QOHELETH IN CURRENT RESEARCH

by

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Ten years ago a survey of Qoheleth research was published by Breton (1973) in *Biblical Theology Bulletin*. The essay treats commentaries first, then deals with special studies on particular problems of interpretation. Under the first category, Breton described current thinking about the following seven topics: 1) place and date of origin; 2) influences and language; 3) unity; 4) style; 5) Qoheleth and traditional wisdom; 6) pessimism and faith; and 7) *hebel*. The section on special studies, somewhat more extensive, discusses recent essays on 1) philology, 2) style, 3) structure, 4) wisdom, 5) God, 6) pessimism, 7) time, 8) the relationship between Qoheleth and other biblical books, 9) historical data in Qoheleth, and 10) death. Breton emphasized the inadequacy of traditional approaches to the book, expressing the opinion that much of modern research merely restates older views. Thus Barucq (1968) quotes Podechard (1912) over sixty times, Hertzberg (1963) relies heavily upon Delitzsch (1877), while both Loretz (1964) and Ellermeier (1967) underline the significance of older authors again and again. Anyone who has compared commentaries must surely concur in this judgment, and thus stands face to face with a shocking claim of Qoheleth: "There is nothing new under the sun" (1:9b). What follows, therefore, is an attempt to bring up to date the story of research into the book that evokes such contradictory responses in those who wrestle with its presence in the Hebrew Bible. Although I shall emphasize the last ten years, those publications will be set in the larger context of research during the last half century.

Unlike Breton, I envision an interpretive history of research. My mentor in this respect is Galling, whose comprehensive surveys of Qoheleth research appeared in *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* (1932) and in *Theologische Rundschau* (1934). In the first of them, Galling isolated four main issues for discussion: 1) the theme of the book; 2) the autobiographical form; 3) the relationship between Qoheleth and ancient Near Eastern wisdom; and 4) the influence of Greek philosophy upon the book. Galling concluded that Qoheleth lacks a unified theme and an or-

ganic structure. Instead, it consists of thirty-seven separate sentences or aphoristic units. The royal fiction, of Egyptian vintage, is wholly devoid of biographical value, Galling insisted, and therefore provides no historical information about the unknown author. Indeed, that fiction of royal authorship quickly fades, and the rest of the book takes the form of a dispute with "school wisdom." The chief stylistic medium in this debate is the broken sentence, in which the first part presents traditional views only to be corrected by the author's understanding of the real situation. The major part of Galling's survey is actually a thorough presentation of this phenomenon of broken sentences in the book. The third issue, forced upon biblical critics by the remarkable discovery a few years earlier that the Egyptian Instruction of Amenemope influenced Prov 22:17-23:33, did not seem promising to Galling, who does not push beyond Humbert's findings (1929). Even those Egyptian borrowings, such as the literary device of royal authorship, the allusion in 10:16f to cultivated fields of the king, and the philosophy encapsulated in the slogan *carpe diem*, bear Qoheleth's individual stamp. The final issue, that of Greek influence upon the book, was set aside, since Galling intended to publish a separate essay on Theognis. So far as I can determine, that essay never materialized.

The second survey essay by Galling spreads its net wider still, focusing on seven topics: 1) the text, language, and date of the book; 2) its unity; 3) its composition; 4) Qoheleth and Greek philosophy; 5) the relationship with Egyptian wisdom; 6) an analysis of the book's structure; and 7) its theological perspective. Galling opted for a third century date in Jerusalem, and conceded that Aramaisms are sprinkled throughout the book. He argued for the presence of editorial additions in 3:17; 8:5, 12, 13; 11:9b; 12:7b; and the epilogues. Two other texts, 2:26 and 7:26, usually thought to be additions, are understood in a non-moral sense, and are therefore retained as authentic teachings of Qoheleth. Galling rejected an organic unity, insisting on individual sentences. While acknowledging the atmosphere of popular Greek philosophy in Qoheleth, Galling denied a Greek source for such phrases as "the good that is beautiful" (5:17), "chance" (cf. 1 Sam 6:9; Ruth 2:3 for similar use of *miqrēh*), and "to see (enjoy) good" (cf. 2 Sam 12:18). Furthermore, he noted the absence in Qoheleth of a contrast between aristocracy and plebes, so essential to Theognis. Egyptian influence seemed undeniable to Galling, who mentioned the following verses in this regard: 1:12; 8:2, 10; 10:4; 7:10, 13f; 8:13. He did note, however, that Papyrus Insinger lacks the distinctly personal touch in Qoheleth, who found no place for a hymn to the creator. In this respect, Ben Sira

