

Torah Overtones in the Epilogues of Qoheleth

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Abstract: This article focuses on the two epilogues of Qoheleth, namely 12:9–11 and 12:12–14 and is an attempt to unravel the relationship of the words of the sage with Torah, the latter featuring as *mišwōt* in v. 13. It is often held that these epilogues were written by someone other than the author of the book at large, and that their function (especially that of the second one), is to highlight the importance of the Torah over and against the words of the wise. Such a position is hereby contested and a rereading of these epilogues is offered. Two specific questions are addressed: Are these epilogues, particularly the second one, meant to downplay the words of the wise in relation to Torah? Conversely, how do the images employed, namely those of the goad, the nails, and the shepherd, possibly constitute a subtle reference to the divine commandments given by God himself? An analysis of the structures of the two epilogues and of the concepts used – this being done especially through an intertextual reading – is carried out hand in hand with a careful translation of the most pertinent texts. Moreover, the similarity of salient concepts found in the epilogues to Pentateuchal and Prophetic texts that have a pertinent canonical position is highlighted, thereby bearing light on the conclusion of Qoheleth. Finally, certain rabbinical interpretations are employed to further unpack the meaning of the texts in question. This exercise leads the author to hold that a positive relationship between sapiential wisdom and Torah is made both in the final epilogue, where the commandments are mentioned, and also in the first epilogue.

Keywords: Epilogues, Torah, goads and nails, similes and metaphors

Given Qoheleth's nonconformist understanding of reality, it is not surprising that the word *tôrāh* does not feature in his writings. The related term *mišwōt* ('commandments') is found in the penultimate verse of the book (12:13). Stuart Weeks has pointed out that the phrase "keep his commandments" at the end of the book "is so quintessentially Deuteronomic... that it could hardly but have been read by early Jewish readers as a reference to Torah, and the author of the verses must surely have been aware of these connotations."¹ Because of this reference to God's commandments and to the fear of God, as well as other elements, 12:9–14, which are the last six verses of the Book of Qoheleth, rightly constitute its epilogue or, more likely, its two epilogues.

¹ Weeks, "Fear God," 112. However, as far as Qoheleth's own understanding of this concept goes, Stuart Weeks is of the opinion that the monologue of the sage shows that he would have accepted the notion of divine commandments given to human beings, but by no means does his work relate to a divinely revealed Torah given authoritatively in the past (cf. *ibidem*, 115).

In terms of the relevance of this final section for canonical considerations, Brevard S. Childs had identified 12:9–14 as one of the few texts in Scripture which mostly betray a particular attention to the canon.² It might be tempting to conclude – and several have indeed opted for this position – that the *mišwōt* are here being presented over and against the sage’s reflections, such that human words would pale into insignificance before the divine words.³ This paper seeks to weigh against such an understanding of these epilogues by analysing their structure and the concepts encapsulated in both, with particular attention paid to the similes of the goads and nails in v. 11. It is my contention that the link between sapiential wisdom and Torah is made not only in vv. 13–14 but also prior to them, in the first epilogue, precisely through the employment of these two similes. Here, we also find the intriguing metaphor of the shepherd (v. 11), which various scholars have seen as being a reference to God. Though this paper gravitates towards such an interpretation, it must be stated that not enough attention has been given to the metaphorical imagination elicited by the images of the goad and the nail in this regard. Hence, what follows is an unpacking of these concepts in order to extract their fullest possible meaning for the interpretation of the text and its consequences for the relationship of Qoheleth to Torah.

1. Structure and Translation

The final section of Qoheleth is believed to contain two epilogues, though scholars have different opinions regarding their precise delimitation.⁴ Moreover, it is generally agreed that the voice heard in the epilogues differs from that of the body of the book, both because Qoheleth is spoken of in the third person and also for reasons related to content or style.⁵ The practically identical statements in 1:2 and 12:8 on the meaninglessness of life suggest that v. 9 onwards form an epilogue.⁶

² Brevard Childs (*Introduction*, 585) states: “Few passages in the OT reflect a more overt consciousness of the canon than does this epilogue.”

³ Historical critical analysis of the end of Amos too, namely Amos 9:11–15, led to seeing this final text as overturning former statements made in the book: contrast 5:2 to 9:11; cf. Blenkinsopp, *History*, 77.

⁴ James L. Crenshaw (*Old Testament Wisdom*, 143) points out that the epilogues are variously divided into vv. 9–11 and 12–14 or 9–12 and 13–14; also see Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 316–317.

⁵ Cf. Fox, “Frame-Narrative,” 84–85, 103. However, it is Michael V. Fox’s contention that Qoheleth is a persona whom the author wants us to believe is a real figure and whose words are mediated by the author of the whole composition, that is both the frame-narratives and the body of the book itself; cf. *ibidem*, 90–91 (“composition by a single author”... “That certain words are in a different voice does not mean that they are by a different hand”), 105–106.

⁶ On the concept of the meaning of life or the lack of it as expressed through the term *הבל*, see Onwukeme, *The Concept of Hebel*.

Norbert Lohfink offers a concentric arrangement of the book in which 1:2–3 and 12:8 are indicated as its frame.⁷

The two epilogues are usually taken to be vv. 9–11 and 12–14. The use of ויִתֵּן at the beginning of each section alludes to this division, with this possibly being interpreted either as a noun or as an adverb.⁸ However, the function of v. 12a must be considered carefully. Semantically, the subject in v. 12a is the same as that in v. 11, namely “the words of the wise” – note that מִהֶמָּה (“by them”) in v. 12a is in the 3rd person plural;⁹ this fact was not picked up by LXX. Ideologically, v. 12a agrees with what precedes it as it is clearly biased in favour of such words, shunning anything in addition to them. Though the *ʾaṭnāḥ* of v. 12 breaks the verse into bicola, it is significant that מִהֶמָּה is in emphatic position. They are given importance because it is *by them* that the listener will be warned (וְהִזְהָרָה v. 12).¹⁰ Hence, v. 12a serves as a hinge that connects the two epilogues, the second of which begins more precisely in v. 12b.

