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Secrets of Qohelet: Toward an Exegetical History of a Biblical Text during the Middle Ages

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Abstract

During the middle ages and early modern period, dozens of Jewish commentaries were written on Qohelet, in Arabic and Hebrew, and representing a very full range of methods and approaches, from Karaite to Rabbanite, grammatical to pietistic, Neoplatonic, Aristotelian, and anti-Aristotelian, even kabbalistic. The purpose of this article – dedicated to the memory of Kalman Bland – is to present some experiments related to the telling of the history of medieval Jewish exegesis of Qohelet in hermeneutical context.

Keywords

Ecclesiastes – exegesis – Kabbalah – Karaite – philosophy – Rabbanite – Qohelet

I start with a well-known passage from Mishnah Yadayim 3:5:

> All the Holy Scriptures defile the hands. The Song of Songs and Qohelet defile the hands. R. Judah says: The Song of Songs defiles the hands but there is a dispute concerning Qohelet. R. Jose says: Qohelet does not defile the hands but there is a dispute about the Song of Songs. R. Shimon says: Qohelet is among the lenient decisions of the School of Shammai and among the stringent decisions of the School of Hillel. R. Shimon ben Azzai said: I have heard a tradition from the seventy-two elders on the day that R. Eleazar ben Azariah was appointed head of the academy that Song of Songs and Qohelet defile the hands. Rabbi Akiba said: God forbid! No man in Israel ever disputed the status of Song of Songs saying

> that it does not defile the hands, for the whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the writings are Holy but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies. If there was a dispute it concerned Qohelet. R. Yohanan b. Joshua the son of Rabbi Akiba's father-in-law said that Ben Azzai's version of what they disputed and decided is the correct one.[1]

This passage has been cited and discussed quite frequently in recent years in connection with the Song of Songs[2] – and so it should be, for it captures very well the ambivalence toward this biblical book in early rabbinic Judaism. It also anticipates, one might say even determines, something of its complex reception history. After all, how did this erotic secular love poem with no mention of God become a part of the rabbinic canon? With Rabbi Akiba as its chief apologist, it became something more: Not just any book that "defiles the hands" – the rabbinic marker of Holy Scripture – but a central text in rabbinic thought and theology. Not secular love poetry but sacred salvation history, recounting and recording God's love for Israel from creation to redemption.

But, one may ask, what about the other book mentioned in this mishnah? The other book attributed to King Solomon? As the mishnah indicates, Qohelet was no less problematic than the Song of Songs in early Judaism, nor was its reception history any less complex. It too was scrutinized during rabbinic debates about scripture and canon, yet for very different reasons – not for its erotic storyline or "secular" nature, but for its ideas, its troubling observations, its inconsistencies and apparent contradictions – internal contradictions and contradictions of other biblical texts and rabbinic doctrines.[3] Unlike Song of Songs, Qohelet never did receive an apologist, certainly not of Rabbi Akiva's stature, nor did there develop a canonical interpretation. Instead, it remained a "strange" book, an irritant, a problem to contend with, a challenge to orthodoxy. For philosophers and theologians, it was also an opportunity: a place to develop their speculative ideas within the framework of the traditional canon.

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1 For the discussion of this passage in the context of canonization, see, in general, Sid Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1976).

2 See most recently Jonathan Kaplan, *My Perfect One: Typology and Early Rabbinic Interpretation of Song of Songs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Michael Fishbane, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Song of Songs* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2015).

3 For a discussion of the early history of Qohelet exegesis, rabbinic versus patristic, see Marc Hirshman, *A Rivalry of Genius: Jewish and Christian Interpretation in Late Antiquity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), especially chapters 1–3, 9–10, and Hirshman, "Qohelet's Reception and Interpretation in Early Rabbinic Literature," in *Studies in Ancient Midrash*, ed. James L. Kugel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 87–99.

Over the past several years I have been researching the history of the medieval reception of this difficult, "strange," problematic, irritating book of the Bible. I have been collecting, classifying, editing, translating, annotating, and introducing the many commentaries on it. So far I have identified over thirty proper commentaries – extant in full or in part – written between 950 and 1600, in Arabic and Hebrew, and representing a very full range of methods and approaches, from Karaite to Rabbanite, grammatical to pietistic, Neoplatonic, Aristotelian, and anti-Aristotelian, even kabbalistic, though tragically the only early kabbalistic commentaries on Qohelet – by Azriel of Gerona and Moses de Leon – seem to be completely lost.[4] There are also dozens of Arabic and Hebrew works of grammar, lexicography, homiletics, philosophy, kabbalah, law, religious polemic, poetry, liturgy, and literature that contribute directly and indirectly to the history of Qohelet interpretation as well.[5]

What I am starting to work on now is stage two of this project: transforming this mass of unruly data into a meaningful, productive narrative history, a history which is comprehensive in scope yet manageable and accessible, which will allow the full range of interpretations to be seen in relation to each commentary's own historical, intellectual, literary, and exegetical context, and in connection with the long history of interpretation it fits into.[6]

4 The list of commentators and commentaries includes the Jerusalem Karaites Salmon b. Yeroham, Yefet b. 'Eli, and David b. Boaz; grammatical notes by Yusuf Ibn Nuh, an anonymous translation and commentary, and an anonymous anthology (the earlier Judeo-Arabic commentaries by Dawud al-Muqammis and Ya'qub al-Qirqisani are lost); the Andalusi exegetes Isaac ibn Ghiyath and Abraham ibn Ezra; the Eastern Rabbanites Netanel, Abu al-Barakat al-Baghdadi, and Tanhum ha-Yerushalmi; the French school of Rashi, Rashbam, and Joseph Kara; the Maimonidean philosophers Samuel ibn Tibbon, Immanuel of Rome, Gersonides, and Joseph ibn Kaspi, along with Isaac ibn Latif (whose work defies easy classification, though the early commentary on Qohelet, like his "Gate of Heaven," has strong Maimonidean tendencies); later *pashtanim* from Spain and Italy such as Isaiah of Trani and Jacob ibn Ghiyani; and from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Isaac Arama, Solomon ibn Melekh, Abraham Farissol, Obadiah Seforno, and Joseph b. David ibn Yahya; Joseph Taitatzak, Moses Almosnino, and David ibn Shushan in Salonika; and in Safed, Elisha Gallico and Moses Alsheikh. In Kabbalah: Moses de Leon refers to his *Sha'are Tsedeq* on Qohelet, but it is apparently lost; for Azriel, see Jonathan Dauber, "Competing Approaches to Maimonides in Early Kabbalah," in *The Cultures of Maimonideanism*, ed. James T. Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 87 n. 88. See also Moses of Burgos on Qoh 4:17, in *The Writings of R. Yitzhak ben Ya'akov haCohen and R. Moshe* (*Zinfa*) *of Burgos*, ed. Oded Porat (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2019) [Hebrew], 173–183. And, of course, the Zohar keys several of its central doctrines to verses from Qohelet, many of which are anthologized by the Safed exegetes.

