

Ruth

Ruling from Their Graves? Reading Naomi within the African Religio-Cultural Context - **Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele)**, University of South Africa, South Africa

The Boaz Solution: Reading Ruth in Light of Australian Asylum Seeker Discourse - **Anthony Rees**, United Theological College, Australia

Finding Korean Goose Mothers a Home: A Contextual Re-Reading of Ruth - **Hyun Woo Kim**, Emory University, USA

Boaz as 'Sugar Daddy': Re-Reading Ruth in the Context of HIV in Southern Africa - **Gerald O. West** and **Beverley G. Haddad**, University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa
Racial Melancholia and the Book of Ruth - **Gale A. Yee**, Episcopal Divinity School, USA

Poor and Landless Women: An African Reading of Leviticus 25 and Ruth 4 with Latino/a Critical Tools - **Ndikho Mtshiselwa**, University of South Africa, South Africa

Song of Songs

A Womanist Reading of the Song of Songs in the Age of AIDS - **Cheryl B. Anderson**, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, USA

Where Love and Death Meet: Reading the Old Testament in a Context of Gender Violence - **Mercedes L. García Bachmann**, Instituto para la Pastoral Contextual, Iglesia Evangélica Luterana Unida, Argentina

Qoheleth

'What Gain Have the Workers from Their Toil': (Con)Texting Ecclesiastes 3.9-13 in Pasifika - **Jione Havea**, Trinity Theological College, New Zealand

Hebel and Kong: a Cross-Textual Reading between Qoheleth and the Heart Sūtra - **Huang Wei**, Shanghai University, China

Dealing with Death: Reading Qoheleth in Different Contexts - **Klaas Spronk**, Protestantse Theologische Universiteit, The Netherlands

Lamentations

Reading Daughter Zion and Lady Meng: Tears, Protest and Female Voices - **Archie C. C. Lee**, Shandong University, China

Lamentations as Musical Performance, its Origins and Life Occasions: Some Reflections - **Athalya Brenner-Idan**, Stellenbosch University, South Africa and Universiteit van Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Esther

Women's Banquets and Gatherings in Text and Context: The Queens' Banquets in Esther and Contemporary Women-only Israeli/Jewish Ceremonies - **Ora Brison**, Tel Aviv University, Israel

Esther, Pious and Brave: Reading Children's Bibles as Commentary on Twentieth-Century Afrikaner Culture - **Jaqueline S. du Toit**, University of the Free State, South Africa

texts@contexts

The Five Scrolls

BRENNER-IDAN,
YEE & LEE editors



ATHALYA BRENNER-IDAN
GALE A. YEE
ARCHIE C.C. LEE
editors

t&tclark

The Five Scrolls

texts@contexts

BIBLICAL STUDIES

Cover image © characterdesign/iStock

ISBN 978-0-567-67893-5



9 780567 678935

Also available
from Bloomsbury



www.bloomsbury.com

B L O O M S B U R Y

THE FIVE SCROLLS

TEXTS@CONTEXTS

Edited by

Athalya Brenner-Idan, Gale A. Yee and Archie C. C. Lee

Bloomsbury T&T Clark
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury T&T Clark
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Imprint previously known as T&T Clark

50 Bedford Square	1385 Broadway
London	New York
WC1B 3DP	NY 10018
UK	USA

www.bloomsbury.com

BLOOMSBURY, T&T CLARK and the Diana logo are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published 2018

© Athalya Brenner-Idan, Gale A. Yee and Archie C. C. Lee, 2018

Athalya Brenner-Idan, Gale A. Yee and Archie C. C. Lee have asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Editors of this work.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

No responsibility for loss caused to any individual or organization acting on or refraining from action as a result of the material in this publication can be accepted by Bloomsbury or the author.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 978-0-5676-7893-5

ePDF: 978-0-5676-7894-2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Series: Texts@Contexts, volume 6

Cover image © characterdesign/

Typeset by Forthcoming Publications (www.forthpub.com)

Printed and bound in Great Britain

CONTENTS

List of Contributors ix

INTRODUCTION
Athalya Brenner-Idan xi

Part I RUTH

RULING FROM THEIR GRAVES?
READING NAOMI WITHIN THE AFRICAN RELIGIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT
Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) 3