demonstrates clear affinities with Insinger.[1] As far as internal structure is concerned, Galling rejected attempts to see a pervasive influence of the Yahwistic creation narrative upon the book. He went so far as to deny familiarity with Israel's history of creation. That led Galling to discuss the theological perspective of the book. Far from speaking out of the category of revelation, Qoheleth maintained distance between creature and creator and spoke for the people. In Galling's judgment, Qoheleth dwelt on the periphery of Yahwism.[2]

Explaining Inconsistencies within the Book

Is it possible to ascertain a common theme in Qoheleth research during the period under review? Unless I am mistaken the essential issue for more than fifty years has been the search for an adequate means of explaining inconsistencies within the book. A more pressing concern seems to have motivated this endeavor, even though frequently waiting inconspicuously in the shadows. That desire was to determine authentic teachings of Qoheleth. One suspects that historical interest alone cannot explain this compulsion. That is why theological issues always seem to surface in discussions of Qoheleth.

Qoheleth affirms divine action, both punishment and reward (7:18, 26; 3:11, 14; 11:5), but he also contends that God is so far away that no one can comprehend the divine ways (8:17; 5:1). Life is better than death (9:4-6), but the dead are more fortunate (4:2), and Qoheleth hates life (2:17). Wisdom is unprofitable and empty (1:17-18; 2:13-16), but it is an advantage when accompanied by a heritage (7:11); it is useful (7:19) and preferable to force (9:16-18). Joy is empty (2:2-3, 10-11), but it is good (5:19; 8:15) and comes from God (2:24-26). Work is grievous and unprofitable (1:13-14; 2:11, 18; 3:10; 4:6), but God gives it for human enjoyment (5:18). Woman lacks real worth (not one in a thousand, 7:26-27), but a man ought to enjoy the wife he loves (9:9). Retribution does not operate (8:10-14), and all are equal in the grave (9:2-3), but God keeps a tally of merits (7:18, 26) and will eventually judge everyone (11:9).[3]

1. The kinship between Ben Sira and Papyrus Insinger has recently been examined by J. Sanders, *Ben Sira and Demotic Wisdom*, SBLMS, 28, Chico, 1983.

2. One other survey of research on Qoheleth appeared in 1980 (P. C. Beentjes, "Recente visies op Qohelet," *Bijdragen: Tijdschrift voor Filosofie en Theologie* 41:346-444), but it is largely devoted to a single monograph, C. F. Whitley, *Koheleth*.

3. On such inconsistencies within Qoheleth, see A. Barucq, "Qoheleth (Livre de l'ecclésiaste ou de)," p. 613 in *Supplément au Dictionaire de la Bible*, 50B, 1977.

Naturally, such inconsistency in the book produces opposing interpretations, even with respect to the overall tone. Was Qoheleth an optimist despite everything, or was he a pessimist? Von Rad (1972, p. 231; cf. Whybray, 1981a) thought Qoheleth's heart beat with gusto when the subject of enjoying life's pleasures presented itself, and Rousseau (1981) has opted for the dominance of that refrain over the more frequent one asserting life's absurdity. Of course, a moderate position commends itself to others, for example Klopfenstein (1972), who conceded that skepticism has invaded Qoheleth's thoughts and taken up residence, but that doubt concerns human ability and never extends to God. The present author (1981, pp. 126-148, 254-256) has argued for the prominence of pessimism, largely on the basis of the consistent qualification that Qoheleth attaches to each allusion to enjoyment. In another essay (1980) he has insisted that skepticism, which perceives the disparity between present reality and a vision of a just society, passes over into pessimism in this book.