5 One example is the long explanation of Qoh 12:12 in Jonah ibn Janah's *Sefer ha-Riqmah*, which is cited below.

6 For examples of presenting each exegete individually, commentary by commentary, see my books on Salmon and Ibn Tibbon: James T. Robinson, *Asceticism, Eschatology, Opposition to*

This is not an easy thing to do – to say the least – and I continue to experiment with methods of presentation. What I aim to do in this article, dedicated to the memory of Kalman Bland, inspiring scholar and friend, whose scholarship is always as interesting and elegant as it is informative, is to present some preliminary experiments related to one approach, a "method of examples," we can call it, a series of illustrations presented in hermeneutical context, related to the biblical text being explicated. Five examples will be presented, which look at a sample of the commentaries from different perspectives: exegetical method, rhetorical analysis, and discussion of basic themes coming out of or attached to verses in "Solomon's" book of wisdom. This type of presentation helps to bring out patterns in the history of exegesis, to identify clear lines of demarcation between traditions and schools of thought, to expose inclinations and habits in the work of each exegete, and perhaps more than anything, to highlight the importance and interest of lesser-known figures. The five examples are the following:

1. The different explanations of the hapax legomenon *shiddah* in Qohelet 2:8
2. The explanation of the awkward locution *shamor raglekha* in Qohelet 4:17

Philosophy: The Arabic Translation and Commentary of Salmon b. Yeroham on Qohelet (Leiden: Brill, 2012); idem, *Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Commentary on Ecclesiastes, The Book of the Soul of Man* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007); idem, *Sefer Nefesh ha-Adam: Perush Qohelet li-Shemuel ben Yehudah Ibn Tibbon* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2016). See also Georges Vajda, *Deux commentaries karaites sur l'Ecclesiastes* (Leiden: Brill, 1971); idem, "Quelques observations en marge du commentaire d'Isaac Ibn Ghiyāth sur l'Ecclésiastes," in *The Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Volume of the Jewish Quarterly Review*, ed. Abraham A. Neuman and Solomon Zeitlin (Philadelphia: Jewish Quarterly Review, 1967), 518–527; idem, "Ecclésiastes XII, 2–7 interprété par un auteur juif d'Andalousie du XI^{e} siècle," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 27 (1982): 33–46; Hagit Mittelman, "A Commentary on Ecclesiastes in Judeo-Arabic Ascribed to Isaac Ibn Ghiyath" (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, 1999) [Hebrew]; M. Gómez-Aranda, *El Comentario de Abraham Ibn Ezra al Libro del Eclesiastes* (Madrid: Instituto de Filosofía del Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1994); Shlomo Pines, "Toward the Study of Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī's *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*: Four Texts," *Tarbiz* 33 (1964): 198–213 [Hebrew]; Raphael Dascalu, *A Philosopher of Scripture: The Exegesis and Thought of Tanhum ha-Yerushalmi* (Leiden: Brill, 2019); Ruth Ben-Meir, "Gersonides' Commentary on Ecclesiastes: Analysis and Text" (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, 1993) [Hebrew]; Y. Tzvi Langermann, "David ibn Shoshan on Spirit and Soul," *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 1 (2007): 63–86. For a fascinating attempt at presenting a history of Qohelet exegesis in commentary form, see Eric Christianson, *Ecclesiastes through the Centuries*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007). There one can see very clearly both the possibilities and the limitations: the premodern period is dealt with very unevenly, especially the medieval, while early modern English literature – the main field of the author's expertise – is overrepresented. In *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), in contrast, Michael Fox mentions but mostly dismisses the premoderns.

3. The debate about asceticism as it plays out through Qohelet 7:16
4. The political and allegorical readings of Qohelet 10:20
5. The debate about foreign sources developed through rival readings of Qohelet 12:12

1 Example 1. Qohelet 2:8: The Many Meanings of *shiddah*

כָּנַסְתִּי לִי גַּם-כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב וּסְגֻלַּת מְלָכִים וְהַמְּדִינוֹת עָשִׂיתִי לִי שָׁרִים וְשָׁרוֹת וְתַעֲנֻגוֹת בְּנֵי הָאָדָם שִׁדָּה וְשִׁדּוֹת

The biblical book Qohelet is difficult for many reasons, including its language. There are in this late (according to the critical scholars) Hebrew text more than thirty hapax legomena that defy simple explanation. In general, the medieval grammarians, lexicographers, and exegetes attempted to explain these hapaxes in at least five different ways: they searched for a Biblical Hebrew term or root that might be related in some way, if even indirectly; they read in relation to Mishnaic Hebrew; they read in light of Aramaic, generally Targumic Aramaic; they read in comparison with Arabic; or they drew from interpretations found in the rabbinic corpus.

The hapax legomenon in Qohelet that led to the broadest range of interpretations among the medieval interpreters was *shiddah*, and the plural form *shiddot*, at Qohelet 2:8. No less than eight different explanations had already been suggested by the eleventh century. The fullest list of possibilities was given by Isaac ibn Ghiyath (d. 1089), a poet and communal leader, an exegete and philosopher based in Islamic Spain, and the author of the very first Rabbanite commentary on Qohelet.[7] His Judeo-Arabic commentary, which includes a Judeo-Arabic translation of the biblical verse, reads as follows:[8]

> I gathered silver and gold and rare curiosities of kings and cities; I acquired male and female singers, and the pleasures of man, along with musical instruments … (Qoh 2:8)

7 For his life and poetry, see Sarah Katz, *Rabbi Isaac ibn Giat: Monograph* (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1994) [in Hebrew]. The Judeo-Arabic commentary on Qohelet was published, with Hebrew translation, by Yosef Kafih (and wrongly attributed to Saadia Gaon), in *The Five Scrolls with Ancient Commentaries* (Jerusalem: Ha-Agudah le-Hotsa'at Ginze Teman, 1962), 155–296.

8 Kafih, *Five Scrolls*, 193–194.

> שְׁדָּה וְשִׁדּוֹת – the poet Abū Tammām said: "male and female singers of *shādiya*," and the *shādi* is a sweet-sounding melody. Indeed, of anything good and pleasant in the eyes of a man they say: *shada fihi*.[9] Someone else explains: one and many hot baths. Another suggests: one and many female wine stewards, while another has: buxom young women. Yet another suggested: slave girls taken as spoil. We also find our Rabbis saying three words [together]: *shiddah*, *tevah*, *migdal*, as in: "a *shiddah* whose opening is at the side," that is, they believe that *shiddah* and *shiddot* are receptacles in which one puts fine things and clothing, as in: "And he said unto him that was over the vestry" (2 Kgs 10:22), which has the sense of chests and armoires. I have also found our Rabbis saying: "*shiddah* and *shiddot*: Here [in Babylon] they translate as male and female demons; in the West [Palestine] they say [it means] carriages" (b. Gittin 68a–b). The best interpretation is: an important musical instrument that was found in the time of the Kingdom yet has since been lost. At the end of Talmud Sotah: "When the first Temple was destroyed, *shiddah* was destroyed along with braided silk and white glass" (b. Sotah 48b).... This interpretation is the correct one, namely, that [*shiddah*] is a wondrous instrument that existed for the ancients yet was lost after the time of the Kingdom.