V. 11 will be singled out for translation since it is the focus of this paper and happens to be somewhat obscure, as can be attested even from the original sources. The expression דְּבַרֵּי חֲכָמִים is an indefinite construct chain that should be translated, contra most modern translations, as “words of wise people,” rather than “the words of the wise.” LXX confirms this with its indefinite λόγοι σοφῶν. The inseparable preposition כ makes the references to the goads and nails similes in relation to the words of the wise. Here, the reader can clearly detect tenors (the words and the בְּעֵלֵי אֲסָפוֹת) and two vehicles (goads and nails), and he/she must therefore relate the two domains no less than when metaphors are employed.¹¹ That the goads and pegs mentioned are *both* similes of these ‘words of wise people’ is supported by LXX and VUL, but MT’s synonymous parallelism places the nails in relation to the rather obscure expression בְּעֵלֵי אֲסָפוֹת. The synonymous parallelism employed here has a chiastic structure.¹² According to Marcus Jastrow, the term אֲסָפוֹת means “gatherings of scholars, councils.”¹³ In this case, it would translate as “the lords of the councils.” Alternatively, בְּעַל could be taken to have a figurative function, hence meaning “sayings of gatherings of

⁷ Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 8.

⁸ In the first case it would translate as “And an addition,” whilst in the second it would be “And moreover”: cf. Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 319, who translates “Un (altra) aggiunta” for the former.

⁹ Note that the construction “by them” is similar to “by one shepherd” in the preceding verse, both of which employ the preposition מִן. It is intriguing that Paul Joüon (*Grammaire*, 132d) points out that in prose this preposition rarely expresses the cause of an action, that is by whom it is done, but it does so in Qoh 12:11 (“ils sont donnés par un seul pasteur”).

¹⁰ Conversely, for Manfred Görg (“זהר,” 43), here this verb implies admonition because of what follows it, rather than what precedes it.

¹¹ Antje Labahn (“Wild Animals,” 71, 84) speaks of two instances of a simile which functions as “a marked metaphor.”

¹² Cf. Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 332: A (words) – B (like goads) – B’ (like nails) – A’ (sayings...).

¹³ Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 89. Also see Isa 24:22 for its only other occurrence in the MT. The hapax συναγμάτων (‘collection’) by which the term is translated in the LXX is not of much help.

scholars,” or “sayings of collections.”¹⁴ The former translation can also be derived if דברי is taken to have double-duty, resulting in בעלי אספות.¹⁵

The verse is dominated by assonance through the repetition of the sound *-ot* (3 x וַת). Every single lexeme is in the plural form except for the last two words (מרעה אחד), which is in apposition with the two similes employed and seems to be a small though significant addendum. The verse can be translated as follows:

Words of wise people are like the goads, and like planted (i.e. fixed) nails
are sayings of collections, given by one shepherd.

The entire verse in the MT gives the impression that the author compromised the meaning of the text for the sake of creating a pleasant poetic rhythm. Yet, despite the difficulty with the expression בעלי אספות, the synonymous relationship between the concepts of goads and nails is evident, as is the relationship of the shepherd to both.

2. A Positive Assessment of Qoheleth in the Epilogues

In analysing the function of the epilogue, Michael V. Fox states that the epilogist advocates a respect towards Qoheleth and also a particular distance.¹⁶ Though he acknowledges that Qoheleth searched for upright and true words (v. 10), he does not state that his project was successful. This is compounded by Fox's negative assessment of goads and nails, as will be seen below. In my opinion, Qoheleth does not receive such a pessimistic assessment in the epilogues. A primary indication that our sage is being honoured rather than devalued comes from the very first verse of these epilogues. Luca Mazinghi offers a translation wherein ויתר in v. 9 is read in relation to the particle adverb עוד (here meaning 'also').¹⁷ The implication would be that not only was Qoheleth a normal sage like all the rest, but that he *also* imparted knowledge to the people by teaching them. This would seem to imply that it is a confirmation of his outstanding qualities with regards to wisdom and knowledge, for Qoheleth himself had affirmed at the beginning of the book: “I have gained more wisdom than all

¹⁴ Cf. Mazinghi (*Ho cercato*, 335) who offers the image of birds in Qoh 10:20 as an example of the non-personal implication of בעלי.

¹⁵ Cf. Mazinghi, *Ho cercato*, 335. Out of a number of options, Luca Mazinghi cautiously chooses to read דברי with reference to objects, not people, also due to its parallelism to “the words of the wise,” hence resulting in “i testi delle (loro) raccolte,” that is “the texts of (their) collections.”

¹⁶ Cf. Fox, “Frame-Narrative,” 100–101, where the author speaks of the equivocal tone of the epilogist and his being somewhat non-committal towards Qoheleth's sayings.

¹⁷ Mazinghi, *Ho cercato*, 324: “Oltre a essere un saggio, Qohelet insegnò anche il sapere al popolo...”

who were before me over Jerusalem, and my heart has perceived great wisdom and knowledge” (1:16).¹⁸ Moreover, the LXX phrase καὶ περισσὸν ἐξ αὐτῶν at the end of v. 11 could be taken to be a comparative remark that presents the shepherd (presumably Qoheleth) as being exceedingly more remarkable than the other sages.

The production of many books mentioned in v. 12b is conceptually in antagonism with Qoheleth’s activity mentioned in vv. 9–10. There is tension created between the emending of proverbs by Qoheleth and the too many writings produced. Though הרבה (‘many’) appears in conjunction with Qoheleth and with the several books produced in vv. 9 and 12b (x 2) respectively, in the former case our sage is said to straighten (תקן) many proverbs. The combination of searching (חקר) and weighing (אזן) many parables does not mean that Qoheleth merely wanted to reproduce them. Rather, his emending them or straightening them out implied distilling them in order to draw out what is true and agreeable. His task was not the mass production of writings, but rather, to use the words of the second epilogist, to find the end of the matter (סוף דבר 12:13).