A related question has prompted considerable debate: was Qoheleth the guardian of authentic Yahwism or did he circle around biblical faith, remaining on the outermost fringes? Zimmerli (1964) has insisted that Qoheleth preserved the old belief in Yahweh's freedom and grounded human response in proper fear, working his theology out of the revelatory category of creation. On the other hand, von Rad (1972, pp. 232-237) has located Qoheleth's thought on the perimeter of Israelite faith, in this judgment concurring in Gese's declaration that Qoheleth, and wisdom in general, was an alien body in the canon (1958). Hertzberg (1963) and Forman (1960) attempted to demonstrate Qoheleth's indebtedness to the Yahwistic creation narrative, while Sheppard (1977) and Childs (1979, pp. 580-589) discussed the significance of the final epilogue in setting the tone for reading the entire book. Goldin (1966) and Holm-Nielsen (1974; 1975/76; cf. Murphy, 1982) examined varying attitudes in Judaism and Christianity to the epilogue and to the whole book respectively.

Differences persist in other matters as well. Was Qoheleth a misogynist? Did he advocate nothing in excess, not even virtue? Was he a conservative or a radical? Lohfink (1979) has addressed the first question, that of Qoheleth's attitude to women. Largely by appealing to several stages in the development of the ideas found in 7:23-28, Lohfink sought to exonerate Qoheleth of prejudice against women, who on the other reading of the text are only one one-thousands less trustworthy than men. The crucial verse was taken by Lohfink to be a citation from traditional wisdom, which Qoheleth refuted. Whybray (1979) has sought to isolate conservative and radical tendencies in Qoheleth's thought. In his view, Qoheleth draws

heavily upon Jewish wisdom, not Egyptian, Greek or Mesopotamian, but he interprets these traditions in a radical manner. In another essay Whybray (1978) has stoutly refused to concede immoral advice to this sage. By means of a syntactical analysis of 7:16-17, he challenged the usual understanding of this passage. It does not, he insisted, commend a middle course between virtue and vice, but attacks self-righteousness.

Perhaps the most frequently used word to characterize Qoheleth is crisis (Crüzemann, 1979a; Hengel, 1974). Even here opposite viewpoints exist. Gese (1963) has put forth the thesis that in Qoheleth a crisis of wisdom explodes the atmosphere of a doctrinaire school. Schmid (1966, pp. 186-196) has offered a slight revision, but his view virtually amounts to the same thing: Qoheleth has given up all hope of securing existence through wisdom, since its ability to cope has vanished. Schmid noted the remarkable inconsequence that Qoheleth did not give up faith in God. On the other hand, Lauha (1955; cf. Crüzemann, 1979b) compared Job and Qoheleth, the former as *homo religiosus* and the latter as a secular individual. For Lauha, the crisis occurs in the realm of faith: God no longer guarantees an order in which goodness receives divine favor and wickedness results in punishment (cf. Müller, 1978).

To recapitulate, contradictions within the book of Qoheleth evoke opposing interpretations of the real thought to be attributed to the teacher. Critics cannot agree where the emphasis falls, and the result has been lively debate that so far has generated little consensus. How can the tensions within the book be explained? Four responses to this difficult question govern the course of contemporary discussion. The contradictory views derive from a redactor, they are citations of traditional wisdom, they reflect life's ambiguities and time's passage, or they represent conscious effort to provide thesis and antithesis and thus to capture life's fullness.

Dominant Hypotheses

(1) Contradictory views derive from a redactor

Lauha (1978) has recently reasserted the hypothesis of editorial activity throughout the book. In his view two redactors worked over the book, R^1 adding 1:1, 2; 12:8, 9-11 and rearranging 1:3-11 to its present position, and R^2 correcting Qoheleth's unorthodox theology, particularly on the touchy subject of retribution. This redactor's hand is evident in 2:26aα; 3:17a; 5:18; 7:26b; 8:12-13; 11:9b; 12:12-14. Acknowledgment of redactional activity did not lead Lauha to reject a certain kind of unity, that of style and thought. In this regard he followed Loretz (1964, 196-216) in recognizing

a unity of *topoi* with their own inner connections. Lauha insisted that the *topoi* were typical ones drawn from traditional wisdom, but they achieved a distinctive tone in Qoheleth's nimble fingers. Since the first redactor assumed that Qoheleth's membership in the professional guild of the *ḥakāmîm* was common knowledge, it follows that the teacher had access to the *topoi* promulgated in the schools. Surprisingly, Qoheleth referred to himself as king rather than sage, but he surely meant this bit of royal fiction, quickly abandoned after the second chapter, to be understood as an allusion to sapiential status. The first redactor altered this reference by making it specific; the phrase "son of David" thus historicized what had earlier been a general allusion. Lauha considered it significant that the first colophonist ignores the royal fiction altogether. Naturally, this claim depends upon reading the words "one shepherd" as an allusion to God rather than the teacher.[4]