There are several remarkable things about this list. First, it shows the ease with which the medieval exegetes could move from one source to another, one tradition to another, one Semitic language to another. Yet despite this ease of movement, there were definite limits. The Karaites, for example, read *shiddah* in light of Biblical Hebrew – either as female breast, in relation to Hebrew *shad*, or as captured slave girls, in relation to *sh/d/d*.[10] The Rabbanites, in contrast, considered also Aramaic and Arabic cognates and drew from rabbinic sources. Perhaps most remarkable, however, is what is not developed by any of the early exegetes, even though Ibn Ghiyath does allude to it: the rabbinic association of *shiddah* with *shed* – demon – in connection with the legendary stories about King Solomon and Ashmedai. At least in the early history of medieval Jewish commentary, especially from the tenth to twelfth century, there was a strong tendency to avoid the more exotic legendary aspects of rabbinic midrash.

9 He seems to understand *shiddah* here in relation to the Arabic *sh/y/d* ("to speak up in praise or blame"); see Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* ((London: Williams and Norgate, 1863–1893), 1628–1629).

10 See Robinson, *Asceticism, Eschatology, Opposition to Philosophy*, 242–245.

2 Example 2. Qohelet 4:17: From Sexual Chastity to Preparing for the Study of Metaphysics

שְׁמֹר רגליך (רַגְלְךָ) כַּאֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵךְ אֶל בֵּית הָאֱלֹהִים וְקָרוֹב לִשְׁמֹעַ מִתֵּת הַכְּסִילִים זָבַח כִּי אֵינָם יוֹדְעִים לַעֲשׂוֹת רָע

2.1 *shamor raglekha* as Euphemism

The second example relates not to a strange word in Qohelet but an awkward locution: *shamor raglekha*. What could guarding the foot possibly mean? And how does it relate to the House of God? Ibn Ezra in his commentary on Qohelet suggests that most exegetes explain *shamor raglekha* in relation to the expression *lo ʿasah raglav* at 2 Sam 19:25, and indeed this connection is already found in the earliest surviving Jewish commentary on Qohelet by Salmon b. Yeroham, a tenth-century Karaite of Jerusalem. He understands both expressions – *shamor raglekha* and *lo ʿasah raglav* – as euphemisms for sexual chastity, as follows:[11]

> Control your pudendum **always**, **as at the time** when you go to the House of Allah; and coming close to hear **is better** than the ignorant giving sacrifices, for they know not the doing of evil. (Qoh 4:17)
>
> After teaching that the wisdom of the world and its affairs are "dust," he begins now with an exhortation to follow the will of Allah, to observe the commandments, and to work for the affairs of the Hereafter, taking provisions in this world – which passes away – for the Abode of Everlasting Life. So he says: שְׁמֹר רגליך [in the plural, following the written consonantal form, the *ketiv*], which is read: רַגְלְךָ [in the singular, as in the recited version according to masoretic pointing, the *qeri*]. He implores us to keep our pudenda (*furūj*) from committing sexual offence with forbidden women. When he says: "Keep thy foot" (*shamor raglekha*), it resembles the dictum: "And Mephibosheth the son of Saul … had neither dressed his feet" (*lo ʿasah raglav*, 2 Sam 19:25), the translation of which is: *faraj* (pudendum). He says: כַּאֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵךְ אֶל בֵּית הָאֱלֹהִים – that is, someone who goes on pilgrimage to the House of Allah ought to be pure, free of iniquity and rebellious behavior, as our father Jacob, peace be with him, said: "Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments; and let us arise, and go up to Bethel" (Gen 35:2–3). Here he

11 Ibid., 348–351.

> obligates man to be pure, free of all disobedient acts always, as when he goes to the House of Allah …

2.2 *From Specific Admonition to Universal Rule*

In his explication, Salmon does far more than explain an awkward locution. He transforms the verse from a specific admonition – keep your foot when going to the House of God – to a universal principle: be chaste always, not only when going to the House of God. Ibn Ghiyath seems to push this universalistic reading even further, as follows:[12]

> The shaykhs have consensus that the intention in "guarding the foot" when walking to the House of Allah is that one be pure and clean, that is, one ought not to go to those places except with utmost cleanliness and in a noble state. It seems to us that in any sort of walking one does and in any action one does and in any occupation one is occupied with and any step one takes at any time or moment, one ought to be in a moderate state (*ḥāl al-iʿtidāl*) and be guarded, cleanly, and ready to serve Allah, as we are when we go to pure and noble communal places of worship (*al-majāmiʿ*); for the Lord exists in each and every place we go to and reach; we are always in His noble house and His holy sanctuary.

2.3 *From Ritual Piety to Philosophical Study*

This universalizing trend in Salmon and Ibn Ghiyath bore still greater fruit in the thirteenth century under the influence of Aristotelian philosophy. We find this in the commentary by Samuel ibn Tibbon – the first Maimonidean exegete, writing in southern France in the early thirteenth century – who follows the *Guide of the Perplexed* (1:5 and 1:32) in understanding "going to the House of God" in Qohelet 4:17 as the gradual ascent toward the study of metaphysics, with the verse representing cautionary advice not to be led astray by drawing hasty conclusions. This new interpretation, which in fact reintroduces specificity to Solomon's exhortation, was followed by most subsequent philosopher exegetes, including the eminently complex Isaac ibn Latif, who adds nuance to the reading, and the strongly anthologizing Immanuel of Rome, who completes the ascent by including both moral and intellectual stages. The explications by Ibn Tibbon, Ibn Latif, and Immanuel read as follows:

12 Kafih, *Five Scrolls*, 218–220.

First, Ibn Tibbon, writing around 1220 in southern France:[13]

> That is, *guard your foot* so that you don't stumble while walking the path to *the house of God*. He alludes to someone who seeks to speculate in divine subjects. Such a person needs to be cautious when engaged in this type of speculation, lest he make overhasty judgments: affirming what has no demonstration or refuting what has no demonstration of its contrary. He should not speculate about anything with respect to which man ought not to speculate, that is, anything beyond his intellect's grasp and for which there is no opening through which he can enter. All these things are stumbling blocks for anyone who seeks to speculate in divine subjects.

The interpretation of Isaac Ibn Latif, writing around 1240 in Toledo:[14]

> As is known, the feet are limbs used for walking, and it is not typical for humans to hop along like ravens; rather, they set one foot down in a firm and steady place, then a second, and in this way walking will be straight and he who walks will not stumble. The object of this allegorical representation is that a man ought to accustom his soul and train his thoughts one by one if he wants to enter into the wisdom of supernal beings (*ha-ʿelyonim*), which is *the house of God*. He ought not to be hasty (*yaharos*), trying intellectually to master what he cannot apprehend. Instead, he should control his spirit with restraint and conduct his ways slowly – precept upon precept (Isa 28:10), level by level. Otherwise he will stumble while walking [to the house of God] and thus fail to attain any of the things he had aimed to attain.

