as small as a butterfly flapping its wings can be magnified over time and can be the cause of global weather changes. This particular metaphor originated with the title of a paper presented by meteorologist Edward Lorenz at the 1972 meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington, D.C., "*Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly's Wings in Brazil set off a Tornado in Texas?*" To give an illustration of sensitivity to initial conditions that is purely mathematical, consider what happens if we take the numbers 0.99, 1, and 1.01, and square them over and over again. Each number differs from one of its neighbors by only a hundredth, but repeatedly squaring the first number leads to a sequence that gets closer and closer to zero while repeatedly squaring the last number creates a sequence that gets larger and larger without bound. Meanwhile, the number 1 remains unchanged as we square it. Thus, when it comes to repeatedly squaring a number, the end result is very sensitive to whether our number is 1, slightly smaller than 1, or slightly larger than 1.

RESULTS OF REPEATEDLY SQUARING A NUMBER

0.9900	1	1.01
0.9801	1	1.0201
0.9606	1	1.040604
0.9227	1	1.082857
0.8515	1	1.172579
0.7250	1	1.374941
0.5256	1	1.890462
0.2763	1	3.573846
0.0763	1	12.77238
0.0058	1	163.1336

Kohelet also recognizes that some outcomes may be sensitive to one's starting point. For example, he observes that the wicked and the foolish often seem to prosper, but then suggests in Ecclesiastes 7:20 that this outcome may be due to the fact that no one is wholly righteous. Consequently, a single action might alter the balance and determine one's fate.

> Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there. (Ecclesiastes 3:16)

> All this have I seen in my days of vanity: there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who live long in his evil doing. (Ecclesiastes 7:15)

> There is a vanity that is done on the earth, that there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the work of the wicked. Again there are wicked men to whom it happens according to the work of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. (Ecclesiastes 8:14)

> There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, the sort of error which proceeds from the ruler. Folly is set in great dignity, and the rich sit in a low place. I have seen servants on horses, and princes walking like servants on the earth. (Ecclesiastes 10:5-7)

> Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and doesn't sin. (Ecclesiastes 7:20)

A psychological perspective can help us understand both the problems and the solutions that are described in Ecclesiastes. One point made in the text is that there is no end to one's desires.

> The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. (Ecclesiastes 1:8)

> There is no end to all of his labor. Neither are his eyes satisfied with wealth. (Ecclesiastes 4:8)

> All the labor of man is for his mouth, and yet the appetite is not filled. (Ecclesiastes 6:7)

Ecclesiastes Rabbah also understands this principle that a person's desires are unlimited.

> R. Judan said in the name of R. Aibu: Nobody departs from the world with half his desire gratified. If he has a hundred he wants to turn them into two hundred, and if he has two hundred he wants to turn them into four hundred. (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:32)

However, in spite of the abundance of our desires, Kohelet notices that their fulfillment fails to bring happiness.

> And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly; I perceived that this also was a striving after wind. For in much wisdom there is much grief; and he that increases knowledge increases sorrow. I said in my heart, Come now, I will try you with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure; and, behold, this also is vanity. I said of laughter, It is mad; and of mirth, What does it achieve? I sought in my heart to give myself to wine, yet guiding my heart with

> wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life. I made great works for myself; I built houses; I planted vineyards; I made gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruits; I made pools of water, to water with it a forest of growing trees. I acquired servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than all who were in Jerusalem before me; I gathered also silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and of the provinces; I acquired men singers and women singers, and, the delight of men, many women. And I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired I kept not from them, I did not restrain my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labor; and this was my portion of all my labor. Then I looked at all the works that my hands had done, and at the labor that I had labored to do; and, behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 1:17-2:11)
>
> He who loves silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he who loves abundance with gain. (Ecclesiastes 5:9)
>
> As he came forth from his mother's womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing for his labor, which he may carry away in his hand. And this also is a grievous evil, that in all points as he came, so shall he go; and what gains has he who has labored for the wind? (Ecclesiastes 5:14-15)

These are the problems with life as seen by Kohelet. One is destined for death regardless of whether one is wise or a fool, life often seems unjust, and the fulfillment of external desires does not lead to lasting happiness. However, Kohelet also seems to provide a solution to these dilemmas. Amidst all the change and cyclic repetition in the world, Kohelet notes that there also seems to be a fixed point that does not change.