Zimmerli (1962) had earlier developed Galling's views about an adversarial relationship between Qoheleth and school wisdom into open hostility, a view recently emphasized by Murphy (1979). At one point Qoheleth boldly asserted that the mere claim to possess knowledge was not to be trusted, even if put forth by a sage (8:17). This conviction that wisdom cannot achieve its goal struck at the fundamental premise of the school. For Qoheleth, wisdom has lost its power and chance has ascended the throne (cf. Müller, 1978). Such crushing of the very foundation stone upon which the sages had built their school was a bold enterprise. Was it too daring? Did Qoheleth vacillate from one position to another, at one time endorsing divine reward and punishment, at another denying them? Thus it would seem — unless Qoheleth cites traditional claims in order to refute them.

(2) The author quotes traditional wisdom

A decisive step forward was made when Gordis recognized the presence of quotations within the book attributed to Qoheleth (Gordis: 1939/40), a thesis that was subsequently strengthened by analysis of other biblical, rabbinic, and ancient Near Eastern literature (Gordis: 1949a). The fruit of this research is conveniently summarized in a recent essay, where Gordis distinguishes eleven different types of citations (Gordis: 1981). He proposes four major categories of quotations: (1) the verbalization of a speaker or writer's unexpressed ideas or sentiments; (2) the sentiment of a subject other than the writer or speaker; (3) use in argument and debate;

4. On the imagery of shepherd in Egyptian thought, see D. Müller, "Der gute Hirte: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte ägyptischer Bildrede," *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* (1961) 86:126-144.

and (4) indirect quotations without a *verbum dicendi*. Under the first category Gordis delineates six sub-types: (a) presentation of a speaker's unspoken thought; (b) citations from current folk or literary wisdom; (c) citation of a proverb with or without comment, or expanded by additional observation by the author supporting or opposing it; (d) citation of prayers; (e) presentation of ideas previously held by the speaker or writer; (f) a hypothetical idea that would or should have occurred to the subject. Two sub-types fall under the second major category: (a) direct quotation of words of foes, friends, God, or people, and (b) development of elaborate dialogue where various speakers must be inferred. Similarly, two sub-types appear under category three: (a) use of contrasting proverbs to negate one view and affirm another, with the second being the author's view; and (b) presentation of the arguments of one's opponents in order to refute them; the citation, which exaggerates and distorts the original, is never literal.

Whybray has recently examined Qoheleth from the perspective of quotations, searching for agreement in form and content between sayings in the oldest collections of the Book of Proverbs and Qoheleth (Whybray, 1981b). Eight quotations in Qoheleth meet this criterion, in Whybray's judgment (2:14a; 4:5; 4:6; 7:6a; 9:17; 10:2; 10:12). Like Gordis, Whybray emphasizes the many uses of such quotations. Some are quoted with full approval (7:5-6; 10:2, 12) but Qoheleth gave them a radically new interpretation. Others he employed to confirm the first stage in the characteristic two-part argument, the so-called broken sentence in which he posited a truth and then "gravely qualified it by stating a fact of life which runs counter to it."

(3) Inconsistencies reflect life's ambiguities and time's passage

Not all critics attribute diversity of viewpoint within the book to different authors. Delitzsch (1877) had long ago contended that Qoheleth should not be judged by logical standards derived from Greek thought, and Wildeboer (1898) had emphasized the inevitable conflict between faith and experience as the source of inconsistency. When one combines these recognitions with an understanding of the literary form of the book as a teacher's notebook or diary, then time's passage lends credibility to the argument. After all, opinions change with age and shifting political circumstances. In this regard, even wisdom is historical, as Schmid (1966) has perceived with great clarity. Rudolph (1959) went so far as to explain Qoheleth's inconsistency as the fruit of the confrontation between Judaism and Hellenism, coupled with the psychology of the individual. In this judgment Rudolph exercised considerably more restraint than Zimmermann (1973), who thought he found evidence that Qoheleth suffered from the classic

symptoms Freud described so graphically: incest, impotency, Oedipal conflicts, and so forth. Maillot (1971) drew the analogy of a kaleidoscope, insisting that like life itself Qoheleth's views create a kaleidoscopic demonstration that eventually forms a fixed image. Barucq (1977) found such an explanation for the shifting positions in Qoheleth attractive, although he did not rule out the possibility of glosses.