That Qoheleth’s opus is presented as being superior to the many books produced by nameless others can be gleaned by comparing or contrasting vv. 9–11 and 12–14, specifically the central verse of each of these sections, namely v. 10 and v. 12. Different nouns are used to identify these works, different verbs are employed to describe their creation, and the quantities implied in each case differ too (see Table 1). In the case of Qoheleth, the masculine singular participle כתוב (‘written’) is used, implying a single written document.¹⁹ This contrasts with the plural term ספרים (‘books’), which is amplified by the adverb הרבה (‘many’). Moreover, Qoheleth’s activity is denoted by the more refined verb כתב, which must be distinguished from the mere production of books expressed through the ordinary verb עשה (‘to make’). In this respect, he resembled Moses (and Joshua) who wrote down the words of the Law.²⁰

Table 1: Contrasts between the activity of Qoheleth and the other writers

Term Used	Qoheleth (v. 10)	Other Writers (v. 12)
Noun	כתוב (‘written’)	ספרים (‘books’)
Verb	כתב (‘write’)	עשה (‘make’)
Quantity	One single entity [כתוב masc. sing.]	הרבה (‘many’) [ספרים masc. pl.]

¹⁸ The linguistic connections are the following: חכמה (1:16) and חכם (12:9); דעת (1:16;12:9); הרבה (1:16;12:9); יסוף (1:16) and עוד (12:9).

¹⁹ For 12:10, the translation of NKJV seems ideal: “The Preacher sought to find acceptable words; and *what was written was upright* – words of truth.”

²⁰ Cf. Exod 24:4; 34:28; Deut 31:9; 31:22; Josh 8:32.

If, as v. 12 claims, there is no end to the writing of many books, Qoheleth's efforts to find acceptable words involved painstakingly sifting through the copious material he had at hand (the numerous proverbs; משלים הרבה v. 9) and succinctly presenting what was truly valid. The arduous nature of this task is expressed in LXX by the adjective πολλά in v. 10, thus rendering: "The Preacher sought *diligently*..." That the reference to "much study" in v. 12 is not meant to reflect an unfavourable judgement on Qoheleth's efforts can be surmised from the congruous statements at the far ends of the book. In 1:8 the sage had already stated that all things are wearisome (יגע), and that despite his outstanding excellence with regard to wisdom and knowledge in 1:16–18, his efforts led to grief and sorrow which, in fact, are the emotional equivalent of the weariness of the body (יגיעה) mentioned in 12:12.²¹

If the final two epilogues were indeed composed by two different redactors, it is clear that the second of these (vv. 13–14) is the one that is concerned with orthodoxy and the tradition of Israel's faith, for it is here that the fear of God and observance of his commands are mentioned. The question is whether or not, with the stroke of a pen, the second redactor here meant to deliver some kind of *coup de grâce* to all that had been said. Worthy of note is the emphasis on Qoheleth's proverbs as words to be listened to, which words are somewhat in contrast with the writings of the other sages. In these two epilogues, the lexeme דבר ('word') appears for a total of four times in three verses, namely vv. 10 (x 2).11.13. In v. 10 we hear of the "words of delight" and "words of truth." Then v. 11, which contains the two important similes, has as its subject the "words of the wise." Finally, v. 13 presents the last word (סוף דבר), that is "the end of the matter." Contrasting these occurrences with v. 12b, which refers to books and study in a somewhat unfavourable light, it becomes clear that this verse utilises semantically related but yet different lexemes, rendering דבר conspicuously absent, as though it were intentionally left out. Hence, to claim that the last epilogue overturns the first is, partly, to misunderstand the role of דבר in the text.²² The expression סוף דבר ("the end of the matter") does not have adversative overtones. Rather, both linguistically and canonically, it is meant to serve as a real conclusion, wrapping up the previous arguments or asseverations. Fearing God and obeying his commandments turns out to be, quintessentially, what Qoheleth had been implying throughout the book. The short and long of it is that it is the other writers' works, and not the fear of God and the observance of his commandments, that are being subtly contrasted to Qoheleth's own writing.

Qoheleth's observations about the whole of reality that he presented by way of inductive logic, employing lexemes such as כל ('all') and זה ('this'), are meant to show that human beings are fated to endure certain experiences in life (e.g. 2:10.19.23; 3:19; 4:4.8.16; 5:18; 6:2; 7:18.23; 8:9; 9:1.3), though free will is not dispensed with.

²¹ The term יגע appears only in 1:8 and 10:15, whilst יגיעה is found only in 12:12.

²² The book of Qoheleth in fact opens with a reference to the sage's words (דברי קהלת).

In similar fashion, the penultimate verse of the book is a statement that must be read as a summing up of all of Qoheleth's affirmations. It is not a question of fearing God and obeying his commandments *over and against* what had just been heard (נשמע 12:13a), but *in agreement with* what was heard. The statement כִּי־זֶה כָּל־הָאָדָם ("for this is the whole [duty] of man") in v. 13b, employing כָּל and זֶה once again, affirms that one's submission to God's dictates as clearly outlined in the book has to do directly with the fear of God and the obedience of his commandments.

3. A Nuance of Torah in the Similes Employed

It is opportune to turn to v. 11 and to focus on the similes found therein. What follows is not an indisputable case for the association of these similes to the notion of the Torah. Rather, my intention is to delve into the conceptual spaces created by these marked metaphors and to consider their subsequent implications for reading these final verses in relation to Torah.

Goads

The word דִּרְבָּן, 'goad,' appears in 12:11 and only once more in the MT, namely in 1 Sam 13:21. Here, it is predicated of the Hiphil verb נָצַב, which means 'to cause to stand.' The LXX ὑπόστας signifies the essence of something, hence the translation 'to straighten' is fitting. In 1 Sam 13, the goads are used as implements of war that were sharpened by the Philistines. Another word for דִּרְבָּן is מִלְמַד ('ox-goad'), which appears only in Judg 3:31 and which is used by Shamgar son of Anath to save Israel from the Philistines.²³ In Qoh 12:11, the possible use of the goad in warfare is completely missing. Interestingly, the Ancient Near East offers a number of images of the ox-goad as can be seen, for instance, in Sennacherib's Lachish reliefs.²⁴

In the case of oxen, the use of a goad would denote the cattle-driver's resolve to force the cattle to plough the field. It is indeed highly unlikely that by goads the author meant to elicit its function in inducing work, for throughout the book, Qoheleth attributed to it a very relative value. Work is beneficial only insofar as it provides one with the means to have pleasure.²⁵ The outlook is in line with the rest of the book which does not have a particularly positive stance vis-à-vis work (cf. Qoh 2:17; 2:23; in 3:22 too, work is seen as a matter of fate which one should best enjoy as though to

²³ LXX translates this using the lexeme ἀροτρόπους which actually means 'ploughshare.'