> One generation goes and another generation comes, but the earth remains forever. (Ecclesiastes 1:4)
>
> All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full. To the place where the rivers flow, there they flow again. (Ecclesiastes 1:7)

The earth is used as a symbol for eternity above, and it is reminiscent of the frequent imagery in the Tanach of a rock as a metaphor for God.

> He is the Rock, his work is perfect; for all his ways are justice; a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he. (Deuteronomy 32:4)
>
> Trust you in the Lord forever; for the Lord God is an eternal Rock. (Isaiah 26:4)
>
> He alone is my Rock and my salvation; he is my refuge; I shall not be moved. (Psalms 62:7)

The earth and rocks represent a state of permanence, and similarly, the sea also represents a body that does not flow or change. Consequently, all can be symbols for a God that represents the one fixed point in an ever changing universe.

> I am the Lord, I do not change. (Malachi 3:6)

Kohelet suggests that everything under the sun is subject to change while this fixed point of God remains unchanged.

> What does man gain from all his labor in which he toils under the sun? One generation goes and another generation comes, but the earth remains forever. (Ecclesiastes 1:3-4)

Thus, it now becomes implicit that since things under the sun are changeable, God must belong to a different category. As noted in Genesis Rabbah 68:9, "God is the dwelling-place of His world but His world is not His dwelling-place." We might, furthermore, deduce that the category "under the sun" includes just the usual objects of experience and that God is, therefore, not something that can be objectified in the same manner as a book or a tree. This is a thesis that will be explored further in this paper.

Man is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), but if God is incorporeal and unchanging, then that suggests that this image must also be incorporeal and unchanging. The obvious candidate for that part of us which is most like God is our conscious awareness. Our ego, our sense of "I," changes slowly over time, but even before we develop a sense of self we possess conscious awareness, and, like God, this awareness seems incorporeal and unchanging even as the images that it fuses with are constantly changing. Furthermore, based on Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:3, this awareness is a "shadow with substance" since it is a reflection of a permanent reality. Meanwhile, the images that dwell in awareness are "shadows without substance" since they reflect transitory conditions.

> If life is like the shadow cast by a wall, there is substance in it; if like the shadow cast by a date-palm, there is substance in it! David came and explained, His days are as a shadow that passes away (Psalms 144:4). R. Huna said in the name of R. Aha: Life is like a bird which flies past and its shadow passes with it. Samuel said: It is like the shadow of bees in which there is no substance at all. (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:3)

The great mystery of life is the existence of this awareness that makes us more than a mere machine. While much of the body and brain can be understood in purely mechanical terms, the arising of consciousness is a conundrum that has yet to be solved. The ghost in the machine remains unexplained, but like God this silent observer appears incorporeal and unchanging as it ceaselessly observes all the corporeal changes that occur in our lives. Additionally, the mystery of conscious awareness crosses over from the

realm of mysticism into the realm of science most notably in the field of quantum physics.

According to quantum physics, all matter has a dual wave/particle nature. In other words, sometimes atomic elements will act as if they are comprised of waves which can interfere with one another much as waves in the ocean can combine to form peaks and valleys in their undulation, and at other times, they will act as if they are discrete particles. The transition from wave to particle form, the so-called collapse of the wave function, has been called the essential mystery of quantum physics. The act and manner of measurement of events can trigger this transition from wave to particle, but exactly how and when this transition occurs has been the subject of much discussion over the years. The experimenter can be treated as part of the measuring instrument, and it has been noted that the moment of transition from wave to particle can be pushed back to the very instant of conscious observation. In theory, this leads to a very interesting and paradoxical situation known as "Schrödinger's Cat." This thought-experiment was presented in 1935 in a paper by physicist Erwin Shrödinger in order to show how the strangeness of quantum physics at the microscopic level can, theoretically, intrude into the macroscopic level. In essence, this thought-experiment involves placing a cat in a box along with a Geiger counter, a tiny bit of radioactive substance, a flask of hydrocyanic acid, and a hammer mechanism that will shatter the flask and kill the cat if the Geiger counter detects the decay of an atom. We can assume, for the sake of argument, that at the end of an hour that there is a fifty-fifty chance that an atom has decayed. According to pre-quantum theories of reality, we would expect the cat to then be either definitely dead or definitely alive regardless of whether we look into the chamber. However, in quantum physics, probabilities are the "realities," and the cat simultaneously exists in both states (dead and alive) until we complete our measurement by glimpsing into the box. The transition from this wave of simultaneity into a more particular state is the "collapse of the wave function," and, as some would interpret quantum physics, this transition requires the presence of conscious awareness.