(4) Inconsistencies represent a desire to embrace all of life

Herder's suggestion (See Barucq, 1977, p. 612) that Qoheleth juxtaposes two voices, thesis and antithesis, has been taken up again by Müller (1968) and Loader (1979), the latter in great detail. According to him Qoheleth structured his entire argument around polar viewpoints. Loader claimed to have isolated thirty-eight chiastic structures and sixty polar structures within the book. In all these polarities a negative follows a positive in such a way as to draw attention to the resulting *hebel*. In addition, an intricate system of cross reference joins together numerous lesser polarities and connects the separate verses and larger units. In Loader's view the tension within the book and that between the form and subject matter testify to the conflict between Qoheleth and school wisdom. In short, we have here a version of the theory of quotations. One could argue that Qoheleth's desire to cover all of reality dictated the decision to utter opposing sentiments. In this case he would have recognized some truth in each claim and would have expected his hearers to judge which one applied in a given situation.

Another attempt to understand the competing voices has resorted to the explanation that Qoheleth borrowed heavily from Greek thought. Lohfink (1980) claimed that the form of the book is that of a palindrome, while its content constitutes a diatribe. In a palindrome the symmetry is so perfect that a work reads the same forwards and backwards. The following scheme is proposed for outlining the book.

1:2-3	Frame
1:4-11	Cosmology (poetic)
1:12-3:15	Anthropology
3:16-4:16	Social Criticism I
4:17-5:6	Criticism of Religion (poetry; a sort of intrusion)
5:7-6:10	Social Criticism II
6:11-9:6	Ideology Critique (Refutatio, denying retribution)
9:7-12:7	Ethic (poetic at the end)
12:8	Frame

Lohfink granted that the criticism of religion mars an otherwise perfect specimen of the palindrome. Undaunted, he argued that Qoheleth was written as a compromise for the school at Jerusalem, where Alexandrian influence was manifest. Although intended to preserve Hebrew values while endorsing Hellenistic ones, the book owes its inspiration to Greek education. Lohfink asserted that Greek syntax and stereotypical expressions are scattered throughout the book in the same way English appears in German literature today. Qoheleth was a leader of those seeking education, and gathered the people just as wandering Greek philosophers did. Since the book was later canonized, Lohfink thought that it must have been used as a text and that its author was probably a member of the wealthy class. The hypothesis of use as a text book has received support from Lemaire's (1981) study of inscriptional and other evidence that schools existed in early Israel.[5]

The designation of the form of the book as a palindrome and the message as a diatribe was only the first step in Lohfink's endeavor to buttress an argument for Greek influence upon Qoheleth. Without trying to be exhaustive, we offer the following bits of evidence drawn from the commentary at large.

1. the myth of eternal return (which Lohfink views as a positive statement)
2. the name Qoheleth, which resembles that of Hegesias the Cyrenian, a wandering teacher who was known as the "commender of suicide"
3. the motto in 1:1 which is developed in 1:2-2:2 after the fashion of Cynic diatribes
4. the Hebrew word *tur* for spying out or searching, with the audial resemblance to *tērein*
5. Menander's observation that king and wise, clever and rich are alike in death
6. the comparison of humans to animals, familiar from Epicureans, popular philosophers and Satirics
7. Euripides' distinction of earthly things from *aithēr*, which ascends at death
8. the praise of the dead and the unborn in Homer and Hegesias
9. Menander's warning that God will not forget oaths sworn to him

5. The inscriptional evidence on which Lemaire draws may be read quite differently. Even if one accepts the claim that reverse writing, poor spelling and drawing, and so forth suggest children's efforts at acquiring scribal skills, it is still another jump from that to the existence of schools. I plan to address this issue in the near future in connection with a presentation at the national meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Dallas Dec. 18-20, 1983.