²⁴ For details about these reliefs and other occurrences of the cattle prod in the Ancient Near East and Egypt, see Way, "Minor Judges," 278, n. 17.

²⁵ Onwukeme, *The Concept of Hebel*, 75: "The negative meaning of 'āmal in the other parts of the Hebrew Bible is carried over into his work... When Qoheleth affirms the value of 'āmal as a source of benefit, what is being praised is toil's product..."

overcome the drudgery of life). The connotation of work is missing here since sheep, which are implied by the presence of the shepherd mentioned, do not perform that kind of activity. Given the above, the main conceptual blend that the metaphors of goad and shepherd produce has to do with the activity of giving direction, rather than that of forcing some kind of labour.

Gerhard von Rad sees the image of the ox-goad in Qoh 12:11 as a sign of “the effectiveness of the wise men’s words.”²⁶ Effectiveness is, certainly, associated with this agricultural instrument which is used to spur on cattle whilst ploughing. However, this effectiveness is not merely derived from the image of coaxing a beast, but particularly from the usefulness of the goad in giving direction. This notion can be visualised in the prophetic text of Isa 30:21: “Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, «This is the way; walk in it.»” The use of a goad to direct sheep is particularly interesting since an overarching meaning of the term תורה is ‘direction’ (or ‘instruction’), being derived from the verb ירה which is used for the shooting (directing) of arrows.²⁷ Qoheleth’s role of teaching (למד) the people in v. 9 complements this notion.²⁸

Victor Onwukeme points out that the pericope that opens with 4:17 and concludes at 5:6 has positive imperatives at its far ends.²⁹ The first one is a directive to watch one’s steps (literally one’s *foot*; רגל 4:17), whilst the second imperative is identical to the one in 12:13, namely “Fear God” (אתה אללהים ירא 5:6). This shows that the imperatives in 12:13 are in agreement with the rest of the book, and that before 12:11, where the goad is mentioned, setting one’s foot aright was already enjoined in relation to God’s majesty. This is conducive to attributing to the goad a meaning that is way beyond the mere agricultural sphere. Suffice it to say that Ps 32:8–9 offers a subtle comparison of God’s people to animals that need to be guided “by bit and bridle” if they are to come to you. This is said in the context of the instruction and teaching (אשכילך ואוררך Ps 32:8) that God was willing to offer to his people (also see Isa 1:3). The link between Torah and guidance, even by resorting to animal imagery, is blatant.

The Bible offers the opposite image to being led by God. Though not a frequent theme, this image is indeed significant. In the context of the Exile, the author of Lamentations makes the following complaint: “He has blocked my ways with hewn stone; he has made my paths crooked.” (Lam 3:9). Reading this text in the light of Hosea 2:8, where God warns that he would block Israel’s path with thornbushes,

²⁶ von Rad, *Wisdom*, 21.

²⁷ The cultic connotation of the term can be seen in Mic 3:11 where the priests are accused of “teaching (יורי) for a price.”

²⁸ Sirach 38:25 speaks of “the shaft of the goad” (δόρατι κέντρον). Here, the goad is related to the lack of knowledge of the one using it, which is the very opposite of what one finds in Qoh 12. This fact points to the versatility of the image in question.

²⁹ Cf. Onwukeme, *The Concept of Hebel*, 336.

Gerlinde Baumann suggests that the hewn stones of Lamentations are actually those of the Temple which now bring Israel to a standstill.³⁰ The inability to move forward is a sign of punishment. On the other hand, Hosea 4:16 presents Israel as a balking cow that would not be pastured by the Lord. Here, therefore, the immobility or paralysis results from its own stubbornness which, in Hebrew, has overtones of the notion of straying.³¹ Concerning such deviant behaviour, Pierre Van Hecke states: "... Israel is compared to a straying cow here. Israel is thus described as a cow unwilling to follow the track its driver wants it to go, be it to plough, or to pull loads." Conversely, Prov 13:14 states: "The *law of the wise person* (תורת חכם) is a fountain of life, to *turn away* (לסור) from the snares of death." Here, turning away implies finding the right path, which is essentially what Torah is all about.

Nails

Though משמרה ('nail' or 'peg') in 12:11 is a hapax, it pertains to a semantic field of some form of construction or other that helps the reader to pin it down to a very specific use. Conceptually, the nail/peg corresponds to the foundations of a house, as it is the only part of the structure that reaches down beneath the surface and remains lodged, partly, in the ground. In a recent article, Kenneth C. Way pointed out the following: "Unconventional weapons are noted frequently in the book of Judges (Ehud's custom dagger, Jael's tent peg, a woman's upper millstone, and Samson's donkey jawbone), most likely to emphasize that YHWH's victories are not dependent on state-of-the-art weaponry or technology (cf. Josh 6; 1 Sam 13:19–14:23; 17:45–47; etc.)."³² However, as is the case with the goad, Qoh 12 is completely void of any bellicose imagination even with regards to the nails mentioned.

A related lexeme is יתד ('tent peg'), which refers to the pitching of a tent by Jacob in Gen 31:25, and in Exodus and Numbers is used in conjunction with the court and the tabernacle. In Judg 4:21.22 and 5:26 it is the implement with which Jael kills Sisera. The verb used in 4:21 is תקע ('to thrust'; אָפּוּקָה, 'to make firm'), which verb also appears together with יתד in Isa 22:23 where God says of Eliakim son of Hilkiyah: "I shall drive him like a nail into a firm place; and he will become a throne of glory for his family." An ominous future is then foretold in v. 25, where this peg is seen giving way, falling, and causing all that was hanging on it to fall. Given the context, such a tragedy implies the loss of Eliakim's family's glory. In Jer 6:3 too, תקע denotes thrusting rather than planting, specifically the driving in of tent pegs in order to pitch tents. However, it is curious that this verse makes reference to the activity of every *single* shepherd within a context of discipline and judgement meted out to Daughter Zion

³⁰ Cf. Baumann, "Quadersteinen," 142–143.