13 See Robinson, *Samuel ibn Tibbon's Commentary*, par. 507.

14 The translations in this article are from my unpublished draft edition and translation of Ibn Latif's commentary, produced way back in 2008–2009; my work then, I realize now, corresponded with the beginning of a new era of Ibn Latif scholarship. Since then, five dissertations have been completed on his work: Yossi Esudri, "Studies on the Philosophy of Isaac ibn Latif" (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 2008) [Hebrew]; Shoey Raz, "Isaac ibn Latif: A Neoplatonic Metaphysician of the Thirteenth Century" (PhD diss., Bar Ilan University, 2013) [Hebrew]; Guadalupe González Diéguez, "Isaac ibn Latif (1210–1280) between Philosophy and Mysticism: Timeless and Timebound Wisdom" (PhD diss., New York University, 2014); Adiel Zimran, "Philosophy, Tradition, and Esoterica in Isaac Ibn Latif's *Shaʿar ha-Shamayim*" (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 2016) [Hebrew]; and now Carmel Kobliner, "Isaac ibn Latif's Commentary on Megillat Qohelet" (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 2021).

Finally, Immanuel of Rome, writing in early fourteenth-century Italy. As is typical in Immanuel's compilatory commentary on Qohelet, as in his other biblical commentaries, he transforms the many sources he draws from into a commentary with a single voice.[15] At Qohelet 4:17 he begins with an expanded version of Ibn Ezra's commentary on the verse (with no mention of Ibn Ezra) and ends with a word-for-word borrowing from Ibn Tibbon (with no mention of Ibn Tibbon). In between, he presents a very rich expansion of ideas found in both, with emphasis on both moral and intellectual prerequisites for studying metaphysics, adding the parable of the palace in the *Guide of the Perplexed* (again, without identifying his source) as a guiding image. This middle part of the commentary reads as follows:

> When he says: שמור רגלך כאשר תלך אל בית האלהים ("Keep your foot when you go to the house of God") – this includes also the fact that at the time you intend in your mind to go to the house of God to investigate His actions and apprehend His wisdom, may He be exalted, and to investigate what kind of existence His existence is, and to understand His unity and true reality, to the extent of human ability, שמור רגלך – that is, contemplate and guard yourself such that you walk the proper path, which means that you put fear of the Lord first, which is the beginning of knowledge, and knowledge of the principles of religion by way of tradition, so that you are founded upon belief. You ought also to put before this the abandoning of corporeal delights and the removal of bodily desires and choose the good mean dispositions, so that you have ethical

15 For the latest work on Immanuel's commentaries (in relation to his *Mahberot Immanuel*), with full bibliography, see Dana Fishkin, "Situating Hell and Heaven: Immanuel of Rome's *Mahberet ha-Tophet ve-ha-Eden*" (PhD diss., New York University, 2011), especially the introduction and chapters 1–2. For Immanuel's commentary on Qohelet, see James Robinson, "From Digression to Compilation: Samuel Ibn Tibbon and Immanuel of Rome on Genesis 1:11, 1:14, 1:20," *Zutot: Perspectives on Jewish Culture* 4 (2006): 81–97; idem, "Maimonides, Samuel Ibn Tibbon, and the Construction of a Jewish Tradition of Philosophy," in *Maimonides after 800 Years: Essays on Maimonides and His Influence*, ed. Jay M. Harris (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 291–306; idem, "We Drink only from the Master's Water: Maimonides and Maimonideanism in Southern France, 1200–1306," in "Epigonism in Jewish Culture," ed. Shlomo Berger and Irene Zwiep, special issue, *Studia Rosenthaliana* 40 (2007–2008): 27–60; idem, "The 'Secret of the Heavens' and the 'Secret of Number': Immanuel of Rome's Mathematical Supercommentaries on Abraham Ibn Ezra in His Commentary on Qohelet 5:7 and 7:27," *Aleph* (forthcoming). My edition and translation of Immanuel's commentary, with a full study, is nearing completion.

and intellectual virtues. You also ought to devote yourself to studying the preliminaries (*hatsa'ot*) needed for knowledge of the true reality of God, may He be exalted, so that you walk a straight path; that is, one ought to study the disciplines of wisdom according [to order], not taking the older before the younger and not walking in a place one is not permitted. One ought not to deal destructively (*yaharos*) and cross beyond the sphere investigating what the human mind cannot reach.

Or when saying: שמור רגליך כאשר תלך אל בית האלהים – he came to allude to the fact that one ought not to rise destructively (*yaharos*) to divine wisdom until the appropriate time, which is the time שיפוח היום ונסו הצללים (Song 2:17, 4:6), that is, when the boiling of the natures cools, as in: "I am not yet old."[16]

Immanuel then adapts *Guide* 3:51 to his purpose, as follows, and ends by recapitulating the need to follow proper order, being cautious, always.

He called "House of God" divine wisdom, for he who has achieved demonstration of everything that may be demonstrated, and who has come to know the truth in divine matters, everything that may be known, is already close to God, may He be exalted, and is in the inner part of His house. For, as long as a man is engaged in studying the mathematical sciences and the art of logic, he is, as it were, walking around the house searching for its gate, as our Rabbis, may their memory be blessed, have said by way of parable: "Ben Zoma is still outside." When he understands the natural things, he, as it were, enters the antechamber of the house. And when he has achieved perfection in the natural things and gains understanding of divine science, he, as it were, has entered the inner court of the house and is with the King in His house.[17] Extraordinary

16 Hagigah 14a, as cited in *Guide* 1:34.

17 Cf. the passage in *Guide* 3:51, as translated by Shlomo Pines, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 2:619: "He, however, who has achieved demonstration, to the extent that that is possible, of everything that may be demonstrated; and who has ascertained in divine matters, to the extent that that is possible, everything that may be ascertained; and who has come close to certainty in those matters in which one can only come close to it – has come to be with the ruler in the inner part of the habitation. Know, my son, that as long as you are engaged in studying the mathematical sciences and the art of logic, you are one of those who walk around the house searching for its gate, as [the Sages], *may their memory be blessed*, have said resorting to a parable: *Ben Zoma is still outside*. If, however, you have understood the natural things, you have entered the habitation and are walking in the antechambers. If, however, you have

> "guarding" (*shemirah*) is required there, which is why he said that when you are engaged in divine science, "keep your foot" – so that you walk the fitting path, so that you not deal destructively with what you are not allowed. Walk there following the fitting path, free from corporeal desires, which are the "garments of excrement"; dress in garments which are clean and pure dispositions.

Notice especially the historical development in this example, from the tenth and eleventh centuries to the thirteenth and fourteenth, from universalized and spiritualized readings of the verse to a Maimonidean reading in connection with the cautious, careful, methodical, step-by-step pursuit of divine wisdom. This is a trend we see in many other examples as well.

3 Example 3. Qohelet 7:16: Against Asceticism

With the third example – אַל תְּהִי צַדִּיק הַרְבֵּה וְאַל תִּתְחַכַּם יוֹתֵר לָמָּה תִּשּׁוֹמֵם – we move from a linguistic focus to a thematic focus: the debate about asceticism in medieval Jewish sources.

From the tenth century through the twelfth century, Qohelet 7:16 had a remarkably stable history. "Be not righteous overmuch" was considered a polemic against asceticism, especially the extreme askesis represented by the Christian hermits and Muslim Sufis – while "be not too much wise" was explained as a warning against intellectual hubris, trying to know too much, seeking knowledge of what no human can grasp, such as the origin of existence or the true nature of God. This interpretation is already clearly articulated in the earliest surviving commentary by Salmon b. Yeroham, and is repeated, with only slight variations, by Yefet b. ʿEli, David b. Boaz, and even Isaac ibn Ghiyath, despite the latter's contention that the main point of Qohelet is to teach asceticism and to command philosophical investigation![18]

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achieved perfection in the natural things and have understood divine science, you have entered in the ruler's place *into the inner court* and are with him in one habitation. This is the rank of the men of science; they, however, are of different grades of perfection."