THE BOAZ SOLUTION:
READING RUTH IN LIGHT OF AUSTRALIAN ASYLUM SEEKER DISCOURSE
Anthony Rees 15

FINDING KOREAN GOOSE MOTHERS A HOME:
A CONTEXTUAL RE-READING OF RUTH
Hyun Woo Kim 28

BOAZ AS 'SUGAR DADDY':
RE-READING RUTH IN THE CONTEXT OF HIV IN SOUTHERN AFRICA
Gerald O. West and Beverley G. Haddad 39

RACIAL MELANCHOLIA AND THE BOOK OF RUTH
Gale A. Yee 61

POOR AND LANDLESS WOMEN:
AN AFRICAN READING OF LEVITICUS 25 AND RUTH 4
WITH LATINO/A CRITICAL TOOLS
Ndikho Mtshiselwa 71

Part II SONG OF SONGS

A WOMANIST READING OF THE SONG OF SONGS
IN THE AGE OF AIDS
Cheryl B. Anderson 89

WHERE LOVE AND DEATH MEET: READING THE OLD TESTAMENT IN A CONTEXT OF GENDER VIOLENCE Mercedes L. García Bachmann	103
Part III QOHELETH	
'WHAT GAIN HAVE THE WORKERS FROM THEIR TOIL?': (CON)TEXTING ECCLESIASTES 3.9-13 IN PASIFIKA Jione Havea	123
HEBEL AND KONG: A CROSS-TEXTUAL READING BETWEEN QOHELETH AND THE <i>HEART SŪTRA</i> Huang Wei	134
DEALING WITH DEATH: READING QOHELETH IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS Klaas Spronk	145
Part IV LAMENTATIONS	
READING DAUGHTER ZION AND LADY MENG: TEARS, PROTEST AND FEMALE VOICES Archie C. C. Lee	159
LAMENTATIONS AS MUSICAL PERFORMANCE, ITS ORIGINS AND LIFE OCCASIONS: SOME REFLECTIONS Athalya Brenner-Idan	174
Part V ESTHER	
WOMEN'S BANQUETS AND GATHERINGS IN TEXT AND CONTEXT: THE QUEENS BANQUETS IN ESTHER AND CONTEMPORARY WOMEN-ONLY ISRAELI/JEWISH CEREMONIES Ora Brison	189
ESTHER, PIOUS AND BRAVE: READING CHILDREN'S BIBLES AS COMMENTARY ON TWENTIETH-CENTURY AFRIKANER CULTURE Jaqueline S. du Toit	210
Index of References	221
Index of Authors	226

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

(in Order of Appearance in the Volume)

RUTH

Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele)
University of South Africa, South Africa

Anthony Rees
Charles Sturt University, Australia

Hyun Woo Kim
Emory University, USA

Gerald O. West and Beverley G. Haddad
University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa

Gale A. Yee
Episcopal Divinity School, USA

Ndikho Mtshiselwa
University of South Africa, South Africa

SONG OF SONGS

Cheryl B. Anderson
Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, USA

Mercedes L. García Bachmann
I.U. ISEDET, Argentina

QOHELETH

Jione Havea

Trinity Theological College, Auckland, New Zealand

Huang Wei

Shanghai University, China

Klaas Spronk

Protestantse Theologische Universiteit, The Netherlands

LAMENTATIONS

Archie C. C. Lee

Shandong University, China

Athalya Brenner-Idan

Stellenbosch University, South Africa and
Universiteit van Amsterdam, The Netherlands

ESTHER

Ora Brison

Tel Aviv University, Israel

Jaqueline S. du Toit

University of the Free State, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

Athalya Brenner-Idan

In this collection, scholars from geographical locations as far away from each other as the Pacific islands from South Africa, or Argentina from Israel, revisit a cluster of five biblical texts: Ruth, Song of Songs, Qoheleth [Ecclesiastes], Lamentations and Esther.