³¹ Cf. Van Hecke, "Conceptual Blending," 223–225, where the link between סרר ('to be stubborn') and סור ('to stray') is highlighted.

³² Way, "Minor Judges," 278.

for not having heeded the word of the Lord. Clearly, the image presented in Jeremiah is the counterpart of what is being said in Qoheleth, where the one shepherd's activity is in favour of the people who are willing to listen to the nail-like words of the wise.

Though semantically related, תַּקַּע is different to the verb employed in Qoh 12:11, namely נָטַע ('to plant'). Unlike the word for 'goads' which remains unqualified, the 'nails' mentioned are qualified with this verb. What is in view is clearly the nails' function to give stability to a structure. Among other things, nails imply shelter and rest, firmness and security.³³ Though the notion of the nail/peg has even been taken to denote limits that cannot be surpassed, it would seem more precise to associate them with stability in and possession of the land.³⁴ In fact, the verb נָטַע has strong overtones of God's intention to plant his people on his holy mountain in the Promised Land (see Ps 80:9.16; Amos 9:15) and the implication that they would therefore abound in life. A contrasting scenario is presented in Ps 52:7 where the wicked man is told that God would snatch him from his tent and uproot him from the land of the living.

The whole covenantal theology of the Hebrew Bible is based on the axiom that obedience to the commandments will secure establishment. This is expressed in negative terms when Samuel tells Saul that his kingdom would have been established (נִיּוֹן Hiphil 'to fix') had he obeyed God's command.³⁵ Conversely, personified wisdom states the following in the sapiential text of Sirach 24:8: "Then the Creator of all things instructed me and he who created me *fixed a place* (καταπαύω, 'to cause to rest') for my tent. He said, «*Pitch your tent* (κατασκηνώω, 'to cause to dwell') in Jacob, make Israel your inheritance»." Though the reference to tent pegs is missing, their function in relation to the important task of pitching a tent cannot be missed.

Nails like the one found at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, dating from the end of the 3rd millennium, are interesting archaeological artefacts because they were inscribed and driven into temple walls as a sign of the deity's ownership of the building (see Figure 1).³⁶ Hence, they had to do with a deity's very identity and with their claims to certain possessions. Such a usage would have contributed to loading the concept of a nail with meaning that was not limited to a mere architectural function. Without ascribing any particular influence of such nails to the text under investigation, one can hold that the propensity of such a small object to create a conceptual

³³ Though the word Torah is taken to be derived from Hiphil יָרָה, 'to teach', it is worth noting that Job 38:6 uses the verb with the meaning of laying (a cornerstone). That Torah is a cornerstone in the life of the believing community is self evident.

³⁴ See Mazzinghi (*Ho cercato*, 335) who comments on the position of certain scholars in this regard. The study of Benjamin A. Saidel ("Pitching Camp," 92) shows that tents are at times linked to adjacent durable structures, giving the impression that the tents may have stood for a very long time. See Figure 13.4 – Progression from tent site to village, in Whitcomb, "Pastoral Pleasantry," 251, which provides evidence of a tent site gradually becoming a town.

³⁵ Also see 2 Sam 7:24.26 (with reference to בֵּית, the house of David).

³⁶ Image courtesy of Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

blend through the merging of the spaces of the source domain and the target domain, namely the nails and words respectively, makes it an apt metaphorical figure. It is, therefore, not surprising that the epilogist would have found it a useful metaphor to convey specific concepts about the huge import of sages' words.³⁷



Figure 1: King Ur-Nammu clay nail (2113–2096 BCE), Ur, Iraq

Goads and Nails

Both goads and nails are pointed objects, one used with living creatures, the other with inanimate objects. Fox views these instruments as bearing a negative nuance, given that they both prick, but their meaning in Qoheleth is clearly positive.³⁸ It is striking that these two images are made to complement each other, for a goad and a nail may be physically similar but, in practice, they function somewhat

³⁷ One suspects that in v. 11 the very use of בעל, which generally means lord, may be related to this.

³⁸ Cf. Fox, "Frame-Narrative," 102. Craig Bartholomew (*Reading Ecclesiastes*, 163–164) has serious reservations on Fox's interpretation of these instruments as being painful and dangerous. Weeks ("Fear God," 116) relates the "nails in a stick" of v. 11 to the discomfort that is provoked by the preceding monologue of the sage. In this case, as in Fox's interpretation, the image furnished is that the nail is attached to the end of the goad to make it effective. Weeks (*Ecclesiastes* 5–12, 662) retains the same view; with reference to goads, he claims that such wisdom literature is "painful by design."

contrastingly vis-à-vis movement or stability. Lohfink rightly points out the opposite effects of these two instruments, one driving forward, the other holding down. He suggests that these metaphors reflect the progressive and conservative natures of the teachings of the wise.³⁹