18 See especially Ibn Ghiyath's introduction to his commentary, and his commentary on 12:12 (below). Ibn Ghiyath, as the Karaites before him, considered Qohelet to be Solomon's *Kitāb al-zuhd*, his "book of asceticism." For the background on his conception of *zuhd* in local context, see especially Hagit Mittelmann, "Asceticism in the Commentary on Ecclesiastes attributed to Ibn Ghiyath, with Comparison to Islamic Mysticism," *Daʿat* 48 (2002): 57–80 [Hebrew].

As is often the case, a different approach emerges in the thirteenth century under the influence of Maimonides and the Aristotelian tradition. Following Maimonides's ethical doctrines in "Eight Chapters" and in light of his definition of *tsedeq* in *Guide* 3:53 – as justice, giving everything its due, no more and no less – Ibn Tibbon, and following him Ibn Latif, read the first part of the verse in a very different way, in light of Aristotelian virtue ethics. "Be not righteous overmuch" for them meant one ought not to adhere too dogmatically to the mean. Instead, one ought to veer away from the middle way, incline toward the extreme, go beyond the letter of the law. The verse in this way is recoded in Maimonidean terminology. One should not be dogmatically a *tsaddiq* or *ḥakham*; one ought instead to incline in the direction of *ḥasidut*.

Samples of these two approaches – the commentaries of Salmon b. Yeroham from tenth-century Jerusalem and Isaac ibn Latif from thirteenth-century Toledo – are cited here. They read as follows:

First, Salmon, who established the anti-ascetic reading:[19]

> Be not righteous over much; neither make yourself over wise. Why should you become desolate **and destroy yourself?** (Qoh 7:16)

Sulaymān said that Allah – great and exalted – forces man into servitude and imposes upon him what He knows he can do. He does not impose upon him what he cannot do, for the imposition of something one cannot do is oppressive and lacking in justice, as the prophet Micah, peace be on him, said: "O my people, what have I done unto thee? And wherein have I wearied thee?" (Mic 6:3). And since commands and prohibitions are given according to the measure of ability, he established stipulations lest a transgressor overstep the boundaries, adding or removing, as he said: "Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you" (Deut 4:2).

What he says here (in Qoh 7:16) is similar: אַל תְּהִי צַדִּיק הַרְבֵּה – that is, do not do what Allah has not commanded, that is, do not fast so much that it makes you weak; do not say: "This year I will not eat bread, I will eat vegetables only." Perhaps you will attack your body, weaken it, and kill yourself. Nor ought you to engage in monastic isolation in the mountains and deserts, thinking that in this way you are coming near to Allah. Perhaps you will be led astray and kill yourself. And in any event this is not something Allah has required of you. Or sometimes you might

19 Robinson, *Asceticism, Eschatology, Opposition to Philosophy*, 424–431.

> consider as follows: [the idea] that charity is a noble act might lead you to distribute everything you own; as a result you yourself will become a mendicant requiring charity. Yet Allah did not make it incumbent upon you to give all your wealth as charity. On the contrary, it is said: "Honor the LORD with thy substance" (Prov 3:9), and: "For he giveth of his bread to the poor" (Prov 22:9). It was not said: "**all** of his bread." Likewise Job, peace be with him, said: "Or have eaten my morsel myself alone, and the fatherless hath not eaten thereof" (Job 31:17).
>
> Nor ought a man to say that he will not allow himself to engage in a profession since it is impossible to free oneself from false speech and the fixing of scales – as a result of which he cuts himself off from a livelihood. And it is possible that in a time of hunger he will need to steal or will take a vow upon himself to fast forever, yet sometimes an illness will supervene which will lead him to break the vow. There are innumerable similar examples. Because of this he said: אַל תְּהִי צַדִּיק הַרְבֵּה – that is, do not impose upon yourself that which you cannot do. Know that the One that requires service – great and exalted – judges and sees the service you do. Blessed is he who exerts himself working constantly in what He commands, as is said: "But he that keepeth the law, happy is he" (Prov 29:18).

Here now is Ibn Latif's reading, which seems to incline away from the mean, toward asceticism:

> The term *righteous* is said of someone who gives everything its due and what is fitting – no more and no less – as in: *And they shall judge the people with just judgment* (Deut 16:18), which means, according to justice, that one not take property from one and give to another illegally. Similarly: *Just balances, just weights* (Lev 19:36). He cautions against limiting justice in any way; he does not command that one add to it such that one be forced coercively to distribute wealth. Yet what he means here, when saying *righteous* and attaching *over much* to it, is: one should not be overly punctilious with respect to the many relations with one's fellow, as in the rabbinic dictum: "What is mine is mine and what is thine is thine" (Avot 5:13), such that one senses a gradual movement in the direction of miserliness. Rather, one ought to cultivate a magnanimous soul (*nefesh nedivah*), giving anything extra to others during the time of negotiation. One ought not to be so punctilious that one becomes "righteous" only in the narrow sense of the term; instead, one ought to incline in the direction of generosity (*nedivut*) till one might rightly be called *ḥasid*.

4 Example 4. Qohelet 10:20: Political Wisdom or the Secret of Prophecy?

The history of Qohelet 10:20 –

> גַּם בְּמַדָּעֲךָ מֶלֶךְ אַל תְּקַלֵּל וּבְחַדְרֵי מִשְׁכָּבְךָ אַל תְּקַלֵּל עָשִׁיר כִּי עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם יוֹלִיךְ אֶת הַקּוֹל וּבַעַל הכנפים (כְּנָפַיִם) יַגִּיד דָּבָר

– exemplifies the thirteenth-century shift toward Maimonidean philosophy even more clearly. Although there was a dichotomy between Karaite and Rabbanite understandings of *madda'* during the tenth through twelfth centuries – the Karaites tended to understand it as the place of carnal knowledge, thus: "Curse not the king even in the place of sexual intercourse";[20] the Rabbanites understood it as a place of cognitive knowledge, thus: "Curse not the king even in your mind"[21] – their understanding of the verse as a whole was identical. According to them, Solomon was providing, at Qohelet 10:20, simple commonsense political wisdom. It is generally a bad idea to curse a king, Qohelet advises, or for that matter any person with power.

This reading changes, dramatically, in the thirteenth century. Reviving the midrashic approach to the text – King with a capital K, God[22] – and drawing on Maimonides's conception of prophecy,[23] thirteenth-century exegetes read Qohelet 10:20 as "a secret"; Ibn Latif calls it "the secret of the bird of

20 So in Salmon and Yefet. David b. Boaz, in contrast, reads as "mind" or "knowledge" and "thinking," as in his Arabic translation of the verse: יעני – ולא תשתם איצא פי עלמך מלכא פכרך – "Do not curse a king even in your knowledge (*'ilm*), that is, in your thinking (*fikr*)."