In the Christian bibles these short books are differently placed: Ruth and Esther in the historical books, Qoheleth and the Song of Songs within the wisdom books, and Lamentations in the prophetic section (as attributed to the prophet Jeremiah). In the Hebrew Bible they are grouped together in the *Ketubim* (Writings) section. They are known as The Five Scrolls because of their public liturgical use: each is performed in the synagogue on a certain Jewish festival and they are therefore kept in the synagogue in scroll form.¹

Within this collection the books' order, or rather the order of Ruth and the Song of Songs, varies. In the Aleppo Codex² and most printed bibles the order is determined by the Jewish liturgical calendar (with the liturgical year starting on the month of Nisan, hence the Song of Songs which is recited on Passover opens the collection and Ruth comes second, then Lamentations, Qoheleth and Esther). In the Leningrad Codex and editions that rely on it (including *Biblia Hebraica* editions), the decisive factor is the individual book's narrated chronology or traditionally endorsed time

1. Esther is recited on Purim in all Jewish communities. In most Jewish communities Ruth is recited on *Shavu'ot* (Weeks); the Song of Songs on Passover; Lamentations on the ninth of Ab, traditionally the day both Jerusalem temples were destroyed; and Qoheleth on *Sukkot* (Feast of Booths). This liturgical tradition is probably why the five texts are grouped together. However, as is well known, apart from the Esther Scroll the tradition of reciting those texts annually on those festivals stems at the very least from the Middle Ages.

2. The pages containing Qoheleth, Lamentations and Esther are missing from the Aleppo Codex due to damage or theft.

- Soothill, W. E. and Lewis Hodous, eds (1988), *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms with Sanskrit and English Equivalents and a Sanskrit-Pali Index*, repr., London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. [最新漢英佛學大辭典, 台北: 新文豐出版公司, 1988]
- Shuster, M. (2008), 'Being as Breath, Vapor as Joy: Using Martin Heidegger to Re-read the Book of Ecclesiastes', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 33 (2): 219–44.
- Staples, W. E. (1943), 'The "Vanity" of Ecclesiastes', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 2: 95–104.
- Whybray, R. N. (1989), *Ecclesiastes*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

DEALING WITH DEATH: READING QOHELETH IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS*

Klaas Spronk

The book of Qoheleth is fascinating reading for a man of my age (nearly sixty), somewhere between a midlife crisis (I survived) and a good death (I hope). The relation between Qoheleth and the midlife crisis is obvious to every man in his forties looking at his life and wondering whether all he did was and still is worthwhile.¹ Taking seriously Qoheleth's advice to enjoy life in the best way and for as long as possible, I realize that it makes a big difference whether your prospect is a good or a bad death. With the biblical views on this subject at the back of my mind (Spronk 2004), I picture the end of my life at this moment more to be in line with Abraham's good death than with Absalom's bad death – because I have grandchildren, I am still with the woman I have loved since my youth, have enough money and feel healthy. Someone who is less lucky will not read Qoheleth in the same way as I do. Does he/she understand Qoheleth better? Is my interpretation of Qoheleth's words correct when I do not feel provoked by them?

One thing is clear to me. The context of Qoheleth's reader has a strong influence on the interpretation, more so than with many other books of the Bible. In this contribution I wish to make a modest attempt to describe a number of readings from readers in different contexts, past and present, of a text of Qoheleth on death. This may enable me to get a better, more critical view on my own way of reading this text.

I will concentrate on what we read in ch. 9 about life in the face of death. There can be no doubt that death is one of the primary themes in the book of Qoheleth. This has been demonstrated in scholarly literature

* Thanks are due to my students Liesbeth van Deventer, Stefan Honing, Sico de Jong and André Wingelaar for their support in writing this article

1. In their book *40/40 Vision: Clarifying Your Mission in Midlife* (2015), Peter Greer and Greg Lafferty base their discussion of the midlife crisis and their suggestions to cope with it on their interpretation of the book of Qoheleth.

time and again (Burkes 1999; M. George 2000; Krüger 2005; Lux 2009; Debel 2011; Fuhr 2013: 117–36; Berner 2015). Most scholars agree that, according to Qoheleth, death is the great equalizer, making no distinction between good or bad, wise or foolish; and that there is no life after death. Some want to leave open the possibility that Qoheleth, when speaking of the human spirit going to God (3.21 and 12.7), indirectly refers to a positive conception of the afterlife (Lux 2009: 61–3). Others assume a later ‘eschatological’ redaction, especially in 3.17; 8.5b–6; 11.9; 12.13–14 (Park 2014: 195–209; Berner 2015: 70–2). In his monumental commentary, however, Schoors sticks to the interpretation of Qoheleth as denying any form of individual survival, and is also reluctant to assume redactional activity in a verse like 12.7 (Schoors 2013: 819–20).