If we now accept the premise that our awareness is a reflection of God and that it is the part of our lives that is, as Ecclesiastes states it, a "shadow with substance," then perception becomes the key to communion with the Life of the Worlds. Furthermore, this also becomes the key to unlocking some of the solutions given in Ecclesiastes to the problems of life as recognized by Kohelet.

As noted previously, according to Kohelet, desires are endless, and yet, their fulfillment does not bring happiness. Nonetheless, the text hints at a solution to this endless entanglement with desires.

> All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; to the place from where the rivers come, there they return again. (Ecclesiastes 1:7)

Normally, a person's attention is directed outwards towards their desires and objects of perception. However, each perception can also be used to direct attention back to the very source of awareness. As the rivers run into the sea, so do our perceptions

continually merge with our sea of consciousness, and rather than letting perceptions take us away from the center of our being, they can be used to continually direct us toward it. As a "moving meditation," we can constantly let our perceptions point us back toward that awareness which is beyond perception . Such a procedure can be used with both positive and negative perceptions and help us deal with adverse conditions in our life as is suggested by the following passage.

> In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider; God has made the one as well as the other, to the end that man should find nothing after him. (Ecclesiastes 7:14)

The statement "that man should find nothing after Him" taken in its most extreme sense suggests that there is nothing but God. A deeper examination of perception can lead to the same conclusion. For example, we customarily divide the process of perception into the observer, the observed, and the very act of observation. However, in many respects, this separation is artificial since there is no observed without an observer or the act of observation. A metaphor for this exists in modern physics where particles such as protons and neutrons are believed to be composed of combinations of smaller particles called quarks. However, according to theory, quarks never exist in isolation from one another. As if joined by super powerful rubber bands, attempts to separate a proton into its constituent quarks are met by even stronger forces that guarantee that everything will be held together. In a similar manner, the knower, the known, and the act of knowing seem to be separate components of perception, and yet we can never adequately separate one from the other. Instead, we can move in the opposite direction towards unity and realize that at the moment when the object to be known has merged with the knower, then the knower, the known, and the act of knowing have all become an indivisible whole. As mentioned previously, this indivisibility of experience is also hinted at in the *Sefer Yetzirah* 1:1 where it says, "He created His universe with three books, with text (sepher), with number (saphar), and with communication (sippur)." This verse can be interpreted as referring to two opposites and communication between them such as right brain (text), left brain (number), and their interaction (communication). In such a way, a world is created. Similarly, we can say that our world of perception consists of an observer, the observed, and the act of observation (communication between the observer and the observed). However, since the words *sepher*, *saphar*, and *sippur* all have the same three letter root (samach-pey-resh), this suggests that the division of reality into three parts is ultimately illusory. In the triad of the observer, the observed, and the act of observation, no part exists without the others being present, and when viewed from this perspective, perception can be imbued with a sense of *shalem*, wholeness.

While a greater awareness of the act of perception can help mend divisions in our conscious experience and redirect attention away from the objects of desire to the source of our being, pure awareness itself is not something that can be observed in the same way as a tree or a book. We can be aware of the existence of awareness and experience a communion with it, but our language seems to lack the words to adequately describe what is taking place. In many respects, we understand the parts, but must be silent about the whole, and as Ecclesiastes suggests, much of it will always be a mystery.