21 As in Ibn Ghiyath, who translates *madda'* as *damīr*, and Abu al-Barakat al-Baghdadi, who translates as *dhihn*.

22 See, e.g., Targum Qohelet: "Do not curse the King even in your thought, in the secret places of your heart. And do not curse the Sage in your bedroom, for the angel Raziel proclaims every day from heaven upon Mt. Horeb and a voice goes through the whole world, and Elijah the High Priest flying through the air of heaven like an eagle with wings and declares matters that are done in secret to all the inhabitants of the earth."

23 See Qohelet Rabbah 10:20, which is cited in *Guide* 2:6. Soncino translation: "R. Bun said: When a man sleeps, the body tells what has been done to the spirit, the spirit to the soul, the soul to the angel, the angel to a cherub, and the cherub to that which hath wings. Who is that? The seraph, and the seraph carries and relates it before Him at whose word the universe came into being." *Guide* 2:6, trans. Pines, 2:264–265: "Accordingly, Midrash Ecclesiastes has the following text: 'When man sleeps, his soul speaks to the angel, and the angel to the cherub' [Eccl Rabb 10:20]. Thereby they have stated plainly to him who understands and cognizes intellectually that the imaginative faculty is likewise called an angel and that the intellect is called a cherub. How beautiful must this appear to him who knows, and how distasteful to the ignorant!"

the heavens."[24] An especially full explication in this direction is found in the commentary of Immanuel of Rome. As in his explication of Qohelet 4:17, Immanuel begins with an expanded version of Ibn Ezra on 10:16–20 (with no mention of Ibn Ezra), ends with a word-for-word borrowing from Ibn Tibbon's commentary on 10:16–20 (again, with no mention of the original author), but in between presents an extended philosophical-allegorical explication of the same verses. The first part of his reading of Qohelet 10:20 runs as follows:[25]

> He said after this: גַּם בְּמַדָּעֲךָ מֶלֶךְ אַל-תְּקַלֵּל – that is, even though your actions are pure and clean as silver, make sure your mind is clean also and pure, and your beliefs "purified seven times" (see Ps 12:7), for if your mind is not true you will, as it were, cause disgrace to the King, King of Kings, which means that you would affirm with respect to Him, due to your ignorance, something that ought not exist with respect to Him. Thus, he says using figurative language (*melitsah nimretset*): make sure you don't disgrace the King on account of some defect in your thinking. Then he says: וּבְחַדְרֵי מִשְׁכָּבְךָ אַל-תְּקַלֵּל עָשִׁיר – that is, just as I warned you not to curse the King, so I warn you also not to curse the Rich Man. He called the separate intellects "Rich Men." What he means is that you ought to be careful lest you think of them corporeally and believe false or incorrect beliefs about them, for they bring prophecy to human beings. This is what he meant when saying: כִּי עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם יוֹלִיךְ אֶת-הַקּוֹל וּבַעַל הכנפים

24 See, e.g., Ibn Latif, *Ginze ha-melekh*, ch. 34: "This is a deep secret. Apprehending these things is a spiritual sort of apprehension, not an apprehension through the senses; since they do not yet exist in actuality, but only in potentiality, it is only in the future that they have been sensed in the world; yet the imagination smells from afar, as it were, as is the case with the imagination in some animals. It contemplates them with parables – whether close and accessible or far and remote. This is the secret of: *for a bird of the heavens shall carry the voice, and that which hath two wings shall tell the matter* (Qoh 10:20). Yet I cannot explain, for this is sealed." See also Ibn Latif's *Tseror ha-mor*, chapter 5: "This is the secret of: *And see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me* (Gen 18:21). Understand this! And the sage said: *for a bird of the heavens* (*'of ha-shamayim*) *shall carry the voice* (*ha-qol*), *and that which hath wings* (*ba'al kanfayim*) *shall tell the matter* (*davar*) (Qoh 10:20). Know and see what is the object of the parable with respect to the 'bird of the heavens' and 'that which hath wings'; and what is the 'voice' and what is the 'matter'; and who is he who tells and to whom does he tell. *Then thou shalt be wise* (Josh 1:8)!" In Ibn Latif's *Perush Qohelet* 10:20, in contrast, he presents a moral and political explanation: "He says, by way of moral exhortation (*musar*), even if you suffer harm from the king and his princes, do not rise up in your heart to curse the king, even in your mind. He means you ought to remove even such a thought lest it express itself in speech. *And curse not the rich in thy bedchamber* – he warns you about thinking in order to make a clear distinction between fear of the king and fear of the princes."

25 The translation is from my in-progress edition and translation of Immanuel's commentary.

יֹגֵיד דָּבָר (כְּנָפַיִם) – that is, although the separate intellect, which is a "bird of the heavens" and "has two wings," puts spirit in the mouth of prophets, and though the imaginative faculty in man, which is corporeal, imagines that at the moment the divine emanation flows onto him some corporal word is spoken to him, nevertheless you ought not to think in your mind that the separate intellect is a body or force in a body. For this, in fact, results from the imagination missing the mark since it is corporeal; it cannot but imagine someone as corporeal. Yet in truth it is an intellect completely separate from matter.

He called the separate intellect which causes human beings to prophesy, which is the same Seraph which flies to the prophet with a "live coal in his hand" (Isa 6:6) and puts word in his mouth, "Rich Man" and "Bird of the Heavens" and "Two-Winged Creature." He called it "Rich Man" because it is the way of a rich man to be generous with his wealth and provide for the poor what they need and lack; so too the separate intellect is called by those with Holy Spirit *ruah nedivah* (see Ps 51:14) on account of the emanation that flows from it perpetually; it bestows the light of forms to everything the celestial bodies need in relation to matter. He likewise called it "Bird of the Heavens" on account of the speed with which it acts and gives the form to the thing that requires form: immediately without time. He found no better way to imagine this rapid actualization than the flying of a bird …

Immanuel, in other words, would translate the verse as something like this: "You should not think anything incorrect regarding God, nor should you contemplate the Separate Intellects in a way not befitting them. The Celestial Bird is the agent of prophecy, the Two-Winged Angel delivers the prophetic message."

5 Example 5. Qohelet 12:12: Against Philosophy or for Philosophy?

Qohelet 12:12 – וְיֹתֵר מֵהֵמָּה בְּנִי הִזָּהֵר עֲשׂוֹת סְפָרִים הַרְבֵּה אֵין קֵץ וְלַהַג הַרְבֵּה יְגִעַת בָּשָׂר – is a good example to end with. What the verse originally meant is hard to know, although the rabbis' understanding of it in relation to debates about canon is interesting though likely anachronistic: the "twenty-four" books of the Bible are all one needs; "external books," on the other hand, should be avoided.[26]

26 For a history of the early interpretations of this clause, see Abraham Melamed, "Of making many books there is no end (Qoh 12:12): From Prohibition to Legitimizing," *Da'at* 62 (2008): 51–69 [Hebrew].