Reading Qoheleth 9

In ch. 9 there is clearly no life after death in sight. The focus in vv. 1–3 is completely on this life, as summarized by Schoors: ‘(t)he idea that the same fate overtakes everybody is expressed in a more emphatic way’ than in previous texts (Schoors 2013: 649). He adds that in vv. 4–6 Qoheleth ‘underlines the emptiness of death’, that there is ‘neither reward nor punishment to be received’ in Sheol and that ‘(t)he only practical solution is again to enjoy the good things of life’ (2013: 650).

I have read 9.1–12 in a class with thirty students. Twenty of them were Dutch students in the final year of their academic study and preparing for ministry in Protestant churches. Ten students came from other parts of the world, following a three-month Masters program at our university (Protestant Theological University) in Amsterdam. I asked them to give a personal reaction to this text from Qoheleth: How does it relate to your own views on death, life and the afterlife?

Most of the students pointed to the contrast with their own Christian views about life after death. Some pointed to the different views within the Bible, especially to Lk. 16.19–33, 1 Corinthians 15 and the book of Revelation. Two African students also indicated that they could not accept Qoheleth’s view because it was not in line with traditional African conceptions of the afterlife, which has a prominent place for ancestors. They did not indicate that there was a tension between these African religions and Christianity on this subject.² Some of the students stated that they no longer shared traditional Christian ideas in this regard, and

sympathized with Qoheleth. Two Dutch students did not accept the idea of completely different views within the Bible and announced that they were going to study the matter, apparently hoping to find some way to bring the seemingly opposing views together as different aspects of the same belief. A student from Myanmar reported that Qoheleth 9 is the text quoted most in his country at funeral services; and that it is used to make clear in that situation how important it is ‘to understand the will of God, and to learn how to live the rest of each and everyone’s life’. It was also remarked, especially by Dutch students, that Qoheleth’s view sounds remarkably modern, which makes it possible to use the work ‘as a beautiful gateway for a good conversation’. Two students related it to their future occupation as ministers, stating that – from a pastoral viewpoint – this Qoheleth text is of no use.

A number of students indicated feeling provoked by the words of Qoheleth. Only two of them spoke of a slight change of mind caused by reading this chapter. A white student from South Africa remarked: ‘For me, this text is bringing relief in a way – it reassures me that it will not help me to stress and worry about death. Rather, we must spend our time in life on living it.’ A Dutch student concluded his reaction with: ‘Perhaps we should live this life as if it is the only one we have got...’

One difference between the reactions of the foreign students and those from the Netherlands is that the former referred more explicitly to their context and to the community they live in. This may have to do with the fact that at that moment they had been far from home for a month and were probably used to telling Dutch people, including me as a teacher, about their background. Nevertheless, it is an indication of the impact of one’s context on reading texts about death. More than the Dutch students, the foreign students could refer to their own experiences with death. An African student told of the death of her four siblings. She was the only child left to her parents. A student from Colombia wrote:

This portion of the Jewish Scriptures allows me to put in dialogue the meaning of death and hope in this passage, with the context of war and desolation in my country. More than two interrupted centuries of civil wars within our country caused the Colombian population to see death as a natural or normal event. The surprise for us is to watch a newspaper not informing about death. The most usual experience in my country for decades has been to be eating lunch and sharing a good moment with a partner while, on the screen, there is news on how dozens of Colombians kill themselves. The experience of the other’s death is a place not to mourn, but to naturalize the hegemony of evil of our society.

2. Editor’s note: On this approach cf. also Masenya’s essay on Ruth in this volume.

The only Dutch student to bring in a personal experience was an older student who stated that for him 'death is not a taboo', because his wife had worked in a hospice and they had often spoken about death. Moreover, he had also lost his wife at a relatively young age. He stated that he does not fear death, that he does not have illusions about a life after death and that death is primarily a problem for those who are left behind.