> He has also set a world in their hearts, so that man can't find out the work that God has done form the beginning to the end. (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

> That which is, is far off and very deep. Who can find it out? (Ecclesiastes 7:24)

Awareness is, in many ways, to the rest of our experience as the number zero is to the rest of mathematics. As noted previously, the number zero, as we understand it today, was a very late addition to the number system (circa 458 C.E. in India). This is due to the fact that numbers were originally used to count things, and the minimum number that can be counted is "1." As it says in Ecclesiastes:

> That which is lacking can't be counted. (Ecclesiastes 1:15)

It is no accident that the modern notion of zero developed first in India rather than ancient Greece since the concept of "nothingness" was an anathema to Greek philosophers. On the other hand, philosophers in India were very comfortable with this concept, and one of the original terms for zero was *sunya*, the void, which is also a term used to refer to the Buddhist concept of *nirvana*.

Deep awareness of holiness can result in feelings of extreme awe as one is caught up in a profound unity that shatters one's prior perceptions of reality. Such an experience is described by the poet Walt Whitman in his epic poem, "Song of Myself."

> I hear the train'd soprano (what work with hers is this?)
> The orchestra whirls me wider than Uranus flies,
> It wrenches such ardors from me I did not know I possess'd them,
> It sails me, I dab with bare feet, they are lick'd by the indolent waves,
> I am cut by bitter and angry hail, I lose my breath,
> Steep'd amid honey'd morphine, my windpipe throttled in fakes of death,
> At length let up again to feel the puzzle of puzzles,
> And that we call Being. ("Song of Myself [Verse 26]", Leaves of Grass, Walt Whitman)

Frequently in the Tanach, one reads that one should fear God, but the Hebrew word *y'rah* can be translated not only as "fear," but also as "awe," and the latter interpretation seems to more appropriately describe mystical encounters with Divinity. Thus, when Kohelet says to fear God, this can also be understood as a statement that one must have the type of intimate contact with God that leads to those feelings of awe that are a remedy to the despair that is otherwise encountered in this world. Furthermore, such encounters seem to result in a type of wisdom that is different from that which Kohelet has previously described as futile. Instead, encounters with God appear to lead to a wisdom that exists *a priori* to other kinds of constructs as is evidenced by certain passages from Proverbs.

> For in the multitude of dreams and many words there are also many vanities; but you, fear God. (Ecclesiastes 5:6)

> The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; and the knowledge of holy matters is understanding. (Proverbs 9:10)
>
> The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do his commandments; his praise endures forever. (Psalms 111:10)
>
> The Lord by wisdom has founded the earth; by understanding has he established the heavens. (Proverbs 3:19)
>
> Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn out her seven pillars. (Proverbs 9:1)

The type of wisdom that results from communion with God is definitely seen by Kohelet as something desirable to have.

> Wisdom is good with an inheritance; and by it there are gains to those who see the sun. For wisdom is a defense, and money is a defense; and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom gives life to those who have it. (Ecclesiastes 7:11-12)
>
> There was a little city, and few men in it; and there came a great king against it, and besieged it, and built great siege works against it; And a poor wise man was found in it, and he by his wisdom delivered the city; yet no man remembered that poor man. And said I, Wisdom is better than might; but the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard. (Ecclesiastes 9:14-16)

In the last quotation above, think of the city as the body, and think of the king against it as representing the shocks and problems that come from life. Then the wisdom that comes from a proper understanding of the nature of reality can help protect us from these shocks of life by putting everything into a more correct perspective.

While wisdom results from a correct perception of God and reality, anger can just as quickly take it away from us.

> Be not hasty in your spirit to be angry; for anger rests in the bosom of fools. (Ecclesiastes 7:9)
>
> If the anger of a ruler rises against you, leave not your place; for deference pacifies great offenses. (Ecclesiastes 10:4)

In addition to learning to experience wholeness in diversity, another solution that Kohelet gives for dealing with the vagaries of life is to stay in the present. Our thoughts are often focused either on past experiences or future desires, but both directions take us away from the source of our awareness and the realization that all that exists for us is the present moment.