This approach to the verse was taken up in the Middle Ages as well and expanded – by the Karaites in Jerusalem and by Jonah ibn Janah in Spain – both of whom read Qohelet 12:12 as a warning against foreign literature in general, especially philosophy. A half generation after Ibn Janah, Isaac Ibn Ghiyath interpreted in exactly the opposite way: one ought to be admonished and exhorted to make many books without end, especially books of philosophy; one ought to tax the body with studying them as much as possible. These two approaches – against philosophy and for philosophy – defined the Jewish readings of the verse throughout the later Middle Ages and into the Renaissance. The commentary of Salmon b. Yeroham, who began the medieval debate, and Jonah ibn Jonah, who developed it in Spain, will be presented here, together with the response by Ibn Ghiyath.

First, Salmon b. Yeroham:[27]

> And more than these, O my son, be warned: the making of many books has no end; and much devotion [to them] is labor **and toil** for the flesh. (Qoh 12:12)
>
> Sulaymān the sage adds here a warning and threat regarding the desire for foreign books, saying: וְיֹתֵר מֵהֵמָּה בְּנִי הִזָּהֵר – that is, beware lest you come to desire books other than the revealed holy books, for when someone has desire for something other than them he acquires ignorance and what is lacking in wisdom, as it is said: "Lo, they have rejected the word of the LORD; and what wisdom is in them?" (Jer 8:9)
>
> He says: בְּנִי הִזָּהֵר – that is, he who desires the holy books is a student of the prophets and a student of Qohelet, and still more than this a student of his Creator, as it is said: "I am the LORD thy God which teacheth thee to profit" (Isa 48:17), and: "He led him about, he instructed him" (Deut 32:10). In contrast, he who desires the wisdom of strangers has become a student of the unbelievers and the heretics and the materialists and the dualists and the trinitarians; of them that discourse on natural science; of the Brahmins who deny prophecy; of them that discourse on hylic matter; of them that believe in worshipping fire and water; and all the other sages of the various false sects about whom it is said in general: "For the customs of the people are vain" (Jer 10:3), and: "The Gentiles shall come unto thee from the ends of the earth" (Jer 16:19). Were there in the world any [other] book which has utility or benefit, why would he say exclusively of the Torah of Moses: "Thou shalt meditate upon it day and night" (Josh 1:8)?! Rather would he have said: "[upon it] **and** foreign books."

27 Robinson, *Asceticism, Eschatology, Opposition to Philosophy*, 586–591.

> Since he specifically designated this enjoinder (i.e., Josh 1:8) for this Torah – along with the other words of prophecy, as it is said: "To seal up the vision and prophecy" (Dan 9:24), and indeed it is made obligatory in the Torah of Moses itself, "man of God" (Deut 33:1), peace be with him, to accept the word of the prophets, as it is said: "A Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me" (Deut 18:15) – we learn that any speculation in and occupation with any book other than the books of the prophets is forbidden (*ḥarām*) for Israel, for it leads to the beliefs of the Gentiles. As for him that renounces the Book of Allah and desires the books of the Gentiles, Allah testifies regarding him that he is a renouncer of the Creator. Allah will make judgment of anyone who leads the people to desire the books of the Gentiles and leads them to renounce the Book of Allah....
>
> He says: וְלַהַג הַרְבֵּה יְגִעַת בָּשָׂר – he means that much devotion to anything other than the Book of Allah will weary the body and cause grave sin. For He has already obligated us to meditate upon the Book of Allah day and night, as it is said: "Thou shalt meditate upon it day and night" (Josh 1:8), thus any time you are occupied with any other book besides the Book of Allah you have already violated this commandment and perverted the straight. Our master Moses, peace be with him, said: "And these words, which I command thee this day" (Deut 6:6); "And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children" (Deut 6:7). Already the first ones said: "He who reads in external books has no place in the world to come" (m. Sanh. 10:1) ...

Here now is Jonah b. Janah, from *Sefer ha-Riqmah*:[28]

> And more than these, my son, beware the making (*hizzaher ʿasot*) of many books without end (Qoh 12:12) – that is, beware **of** the making (*hizzaher **min** ʿasot*) of many books without end.... Now the sage [Qohelet] did not prohibit in this dictum increase with respect to the sciences of religion which bring one close to Allah, nor any of the other sciences that are useful and that can be grasped according to their true reality. Rather, what he prohibited is occupation with books that lead, according to those occupied with them, to knowledge of the principles [of nature] and the elements, by which can be investigated the being and creation

28 Ibn Janah, *Kitab al-lumaʿ: Le livre des parterres fleuris*, ed. Joseph Derenbourg (Paris: E. Vieweg, 1886), 267–268; Hebrew translation by Judah ibn Tibbon, *Sefer ha-Riqmah*, ed. M. Wilensky (Jerusalem: Hebrew Language Academy, 1964), 282–283.

> of the upper and lower worlds, for this is something no one can establish according to true reality. One cannot reach through it any end, regardless of the fact that this destroys religion and eliminates certainty and wearies the soul without giving any help or benefit, as he said: "And much study is a weariness of the flesh." This is likewise what the sage alluded to when saying: "All things are wearisome; man cannot utter it" (Qoh 1:8), that is, they are things that cause weariness and yet cannot be apprehended.
>
> What is most correct according to the sage is giving oneself over entirely to Allah (*al-istislām lillah*) and being drawn after what the Law has commanded and joining oneself to the religion – as he says after this: "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man" (Qoh 12:13) – while abandoning anything the true reality of which cannot be grasped....
>
> That the word *min* has dropped out of his dictum "making of many books" with respect to *hizzaher* is the same as its dropping out from: עֲלוֹת בָּהָר וּנְגֹעַ בְּקָצֵהוּ in connection with the first part of the verse: הִשָּׁמְרוּ לָכֶם (Exod 19:12). For when he says: Beware the making of many books, what he really means is: Beware **of** the making of many books, as when you say: הִשָּׁמְרוּ לָכֶם עֲלוֹת בָּהָר וּנְגֹעַ בְּקָצֵהוּ – when what you really mean is: **from** ascending the mountain and touching its end. This is all perfectly clear and explained....

Isaac b. Ghiyath presented his interpretation in direct response to Ibn Janah, beginning with a long citation of his predecessor, as follows:[29]

> What is superior, O my son, to benefit from is the acquiring of many book collections without limit and the type of intensive study that burdens the body. (Qoh 12:12)
>
> ... He says: וְיֹתֵר מֵהֵמָּה בְּנִי הִזָּהֵר עֲשׂוֹת סְפָרִים הַרְבֵּה אֵין קֵץ. One of the shaykhs argues that "than these" refers to what preceded, thus "more than the words of the sages," and that the intention is: one ought to abandon too much study of the sciences that cannot be grasped, such as the science of first principles and investigating the roots of the creation of the upper and lower worlds, for one cannot grasp them completely, [while studying them] exhausts the body without utility. It is as if he says: what is best, following the way of wisdom, is that you strive to avoid burdening your soul with the investigation of anything the true reality of which you

29 Kafih, *Five Scrolls*, 294–295.

cannot grasp, and indeed you cannot possibly reach complete knowledge in the supernal sciences; on the contrary, you ought to follow the way of fear and obedience. According to this interpretation it as if he says: Beware **of** the making of many books, as in: "Keep yourself ascending to the mountain" (Exod 19:2), which means: [Keep yourself] **from** ascending [to the mountain]. For the exhortation is to keep from occupying yourself with what has no end, as when he [Qohelet] says: אֵין קֵץ …

In our opinion, in contrast, this sort of warning using this language [i.e., *hizzaher*] has the sense of inculcating something and admonishing to do something, similar to: "And thou shalt teach them (*ve-hizharttah*) [ordinances and laws]" (Exod 18:20). Its basic meaning is providing explanation and making explicit, that is, making clear to them; and thus the interpretation of *hizzaher* here is: make clear for yourself and explain. The third-person referent in *mehemah* refers to the wisdom he [Qohelet] had composed and the sciences he had collected, thus he comes to exhort students to guide themselves in them and increase study of their subjects. Indeed, the best type of acquiring is acquiring books and bringing into existence various forms of scientific knowledge, not being content with only a few of them, for there is no limit to the sciences, such that one could reach [their end] and stand still; one ought not to be content with what is apprehended of them and reckon one has reached the end, rather one should continue studying till the end of one's time and compose books without ever being satisfied. It is this that he meant when saying: אֵין קֵץ. So too the type of study and diligence that fatigues the body is the best of all toil, for it keeps [the body] from vicious pleasures and prevents base desires from dominating.…

What you learn from this is: you ought to increase the number of compilations by the religious sages; you ought to learn their dicta and how to behave according to them and draw new conclusions from them; you ought to be diligent in study, for through [study] everything will abide; it [study] is the best of all things a man inclines toward and the most virtuous of all things a man can be honored by.

In the Hebrew tradition, Ibn Ezra presents the view of Ibn Janah as correct, without mentioning him or any other Karaite or Rabbanite authority by name.[30]

30 This is what Ibn Ezra says at 12:12, as if the competing explanations of Ibn Janah and Ibn Ghiyath did not exist: "וְיִתֵר מֵהֵמָּה בְּנִי הִזָּהֵר – be admonished **from** making many books, as in: הִשָּׁמְרוּ לָכֶם עֲלוֹת בָּהָר (Exod 19:12). The meaning of *asot*, 'making,' is in fact *qenot*, 'acquiring.' Or perhaps it is written: **for** there is no end **to them.** The *lamed* of וְלַהַג is a root

Later Maimonideans, in contrast, whether drawing from Ibn Ghiyath or not, were very much in favor of promoting an expansive view on the importance of having many books. Ibn Latif says so in his commentary on Qohelet 12:12 clearly and unequivocally, with a clever inferential reading of "weariness of the flesh," whereas Immanuel of Rome, between expansions of Ibn Ezra and literal borrowings from Ibn Tibbon, seems to advise us to beware lest we think the books already available to us or words already taught are the sum total of what ought to be known; there is so very much to learn, beyond what can be contained in any book. We end with these two readings:

> Ibn Latif, commentary on 12:12:
>
> *And further by these my son be admonished* – he says that, more than what the ancients, the masters of assemblies collected and composed in their books, strive to make still more books than they made, for there is great benefit in making sure not to interrupt this or bring it to an end in your mind, as if saying: I have had enough of this. *And much study is a weariness of the flesh* – he means that the making of books and the preoccupation with them is a weariness of the **flesh** only; it is not a weariness of the soul; on the contrary, it is its delight.
>
> And Immanuel of Rome on 12:12:
>
> Or his saying: ויותר מהמה בני הזהר has the meaning that he, after mentioning that he had taught the people knowledge (12:9), had weighed and investigated, composed many *meshalim* (12:10), and had set forth his words arousing the hearts like *darbonot* and collected wisdom in his books before the people (12:11), he said: ויותר מהמה בני הזהר (12:12) – that is, don't think that what I wrote to you is sufficient, rather: of more than what I admonished you, you ought to be admonished. The antecedent of the word מהמה is his *meshalim* or the "words of the sages" he had mentioned. He says: more than what I had said and what you find written in the books of the sages, הזהר. If you say: why did you not compose in the books all that is needed? And then you remind me that I should beware of more than what you wrote, without letting me know what it is? Know that the human intellect does not possess the ability to write in a book

letter no different than the *lamed* of דַּעַת-לְמַד (Eccl 12:9); its morphology is like that of: לַהַט הַחֶרֶב (Gen 3:24). It is a hapex legomenon; in the Ishmaelite language it has the sense of: to read, call (*qeri'ah*)."

> all things a man needs to beware of, for: in order to make many books and write every detail needed, there will be no end or measure to books that man needs to compose. If you say: if you cannot write them in a book because of the burden of writing, say them in your mouths and we will hear them – this too is a heavy burden; it is like much *lahag*, which is a "burden of flesh." The term *lahag*, in this interpretation, is speech (*dibbur*), according to its meaning in context (*ʿinyan*); that is, for much speech is also a "burden of flesh," just as the making of many books is a "burden of flesh."

6 Conclusions: Lessons Learned

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, I am only just beginning to develop a narrative history of Jewish Qohelet exegesis during the Middle Ages. But even with these few samples, I think patterns are starting to emerge.

First: The Judeo-Arabic tradition, both Rabbanite and Karaite, is relatively stable from the tenth to the twelfth century. There is a surprising amount of continuity from the Islamic East to Islamic Spain, and between Karaites and Rabbanites. Even when different, even contradictory readings are developed – as in the interpretations of Qohelet 12:12 – the two competing interpretations are developed clearly within the same cultural world; they are using the same methods and tools, they are speaking the same language – literally and figuratively. Things change dramatically in the thirteenth century in Hebrew in Christian Europe, largely under the influence of Maimonides and the Aristotelian tradition.

Second: The early exegetical tradition of Qohelet in the Islamic world, from the tenth to twelfth century, easily fits into what has been called a "rationalistic" tradition: the exegetes read the text in light of grammar, context, rhetorical usage, historical background, and according to what simply makes sense. Even when someone like Ibn Ghiyath appeals to rabbinic midrash, it is generally to solicit one additional interpretation to help make sense of a verse in context. From the thirteenth century forward, rabbinic midrash returns as a key source of inspiration not for a plain-sense reading of the verse but for philosophical, kabbalistic, and allegorical readings. We see this in the interpretations of Qohelet 10:20. It is found in many other examples as well.

Third: The way I have presented the sources could be seen as being very traditional and strongly anthological in character. There are some differences, however. First of all, the focus is Qohelet, a book that does not have a clear

tradition of reading or canonical sources of commentary, as does the Torah, for example. Second, the exegetes considered in this experiment are not at all traditional; they are not part of a canon of exegesis, nor are they all within the rabbinic tradition or writing in Hebrew. I have consciously avoided Rashi, Rashbam, Joseph Qara, Ramban, and for the most part Ibn Ezra. Even if the approach seems traditional, in other words, the sources are not, and presenting them in this way helps to subvert and expand the canon.

The fourth and final conclusion: This approach, a strongly inductive approach to the history of exegesis, whether traditional or not, is especially helpful in identifying, exposing, and illustrating the shifts in the history of exegesis over time and between different schools. It also helps us to keep in mind a very important principle. Biblical interpretation is rarely, if ever, exegesis and nothing else; it is never neutral and value-free. Or to say it another way: the explication of any biblical text is generally, if not always, the product of the intellectual world of its creator.

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