This small investigation of the modern reception of Qoheleth's words on death underlines the great influence of the context on the way Qoheleth's message is understood and digested. It also indicates that this text does not seem to have much potential for changing the way the reader looks at death. Before going further into the matter of the application of this text, it is interesting to pay attention to the interaction between Qoheleth and the context in which it was written.

Qoheleth in his Historical Context

The book of Qoheleth is presented as the work of King Solomon, but in all probability it has to be dated in the Hellenistic era, somewhere between 280 and 230 BCE (Schoors 2013: 3). One of the arguments put forward by many scholars is that Qoheleth seems to be influenced by Greek ideas.³ One of the parallels that can be noted between Qoheleth and Greek literature is the combination of the conviction of death as the absolute end, and the admonition to enjoy life for as long as and as well as possible. It is evident, for instance, in Euripides's play *Alcestis*, about a woman who dies so that her husband may live, but who eventually is rescued by Heracles. In one part of the play, a drunken Heracles proclaims:

...let me
tell you something that will make you wiser.
Do you know what human life is all about?
I think you don't. How could you? Listen to me:
We all must die. That goes for me and you,
and no man living has the slightest clue
if he'll live another day. Out of the blue
comes all our fortune. Scientists pursue
the truth, and teachers teach their arts and skills,
but still we know less than we ever knew.

3. This was already suggested in the eighteenth century; cf. the survey by Burkes 1999: 91–108. Burkes herself is not convinced. She finds an explanation for Qoheleth's worldview from within the history of the Jewish tradition.

You've heard what I have to say. Now, have a drink!
Enjoy yourself! The life you live today
is yours, and all the rest belongs to fortune.⁴

Especially on this point there are also close parallels with much older Mesopotamian and Egyptian texts. The most famous one is the ending of the Gilgamesh Epic, where the hero of story, who had striven in vain for immortality, is addressed by the tavern-keeper Shiduru in a way that is strongly reminiscent of Qoh. 9.7-9:

O Gilgamesh, where are you wandering?
The life that you seek you never will find:
when the gods created mankind,
death they dispensed to mankind,
life they kept for themselves.
But you, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full,
enjoy yourself always by day and by night!
Make merry each day,
dance and play day and night!
let your clothes be clean,
let your head be washed, may you bathe in water!
Gaze on the child who holds your hand,
let your wife enjoy your repeated embrace!
For such is the destiny [of mortal men,]
that the one who lives...⁵

This parallel of Qoheleth with the Gilgamesh Epic is one of many,⁶ but it is striking that this element of the Gilgamesh Epic is only found in the Old Babylonian version, dating from the first half of the second millennium BCE.

There are also clear parallels with ancient Egyptian literature, especially with the Harper's Song from the tomb of King Intef, found in different copies from the second millennium BCE. It expresses serious doubts about all efforts made to secure a good life after death. Little is left of the 'houses of eternity' of the kings of old. Therefore, it is better to concentrate on this life and make the most of it:

4. Euripides, *Alcestis* 828-840. Translation by Arnson Svarlie 2007: 39.

5. *OB Gilgamesh* VA+BM iii 2-15. Translation by A. George 1999: 124.

6. A survey is given by Samet (2015), and she also discusses the parallel with Qoheleth 9 (377-9).

What of their places?
 Their walls have crumbled,
 their places are gone,
 as though they had never been!
 None comes from there,
 to tell of their state,
 to tell of their needs,
 to calm our hearts,
 until we go where they have gone!
 Hence rejoice in your heart!
 Forgetfulness profits you,
 Follow your heart as long as you live!
 Put myrrh on your head,
 dress in fine linen,
 anoint yourself with oils fit for a god.
 Heap up your joys,
 let your heart not sink!
 Follow your heart and your happiness,
 do your things on earth as your heart commands!
 When there comes to you that day of mourning,
 the Weary-hearted hears not their mourning,
 wailing saves no man from the pit!
 Make holiday,
 do not weary of it!
 Lo, none is allowed to take his goods with him,
 lo, none who departs comes back again!⁷

There is much discussion about how precisely these texts should be related to the book of Qoheleth. Although some still assume that the Gilgamesh Epic functioned as a direct literary source of Qoheleth (Samet 2015), most scholars nowadays are more reluctant to take this position and consider a relation with popular Greek philosophy to be more likely (Van der Toorn 2001; Kelly 2010; Sneed 2012: 42–3). A middle position is taken by those who emphasize that Qoheleth should be read in a traditional Semitic context; that echoes of views in the Gilgamesh Epic can still be found in later Akkadian texts; and that the same holds true for the Egyptian views (Kaiser 2003: 263).