The goad and peg have, as underlying imagery, the notions of travelling along the road (דֶּרֶךְ) and being established in the land (אֶרֶץ). Both these notions are foundational with regards to the way Torah is presented in Deuteronomy, for instance Deut 30:16–18 where the people are admonished to walk in God's ways (לֵלֶכֶת בְּדַרְכָיו) and keep his commands (לִשְׁמֹר מִצְוֹתָיו) lest they perish and no longer live in the land which they were about to possess (אֶרֶץ... לְרִשְׁתָּהּ). The terms דֶּרֶךְ and מִצְוָה or other ones belonging in the same semantic field appear together in Deut 8:2.6; 11:22.28; 19:9; 26:17; 28:9; 30:16; Josh 22:5; Judg 2:17; 1 Kgs 2:3; 3:14; 8:58; 11:38; 2 Kgs 17:13 (the people's wicked ways are mentioned here); Prov 6:23; 19:16; ^{LXX} Prov 13:13; also see Ps 25:4–13 (for discourse on God's ways, the fact that he guides people in his ways, and the possession of the land as a result thereof); 27:11; 44:18–19 (on the covenant and God's path); 119:9.15.32.101.104.128.168; Isa 2:3; Mic 4:2. In the Deuterocanonicals we find the combination of 'commandment' (ἐντολή) and 'road' (ὁδός) in Tob 4:5.19 and Bar 4:12–13 (Law [νόμος], ways of the commandments [ὁδοὶ ἐντολῶν θεοῦ] and "the paths of discipline" [τρίβους παιδείας]). In some of the texts above, the verb דָּבַק appears, referring to a cleaving to the Torah, which attitude may be inferred by the notion of the peg planted. Of particular interest are Ps 119:31–32, two verses in this Torah psalm which combine the notion of stability and movement in line with the imagery of the peg and the goad respectively:

I hold fast to your statutes, Lord; do not let me be put to shame.

I run in the path of your commands, for you have broadened my understanding.

(Ps 119:31–32)

Walking in God's ways and keeping his commandments are not merely human activities that have to do with a man or woman's ability to stick to the path traced out by the Lord. God's active role in keeping the righteous on the right path is what the sage refers to when he says: "He guards the paths of justice, and preserves the way of his faithful ones." (Prov 2:8) More significant in relation to the Torah is Exodus 15:16–17 where Moses sings of the people who pass over (עָבַר) and who God brings (בִּיאָה) and plants (נָטַע) on the mountain of his inheritance.

In v. 9 we are told that Qoheleth "searched out" (בִּקֵּשׁ) and "made straight," or "set in order" (Piel תָּקַן) a number of proverbs. The use of Piel תָּקַן in 7:13, where it is stated that no one can straighten what God has made crooked, suggests that the sage's straightening out of proverbs, or rather his setting them in order, is not

³⁹ Cf. Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 143; Mazzinghi (*Ho cercato*, 337) holds the same view.

contrary to what God has ordained but, rather, is in line with it). The same applies to v. 10, which states that Qoheleth “searched to find” (בקש קהלת למצא)... “and wrote” (כתוב). Whether intentional or not, these aspects of active searching and meticulous writing bring to mind the spurring on and the fixing effect of goads and nails respectively.

Given by One Shepherd

The shift from discourse on “the wise” (plural חכמים) to the singular shepherd (participle masculine singular רעה) suggests that there is some distinction between the two, for there is no reason to suddenly refer to all the wise collectively as though they formed one single entity. The one shepherd who has given these wise words could be taken to be the Teacher himself, who had imposed upon himself the task of collecting the sayings of the wise. However, despite the fact that the Teacher was king in Jerusalem (cf. 1:1.12) – and kings were shepherds of the people⁴⁰ – the circles of shepherds and of sages do not overlap. It would seem awkward to suddenly depict Qoheleth as a shepherd, rather than a king or wise man. The resulting ambiguity may be a case of double entendre. Though the shepherd may refer to Qoheleth himself, the use of this unexpected metaphor at this stage in the book may suggest that the target of the metaphor implied by this linguistic vehicle has divine overtones. Several scholars have, indeed, suggested that this one shepherd refers to God.⁴¹ It is intriguing that Ezek 37:24 refers to king David as the “one shepherd” the people would have, and associates this with God’s Torah, specifically the משפטים and חקת: “David my servant shall be king over them, and they shall all have *one shepherd* [רועה אחד]; they shall also walk in my judgments and observe my statutes, and do them.”

Othmar Keel affirms that, among others, Qoheleth is opposed to the idea that God could be depicted with some human image, such as father, king, or shepherd.⁴² Nonetheless, he admits of some form of representation without which it would be impossible to envisage God. Qoh 12:11 could, therefore, constitute only a subtle reference to God that precludes a too mundane reference to the Lord.⁴³ Despite the epilogist’s possible reluctance to present God in shepherd’s garb, the very notion of the “one shepherd” easily evokes the concept of God as shepherding his people through the wilderness and establishing them in the Land.

More light can be thrown on this impasse when it is noted that, in Qoheleth, the verb נתן occurs often in conjunction with the divine appellation Elohim as its

⁴⁰ Kingship is associated with shepherding in, for instance, 2 Sam 5:2; Ezek 37:24.

⁴¹ Cf. Mazzinghi, *Ho cercato*, 339, on the identity of God and the aspects of inspiration and canonicity. Fox (“Frame-Narrative,” 102) is opposed to this idea.

⁴² Cf. Keel, *Symbolism*, 178.

⁴³ Mazzinghi (*Ho cercato*, 338) speaks of the possible eschatological and messianic overtones of this pastoral metaphor, but cautions us against being too certain about its interpretation, since emphasizing such overtones would relativize the importance of Qoheleth as presented in the first epilogue.

subject (1:13; 2:26; 3:10.11; 5:17.18; 6:2; 8:15; 12:7). From beginning to end, the book is pervaded with a conviction that God is the one who ordains reality the way it is, giving life to human beings as well as the conditions by which they are to live. This is enforced by the phrase *אשר נתן־לו האלהים* (“which God has given him”) that becomes like a refrain spanning chapters 5–8 (cf. 5:17.18; 6:2; 8:15). It has been noted that one of the meanings of the word *δίδωμι*, ‘to give’ (see v. 11), is: “what is given by a person in superior position to one in subordinate position,” which may indeed capture the social context in which this transaction is presented.⁴⁴ This, coupled with the notion of the “one shepherd,” suggests that reading the shepherd image as a metaphor for God may indeed be viable.