10. the cynic phrases "lover of ease" and "lover of gold" (*philoploutos/philarguros*)
11. the expressions *agathon hoti kalon* and *kalon philon*
12. Menander's advice not to oppose God
13. Pindar's observation that humans possess no means of finding out what is best for them
14. Archilochos' counsel to be happy in health and not to fret in misfortune, since people rise and fall
15. Diogenes Laertius' judgment that there is an inner connection between uncertainty and delusion
16. Simonides' comparison of women to a net
17. Theognis' assertion that life is meaningless and the search for knowledge is futile
18. Euripides' claim that whoever is alive has hope
19. Homer's description of death as a net
20. Euripides' saying that it is sweet to behold the light

Such an attempt to locate Qoheleth squarely within the intellectual community of ancient Greece joined hands with that of Braun (1973), who emphasized the influence of popular philosophy upon the book. The hypothesis was advanced long before by Ranston (1930), but it had fallen into disfavor, particularly through Loretz' (1964, pp. 90-134) defense of Babylonian parallels and the ever-increasing recognition of Egyptian affinities, especially with Papyrus Insinger. On another front Horton (1972) has pointed to similarities between Qoheleth and Taoist writings, a powerful argument for the universal character of the themes within the book.

Internal inconsistencies in Qoheleth have rendered all attempts to discover the structure of the book problematic. However, this fact has failed to halt the publication of several essays in recent years (Ginsberg, 1955; Wright, 1968, 1980, 1983; Rousseau, 1981; Schoors, 1982b; cf. Fox, 1977; Good, 1978; Osborn, 1970). The problem is complicated by uncertainty with regard to the actual form of the book, whether it consists of individual "sentences" or a sustained treatise on life's vanity. Zimmerli (1974) speaks for many when arguing that the evidence points in both directions. Form critical analyses have failed to throw much light on this vexing problem (Johnson, 1973; Loretz, 1964; Witzenrath, 1979; cf. Ogden, 1977, 1979), as have philological studies (Whitley, 1979a; Ceresko, 1982).

Attempts to determine the linguistic background and sociological setting for Qoheleth have encountered difficulty because of conflicting tendencies (Ellermeier, 1967; Fox and Porten, 1978; Whitley, 1979b; Loretz, 1980). Ambiguous conclusions have also surrounded efforts to relate the

book to its particular historical setting (Ogden, 1980a; Lohfink, 1981; cf. Lauha, 1981). In one area, at least, a consistent attitude persists. That is the matter of allusions to the shadow of death (Crenshaw, 1978; cf. Sawyer, 1975; Gilbert, 1981). Nevertheless, Eaton (1983) reads Qoheleth in such a manner as to remove every radical teaching. The relationship between Yahwism and Qoheleth's views is the subject of much speculation, particularly because modern theologians have been unable to reckon with wisdom in a predominantly "historical" scheme (Armstrong, 1983). In any event, the significance of creation (Crenshaw, 1974) and fear of God (Pfeiffer, 1965) to Qoheleth seems beyond doubt.[6]

It would be presumptuous to pronounce judgment upon the sum total of this research. Instead, let me say what will characterize my commentary on Qoheleth for the Old Testament Library. First, the refrains will be taken as a decisive argument for thematic unity as well as for the pessimistic impact of the book. Second, the magic rod, i.e., a theory of broken sentences, will be subjected to critical scrutiny in the light of clear evidence of redactional activity, both in the epilogues and within the book itself. Third, the Jewish background for Qoheleth's thought will be highlighted at the expense of Greek or Egyptian sources for themes that are much more adequately explained by the notion of polygenesis. Fourth, the radical nature of the book will receive notice; this applies particularly to the claim that creation faith somehow redeems Qoheleth's unorthodox views and to the positive understanding of the notion of fear before God. Finally, I shall apply aesthetic criticism to the book, emphasizing literary and theological dimensions. It may be that in the last resort Qoheleth is a mirror which reflects the soul of the interpreter. If so, there is sufficient vanity in scholarship to appreciate reliable mirrors.

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6. This survey has not taken into account several important essays on specific topics on which Gordis has written at some length (Qoheleth and Qumran; the language of the original book, whether Aramaic or Hebrew; the text, especially the *k'thib* and *q're'* readings) and many exegetical studies of individual units. Such an inquiry would far exceed the limits of this publication.

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