> So I saw that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his work; for that is his portion; who can bring him to see what shall be after him? (Ecclesiastes 3:22)

> Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire; this also is vanity and striving after wind. (Ecclesiastes 6:9)

> Do not say, Why were the former days better than these? Because you are not asking this from wisdom. (Ecclesiastes 7:10)

So often our attention is focused just on the past. We constantly replay in our mind tapes of past situations that have made us either happy or sad, angry or elated. Regardless of the nature of the recording, these tapes distort our perception of the present and the power of the present moment.

On the one hand, changing certain habits of perception can lead to a larger experience of reality, but on the other hand, there are external conditions that are more advantageous to such a progression occurring. In particular, it is easier to accomplish such realizations during a time of life when things are going well. Thus, Kohelet makes the recommendation that this path be pursued while one is still young.

> Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come. (Ecclesiastes 12:1)

Community with other people can also be helpful. When we are in relationship with others, this helps overcome the sense of separation and lack of wholeness that might otherwise be present in life.

> Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him that is alone when he falls; for he has not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have warmth; but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; a threefold cord is not quickly broken. (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12)

And finally, Kohelet recommends the path of the commandments as a remedy to the misfortunes of life.

> Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. (Ecclesiastes 12:13)

In all, 613 commandments are given in the Torah. However, the Bavli gives some summations that are also extremely helpful.

> Hillel said to him, “What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah.” (B. Shabbat 31a)

> Charity is equivalent to all the other religious precepts combined. (B. Baba Bathra 9a)

> Our Rabbis taught, In three respects is Gemilut Hasadim (acts of loving kindness) superior to charity: charity can be done only with one's money, but Gemilut Hasadim can be done with one's person and one's money. Charity can be given only to the poor, Gemilut Hasadim both to the rich and the poor. Charity can be given to the living only, Gemilut Hasadim can be done both to the living and to the dead. (B. Sukkah 49b)

In summary, while Kohelet recognizes the many futilities of earthly existence, he also recommends solutions to these dilemmas. On an external level, one can follow the commandments, treat people properly, make oneself a part of the community, and keep the energy flowing through performing *tzdakah* and acts of loving kindness. Internally, one can meditate and learn to connect with Divinity by letting every perception lead us back to the source of perception. Such a practice can result in a greater unity of experience and lead to those feelings of awe that result from greater contact with God. Additionally, when we learn to fully experience the present moment, then we can realize the words of the great poet William Blake:

> If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is: infinite**.** ("The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," Plate 14, William Blake)

And finally, since we never know what will work best to help us escape the futility of existence, we must, as Kohelet suggests, constantly be planting seeds for our future.

> In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold your hand; for you do not know which shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both alike shall be good. (Ecclesiastes 11:6)

CONCLUSION

From a scholarly perspective one may conclude that Ecclesiastes is a late work that was not written by Solomon and that was considered problematic by the sages of the post-Talmudic era. However, since the work was eventually canonized, it became the task of Ecclesiastes Rabbah to not only reaffirm the myth of Solomonic authorship, but to also reinterpret the text in a positive light that provides meaning to the universe while reasserting the teachings of Rabbinical Judaism. The genius of Ecclesiastes Rabbah lies in the remarkable way in which it accomplishes this task.

However, as is also pointed out above, one cannot study either text in-depth without them leaving their mark upon one's person. In particular, one has to confront the lack of meaning to life that is presented by Ecclesiastes, and one has to come to terms with it. For this malady, Ecclesiastes Rabbah is a unique antidote. Additionally, one can also use *gematria*, not from the standpoint of a true believer, but simply as a tool for stimulating the imagination in order to help one make those meaningful connections that extend

one's understanding. From this judicious use of numerology, conclusions can be drawn that the world is indeed composed of the bleakness that is conveyed by Ecclesiastes, but at the same time it encompasses the positive messages of purpose and meaning that are to be found in Ecclesiastes Rabbah. In many ways, the two texts represent the traditional dichotomy that we find between the blessing and the curse in Deuteronomy. However, a deeper perspective suggests that these opposites are actually the same, and when we realize that it is only our internal assembler that has concealed this underlying truth from us, then our personal search for the wisdom of Kohelet has finally come to its end.

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