When evaluating the relation with the Greek, Mesopotamian and Egyptians texts one should also take into account that along with these parallels there are also a number of differences. The most important

of these is that, according to Qoheleth, one can find no comfort in the expectation of being remembered after death: 'There is no enduring remembrance of the wise as well as of the fool, because all that now is will be forgotten in the days to come' (2.16).⁸ Here Qoheleth contradicts a motif which is broadly attested in Greek literature (Berner 2015: 59), and which also occurs at the end of the epic of Gilgamesh. It concludes with Gilgamesh proudly referring to the walls of Uruk for which he became and will remain famous (A. George 1999: xxxiv). In 3.21 Qoheleth has also dealt with another idea about escaping death. He asks a rhetorical question: 'Who knows if the spirit of the sons of men goes upward and the spirit of the animal goes down to the earth?' This can be read as a denial of belief in the immortality of the soul, which became common in later Greek-influenced Jewish writings (Schoors 2013: 309), and of the ancient Egyptian conception of the spirit as a bird leaving the body after death.

Burkes compares Qoheleth's view on death and the way death is described in late Egyptian biographies, and sees this as an insoluble problem. She does not assume that one has been influenced by the other. What connects the two views is that they both were 'part of a broader pattern of change where a wide spectrum of religious beliefs, expectations, and emphases are coming in for new reflection (...) at approximately the same time' (Burkes 1999: 236). The problem with this theory is that Qoheleth's view on death can hardly be seen as deviating from traditional views. It is the other way around: Qoheleth is resisting new ways, probably influenced by Greek thinking, of softening the harsh reality of death. In his plea for making the best of this life, he wants to cut off every escape contained in any form of positive views on an afterlife.

A Liberationist Reading

In her rereading of Qoheleth in both today's context and its own context, Elsa Tamez sees similarities between the frustration of the people suffering under the 'globalization' of the Hellenistic Ptolemaic system in the time of Qoheleth, and the 'dehumanizing reality' of the present time (Tamez 2000: v). She interprets 4.1–12, which starts with the reference to the 'tears of the oppressed' who 'have no comforter', as Qoheleth's call for 'solidarity as a way of combating the avaricious and meaningless spirit of his society' (Tamez 2000: 68). She also wants to read ch. 9 as a text of resistance: 'to live and feel the vibrancy of life (...) is a feasible

7. Translation by M. Lichtheim in Hallo 2003: 1:49.

8. All translations from the Hebrew biblical text in this essay are the author's.

way to resist the times of anti-human hostility, and to combat the total frustration caused by the society' (Tamez 2000: 113).⁹ She acknowledges, however, that from a liberationist point of view, Qoheleth as 'a renegade aristocrat under foreign domination' may have been too inclined to accept a situation he could not easily change. Suffering people, however, do not have this luxury. For this reason, Tamez wants to put the apocalyptic vision of a completely different future next to Qoheleth's advice 'to live life from day to day (...) in the midst of enslaving labour and sorrow' (Tamez 2000: 145).

Not everyone will agree with Tamez about her analysis of Qoheleth's view on society. According to Schoors, Qoheleth was aware of political and economic oppression, but did not really criticize them. He did not see oppression as a problem, but only used it to illustrate the absurdity of human existence (Schoors 2013: 325). Katharine Dell, who sympathizes with the liberationist approach, is also reluctant on this issue: 'the very bluntness and realism of Ecclesiastes make it a resistant text for liberation'. Instead, she advocates a postcolonial approach, reading the texts as a two-edged sword, leaving room for a struggle over their meaning, both creating problems and solving them. With regard to the issue of life and death, Dell concludes that Qoheleth 'could be read in the postcolonial context of either group – by the dominant Eurocentric former colonizer or the poverty-ridden formerly colonized – and both would probably come to the same conclusion that life should be enjoyed in the present, whoever you are, and that nothing can ultimately be changed' (Dell 2013: 83). Read this way, however, the biblical text hardly functions as a two-edged sword. Motivated by the experiences of reading this text with my students, I think that more inspiration can be found in it.