Moreover, the verb *נתן* should not be seen as being related purely to the nouns ‘the words of the wise’ and ‘the words of collections.’ Given the fact that this verb is qualified by a metaphorical subject, namely the figure of the shepherd, the verb *נתן* must be taken to pertain to the metaphorical images furnished by the verse. On closer analysis, if it is being claimed that the shepherd is *giving* both goad and nail, one wonders what this statement really means. If anything, the shepherd would *use* these instruments, rather than *give* them. If *נתן* is imbued with divine connotations, by default the images of the goad and nails must be seen as being of divine origin. Their association with Torah thus becomes more firmly established. The link with *עם* (‘people’) in v. 9 at the beginning of the pericope becomes imperative, and the above considerations lead to seeing this *עם* as none other than God’s people.⁴⁵ According to Maharsha the term “shepherd” is used with reference to God and to Moses, hence these words are those spoken by Moses as God gave them to him.⁴⁶ Such an interpretation fits in with the Jewish belief that the ultimate source of the entire Tanakh was the Sinai event. In this case, it might be plausible to read *בעלי אספות* as “lords of the gatherings,” with reference to the “Men of the Great Assembly” who were traditionally believed to have received the revelation given to Moses from his successors, the Prophets. Such a reading would therefore signify the attribution of a canonical status to this book.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Cf. input on *δίδωμι* in Friberg – Friberg – Miller, *Analytical Lexicon*.

⁴⁵ Leo G. Perdue (“Sages, Scribes, and Seers,” 8, n. 10) concludes that the book and the epilogue lead us to see this term as referring to a group of students who were learning at a school where Qoheleth worked.

⁴⁶ Maharsha is a Hebrew acronym that refers to Rabbi Shmuel Eidels; cf. Zlotowitz, *Kohesles*, 201.

⁴⁷ Speaking of Job 28, Maurice Gilbert (“Giobbe 28 e la sapienza,” 226–227) makes the following assertion regarding wisdom and inspiration: “Gb 28,28 attribuisce dunque a Dio sentenze di saggi antichi e recenti. Dietro questo procedimento, c’è la convinzione di quello che ha scritto quest’ultimo versetto del capitolo che le parole dei maestri di saggezza sono parole di Dio, cioè che le loro parole sono ispirate da lui.”

4. Related Biblical Imagery and Rabbinic Analysis

The epilogist's comment about the "words of delight" and "words of truth" are to be seen in the light of the epilogist's likely understanding of the Scriptures in these terms. Various texts from the Hebrew Bible lend their support to giving these terms, particularly that of truth, a certain gravitas that is not related merely to the secular world of wisdom. To begin with, the prophetic injunction in Jer 6:10 concerning the people's refusal to find delight in God's words (דברי־יהוה... לא יחפצו־בו) bolster the idea that the sage's words complement prophetic teaching given within the context of a covenant relationship. Moreover, Qoheleth also sought to write acceptable words (דברי אמת 12:10). It must be recalled that God's words are true (2 Sam 7:28), he spoke from heaven and gave laws of truth (תורות אמת Neh 9:13), his word on Elijah's lips is true (1 Kgs 17:24), and he demands that his word be spoken faithfully (ידבר דברי אמת Jer 23:28).

As for the Psalter, the words of the messianic king in Ps 45 are words of truth (cf. v.5), and the Torah Ps 119 relates God's ordinances or laws to a word of truth (דברי־אמת vv. 43 and 160). Together with the Pentateuch, Isaiah and the Minor Prophets, the Book of Psalms formed the first canon, all these works bearing similarities as to the process of their literary formation.⁴⁸ So it is curious that the expression דברי אמת (words of truth) in Qoh 12:10 occur most often in the Psalms. I will turn again to the relationship between Qoheleth, the Pentateuch and the Minor Prophets shortly. As for the Writings, Proverbs is the one that most resembles the books of the first canon in terms of their evolutionary process. In the entire MT, the word אמת appears most often in the Psalms (x 37), and is then followed by 12 occurrences in Isaiah and 12 others in Proverbs, 7 of which are found within what is considered to be the oldest substratum of Proverbs.⁴⁹ The link between the words of truth mentioned in Qoh 12 and the concept of divine truth in these most ancient Scriptures is undeniable.

In apocalyptic literature, Daniel is presented as having received a true message (אמת הדבר) concerning a writing of truth (cf. 10:1.21). Of particular interest is the end of Esther, where Mordecai sends letters with words of peace and truth (דברי שלום ואמת Esth 9:30). This is noteworthy because, from the point of view of the formation of the Tanakh, this text speaks about the establishment of the tradition of celebrating Purim, hence such a celebration would have imbued this text with a degree of canonicity. In like manner, the reference to Qoheleth writing "words of truth" (דברי דבר Qoh 12:10) – which reference was clearly not written by the author of the book – occurring in the epilogue can be viewed as a redactional move to render the book worthy of canonical status.

⁴⁸ Cf. Treballe Barrera, "Origins," 133–134, 138, 145.

⁴⁹ Namely Prov 10:1–22:16 and 25–29. Proverbs and Job formed the earliest kernel of the Writings (since the Psalms was initially an appendix to the Law and the Prophets); cf. Treballe Barrera, "Origins," 136, 143, 145.

Before turning my attention to rabbinic literature, I would like to make one final remark about Qoheleth in relation to the Pentateuch and the Major and Minor Prophets. Our text presents this sage as having written (כתב Qoh 12:10) important words. Deuteronomy and Malachi are the last two books of Torah and Nevi'im respectively. The end of Deuteronomy presents Moses as writing the words of the law which were meant to be read in a liturgical context related to a pilgrimage (Deut 31:9–13). The purpose of this act of reading was to instil the fear of the Lord that would lead to obedience to the word (vv. 12–13). The role of reading was assigned to the Levitical priests and the elders of Israel. As for Malachi, Levi is presented as an example when it comes to pronouncing words of truth and knowledge in accordance with Torah, though the priests did not follow suit (Mal 2:4–9). The uprightness and law of truth which people sought from his mouth (מישור, תורת אמת v. 6) are reminiscent of the upright and true words (ישר דברי אמת 12:10) he sought to write.⁵⁰ As for the group of prophets preceding the Twelve, namely Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, not far from the end of Ezekiel is yet another text that speaks about Ezekiel being commissioned to write about the temple in order for the people to observe the ordinances laid down (Ezek 43:11). All of this shows that there is a connection between writing or imparting Law-based knowledge and the expected attitude of having the fear of the Lord that leads to obedience at the end of conceptually distinct sections of the Hebrew Bible, namely Deuteronomy, Ezekiel and Malachi. Though Qoheleth does not enjoy the pride of place of a concluding section, the combination of upright and truthful words, the fear of the Lord and obedience to his commandments in its final chapter bears a surprising similarity to the end of the previous “sections” and suggests that the same logic is at play.⁵¹

A brief look at some rabbinic texts is in order to help us understand some aspects of the reception history of Qoh 12:11. Midrash Rabba to Numbers points out that *kaddarbonoth* should be read *kidd'rabbanuth*, meaning “like a command of authority.”⁵² Such an interpretation ignores the marked metaphor of a goad employed here (which is a fitting simile for the words of the wise), as well as the playful assonance created by the syllable וַת (x 3) mentioned earlier. However, such an emendation is interesting as the rabbis clearly attributed the gravitas of moral authority to the words of the wise. Rashi does not dispense with the term ‘goad’ and sees in it the

⁵⁰ The act of writing is subsequently mentioned in Mal 3:16 in relation to those who feared the Lord. However, the context is clearly different. Cf. Oliver Dyma, “Remember the Torah of Moses, My Servant: Torah in the Twelve,” paper presented at the 2019 EABS conference in Warsaw for the connection between Deuteronomy and Malachi in this regard.

⁵¹ In relation to what comes at the beginning of a composition, Egbert Ballhorn (*Zum Telos des Psalters*, 27) states: “Was... am Ende steht, hat ein noch größeres Gewicht. Wer das letzte Wort hat, dominiert die Gesamtaussage.”

⁵² Num. R. s. 14; Marcus Jastrow (*Dictionary*, 612a) makes this reference to B'midbar Rabbah.

instrument by which a heifer is directed to its furrows, comparing this to a person who by the sages' words finds the path of life.⁵³

The aforementioned Midrash Rabba to Numbers (Num. R. s. 14) also emends the term כמס מרות כמשמרות, meaning "as the juice of bitter things." Given the reference to authority for the *kidd'rabbanuth* mentioned above, this emendation cannot imply a negative view of the sages' words. Rather, it probably emphasizes the difficulty one may face in adhering to them.⁵⁴ Another emendation of the word for pegs or nails comes from Midrash Tanhuma which rejects the term *k'mishm'roth* ("like guards") in favour of "*k'masm'roth* ("like nails") to teach thee, if though drivest them like a nail into thy heart, they will guard thee."⁵⁵ In both interpretations, the notion of guarding cannot be missed, and hence, a connection with the keeping (שמר) of God's commands in v. 13 is elicited. On the other hand, Rashi and Metzudas David emphasize the aspect of permanence that a well-fastened nail gives.⁵⁶ Driving a nail into a place also has connotations of ownership, as suggested by Jastrow in a comment on the Midrash Rabbah to Leviticus.⁵⁷ Such connotations may also be gleaned from the verb 'to plant.' In fact, with reference to Qoh 12:11, Midrash Rabbah to Numbers s. 14 states that "as roots of a tree spread in all directions, so the words of the Law enter and penetrate the whole body."⁵⁸ One final interpretation that might be worth mentioning is given with reference to tractate Hăgigah 3b in the Talmud: "as the nail (driven in) creates a hole and not an addition, so do the words of the Law &c."⁵⁹ Though it is not clear what this hole refers to, it might reflect an opening of the heart or its piercing which would allow the Law of God to enter into it.

Conclusion

Whilst the first epilogue portrays Qoheleth in a positive light, the second one may seem to play down the sage's musings, turning the reader's focus away from the book's main content and squarely onto the importance of divine teachings. This, however, is an incorrect reading of the book at large and the epilogues alike. Holding that

⁵³ Cf. Zlotowitz, *Koheles*, 200.

⁵⁴ One must note that, with reference to 12:10, Num. R. s. 14 states that "when they (the words of the Law) come out disfigured, they are bitter (drops) to those who hear them"; cf. Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 808b.

⁵⁵ Tanh. B'haäl. 15; cf. Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 809a.

⁵⁶ Cf. Zlotowitz, *Koheles*, 201. Metzudat David is the work of David Altschuler which was completed by his son Yechiel Hillel Altschuler.

⁵⁷ Cf. Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 1311a on Lev. R. s. 5.

⁵⁸ Cf. Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 1635a.

⁵⁹ Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 490.

the commandments mentioned are placed over and against the sage's reflections misses the mark on several counts:

1. Qoheleth is said to have taught the people, the verb employed, לָמַד, being usually associated with positive teaching.⁶⁰
2. The appropriateness of the sage's teachings is further confirmed by the description of his words as being upright and truthful (v. 10), which strongly echo divine words found in other parts of the Hebrew Bible.
3. The reference to "one shepherd," despite it being somewhat obscure, bears a strong nuance of the divine shepherd particularly in relation to the verb נָתַן ('to give') which, in the context of the entire book, takes on overtones suggesting the ultimate divine provenance of the proverbs collected.
4. Finally, despite the seeming antagonism that is created between the two epilogues, the second one does not contradict nor negate the words of the wise, even less so the words of Qoheleth. Rather, it offers the quintessential substance of the matter. And it is never claimed that, by default, fearing God and obeying his commandments gives meaning to the seemingly confounding and disorienting realities that can be observed under the sun.

The employment of the marked metaphor of goads and nails plays on the power these small instruments have to evoke the imagination as regards the relationship of the sages' words to Torah. But this is possible because of the rich theology they latch themselves onto, particularly in terms of Torah's relationship to the path traced out by God and to the stability that its observance secures. In the light of the goads or pegs analysed, it is hoped that this contribution will spur on the reader to drive the nail of sapiential knowledge further down into the Torah matrix.

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⁶⁰ Some salient examples are Deut 41:1; 6:1; 31:22; 2 Sam 1:17–18; Ezra 7:10; Ps 51:15; 119:12; Isa 48:17; 50:4 (לָמַד).

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