Enjoying Life as a Protest

What strikes me in the reactions to the way Qoheleth speaks about life in the face of death is that his advice to enjoy life as much as possible is understood so differently. I now realise all the more that it makes a big difference when you hear this in my privileged situation, as

9. Besides the parallel from the Gilgamesh Epic, Tamez also refers to the admonition to enjoy life in the face of death in a Latin-American (Nahuatl) poem of the sixteenth century CE: 'For only a short time, like the magnolia flower, have we come to open our corolla in the world. We have come only to wilt. Let your bitterness cease for a moment: even for a moment let us cast away sorrow! What shall we sing, oh my friends? In what shall we delight?' (Tamez 2000: 118).

described above, or when you live, like some of the students, in Medellín (Columbia) or in Central Africa. For me, enjoying life is simply taking some of the many possibilities offered by the amusement industry and advocated by my employer, who wants me to stay happy and healthy. For people in a situation of poverty and oppression, the advice to enjoy life can be heard as a call for protest against their situation and an urge not to give in to resignation. Here I agree with Elsa Tamez. This can also explain why it sometimes seems to be more difficult to enjoy life properly in a comfortable situation. One could also say that being bored or depressed is a luxury not everyone can afford.

These experiences of reading Qoheleth in different contexts are enriched by what Mark George writes about his way of reading the texts in a post-Holocaust age. In his view, Qoheleth teaches us to accept the reality of death in order to take responsibility for the life one has been given (M. George 2000: 289). In his attempt to apply this to the present-day situation, George first consults Jacques Derrida, who states that responsibility requires the act of a unique person, a subject who is finite and irreplaceable. The unique self is not constituted by the role one plays in life, but by one's death. Each person's death is unique (M. George 2000: 290–1). To cope with death in a post-Holocaust age, George suggests going one step further. In line with the view of Emmanuel Levinas that subjectivity arises in the encounter with the Other, George suggests (2000: 293) that 'it is not only one's own death one must take upon oneself, but also the death of the Other, for the death of the Other is oneself'. The death one must accept is also the death of those who died in the Holocaust and the freedom to enjoy life is 'a freedom derived from taking on the deaths of all those who died'. In this way the awareness of death is the beginning of life. I see here also a connection with what I learned from my foreign students, namely that it makes a big difference whether you think of death from the perspective of the individual or from the experience of being part of a community.¹⁰

The obvious conclusion of this survey of interpretations and applications of Qoheleth's texts on life and death is that there are many differences which to a large extent can be attributed to the different contexts of the readers. What can be indicated as characteristic of Qoheleth and which can also be used as a critique on some of the positions taken,

10. It is interesting in this connection to note that in his essay of 2012, on the Gilgamesh Epic, A. R. George points to the contrasts between humans as individuals and humans as a collective in old Babylonian thought as one of the basic elements of the text.

is that Qoheleth is constantly presenting problems. One should be careful with attributing definitive answers or clear-cut conceptions to Qoheleth, because 'he shows that any truth wisdom can attain has only a relative value, there is always a pro and a con' (Schoors 2013: 20). So, why not take the rhetorical question of 3.21 ('Who knows if the spirit of the sons of men goes upward and the spirit of the animal goes down to the earth?') as an open question? In 9.3 Qoheleth confronts the reader with a harsh reality: 'and afterwards – to the dead'. Psalm 73.24 can be read as a specific reaction to that statement, declaring that a difference is made for those who stay with God: 'and afterward you will take me into glory' (Spronk 1986: 326). One does not have to see this as a contradiction. Where Qoheleth did not want to or dared not to go further, the psalmist did want to; or could not stop.

References

- Arnson Svarlie, Diane, trans. (2007), *Alcestis, Medea, Hippolytus / Euripides*, introduction and notes Robin Mitchell-Boysak, Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Berner, Christoph (2015), 'Evil and Death in the Book of Qoheleth', in B. Ego and U. Mittmann (eds), *Evil and Death: Conceptions of the Human in Biblical, Early Jewish, Greco-Roman and Egyptian Literature*, 57–73, Berlin: W. de Gruyter.
- Burkes, Shannon (1999), *Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period*, SBL Dissertation Series 170; Atlanta, GA: SBL.
- Debel, Hans (2011), 'Life-and-Death Advice from a Conservative Sage: Qoheleth's Perspective on Life after Death', in L. D. Matassa and J. M. Silverman (eds), *Text, Theology, and Trowel: New Investigations in the Biblical World*, 39–58, Eugene, OR: Pickwick.
- Dell, Katharine J. (2013), *Interpreting Ecclesiastes: Readers Old and New*, Critical Studies in the Hebrew Bible 3, Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.
- Fuhr, Richard Alan (2013), *An Analysis of the Inter-Dependency of the Prominent Motifs within the Book of Qoheleth*, Studies in Biblical Literature 151, New York: Peter Lang.
- George, Andrew R. (1999), *The Epic of Gilgamesh: The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- George, Andrew R. (2012), 'The Mayfly on the River: Individual and Collective Destiny in the Epic of Gilgamesh', *Kaskal. Rivista di storia, ambiente e culture del Vicino Oriente Antico*, 9: 227–42.
- George, Mark K. (2000), 'Death as the Beginning of Life in the Book of Ecclesiastes', in T. Linafelt (ed.), *Strange Fire: Reading the Bible after the Holocaust*, 280–93, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Greer, Peter, and Greg Lafferty (2015), *40/40 Vision: Clarifying Your Mission in Midlife*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Hallo, William W., ed. (2003), *The Context of Scripture*. Vol. 1, *Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, Leiden: Brill.

- Kaiser, Otto (2003), 'Carpe diem und Memento mori in Dichtung und Denken der Alten, bei Kohelet und Ben Sira', in *Zwischen Athen und Jerusalem: Studien zur griechischen und biblischen Theologie, ihrer Eigenart und ihrem Verhältnis*, 247–74, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 320, Berlin: W. de Gruyter.
- Kelly, Joseph Ryan (2010), 'Sources of Contention and the Emerging Reality Concerning Qoheleth's *Carpe Diem* Advice', *Antiguo Oriente*, 8: 117–34.
- Krüger, Thomas (2005), 'Leben und Tod nach Kohelet und Paulus', in M. Abner et al. (eds), *Leben trotz Tod*, 195–216, Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie 19, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag.
- Lux, Rüdiger (2009), 'Tod und Gerechtigkeit im Buch Kohelet', in A. Berlejung and B. Janowski (eds), *Tod und Jenseits im alten Israel und in seiner Umwelt*, 43–65, Forschungen zum Alten Testament 64, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Park, Young Joon (2014), *Der Durchbruch zum ewigen Leben: Der Psalm 49, das Buch Kohelet und das Wachstum der Weisheit*, Marburg: Tectum Verlag.
- Samet, Nili (2015), 'The Gilgamesh Epic and the Book of Qoheleth: A New Look', *Biblica*, 96: 375–90.
- Schoors, Antoon (2013), *Ecclesiastes*, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament, Leuven: Peeters.
- Sneed, Mark R. (2012), *The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes: A Social-Science Perspective*, Ancient Israel and Its Literature 12, Atlanta, GA: SBL.
- Spronk, Klaas (1986), *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, AOAT 219, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag.
- Spronk, Klaas (2004), 'Good Death and Bad Death in Ancient Israel according to Biblical Lore', *Social Science and Medicine*, 58: 987–95.
- Tamez, Elsa (2000), *When the Horizons Close: Rereading Ecclesiastes*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Van der Toorn, Karel (2001), 'Echoes of Gilgamesh in the Book of Qoheleth? A Reassessment of the Intellectual Sources of Qoheleth', in W. H. van Soldt et al. (eds), *Veenhof Anniversary Volume*, 503–14, Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten.