

MORITZ F. ADAM

Time and Tradition

*Forschungen
zum Alten Testament
191*

Mohr Siebeck

Forschungen zum Alten Testament

Herausgegeben von

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191



Moritz F. Adam

Time and Tradition

Temporal Thinking in Ecclesiastes in the Context
of Emerging Apocalypticism and the History of Ideas
in the Hellenistic Period

Mohr Siebeck

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Published with the support of the Swiss National Science Foundation. This project was supported through funding of the University of Zurich, the German Academic Scholarship Foundation, and the Israel Council for Higher Education.

ISBN 978-3-16-164797-0 / eISBN 978-3-16-164798-7

DOI 10.1628/978-3-16-164798-7

ISSN 0940-4155 / eISSN 2568-8359 (Forschungen zum Alten Testament)

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

2025 Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, Germany / © Moritz F. Adam

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Printed on non-aging paper. Typesetting: Martin Fischer, Tübingen.

Mohr Siebeck GmbH & Co. KG, Wilhelmstraße 18. 72074 Tübingen, Germany
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Meinen Eltern

Proem

The present monograph is based on my dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Theology, which was accepted by the Faculty of Theology at the University of Zurich in the autumn semester of 2024 under the deanship of Prof. Dr. Christiane Tietz. While minor amendments were made as the manuscript was prepared for publication, the book remains in essence identical to my dissertation. I would like to thank the editors of the *Forschungen zum Alten Testament* for admitting my work into their series, and I am grateful to the staff at Mohr Siebeck, especially Mr Tobias Stäbler and Mr Markus Kirchner, for their kind support in the publication process.

Looking back on the past years during which this book was written, I owe a profound debt of gratitude to many people, of whom three deserve particular mention here. First and foremost is Prof. Dr. Konrad Schmid. Since we first discussed the idea of a doctoral dissertation on conceptions of time in Ecclesiastes, he has shown exceptional commitment to me and this project through his generosity, interest, productive critique, and extraordinary support. As an *Assistent* at his chair and throughout the last years, I was provided opportunities, responsibility, and great freedom to develop as an academic, as a university teacher, and also personally. For this I am immensely grateful.

Second, I would like to express my appreciation to Prof. Dr. Hindy Najman. Both during my time as a student in Oxford as well as after my move to Zurich, Prof. Najman took a keen interest in my work, and most recently acted as the external examiner of my dissertation. She has a special talent for bringing a wide range of scholars and her own students together in a community which has helped me and many of my colleagues exceedingly, especially at the moment of transition from being a student to being a scholar.

Third, I would like to thank Dr. John Jarick, who was my first teacher at the University of Oxford and to whom I owe in no small part the decision to take a deeper interest in the study of the Hebrew Bible, which reaches back to my very first week as a university student. With him, I first studied the book of Ecclesiastes in depth, which over time led to my decision to choose this enigmatic, sometimes difficult, but intellectually stimulating and challenging work as the subject of my first book.

Besides my studies in Oxford and my doctorate in Zurich, the third place of my academic development is the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where I worked

as a Fellow. Especially in the current times and in spite of transient present circumstances, enduring solidarity, friendly ties, and close cooperation with Israel, not only in my field, are to me a moral obligation, a professional necessity, and a personal gain. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Prof. Dr. Noam Mizrahi and Prof. Dr. Michael Segal for their hospitality in Jerusalem.

The promotion to Doctor of Theology also formally concludes the course of my academic education. In addition to those mentioned above, I would like to acknowledge a number of teachers and friends from whom I have learned, whose advice and support I value, and from whom I have greatly benefitted over the years: In Oxford Prof. Dr. John Day, Prof. Dr. Nathan Eubank, Prof. Dr. Sue Gillingham, Dr. Philip Kennedy, Prof. Dr. Katherine Southwood, Prof. Dr. Jenn Strawbridge, Dr. Andrew Teal, and Prof. Dr. Hugh Williamson; in Zürich Prof. Dr. Jörg Frey, Prof. Dr. Tobias Jammerthal, Prof. Dr. Stefan Krauter, and Prof. Dr. Thomas Krüger; and elsewhere, Prof. Dr. Sonja Ammann (Basel), Prof. Dr. Arjen Bakker (Cambridge), Prof. Dr. Jonathan Ben-Dov (Tel Aviv), Prof. Dr. Katharine Dell (Cambridge), Prof. Dr. David Hamidovic (Lausanne), and Prof. Dr. Bernd Schipper (Berlin). Further, I am grateful to my colleagues in the research community at the Faculty of Theology in Zurich, including Dr. Hans Decker, Dr. Kishiya Hidaka, PD Dr. Matthias Hopf, Prof. Dr. Michael Jost, and Prof. Dr. Daniel Maier.

The journey through higher education and towards a doctorate cannot be travelled without friends, both locally and in very different places. Here, in no particular order and without claiming to be exhaustive, I would like to thank Rasmus Conrad, Gavin Fleming, Ellie Hamilton, Tony Metger, Jan Ringling, Violet Smart, and many others.

It is a fine tradition to dedicate a doctoral dissertation to one's parents. In this spirit, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to my parents, Margarete and Thomas Adam, for their support, their encouragement for intellectual openness, their understanding, and their trust in me. This book is dedicated to them.

Herrliberg am Zürichsee,
am Schweizerischen Bundesfeiertag, 1. August 2025. Dr. Moritz F. Adam

Table of Contents

Proem	VII
<i>Chapter 1: Introduction</i>	1
<i>Chapter 2: The Date and Compositional History of the Book of Ecclesiastes</i>	9
A. Composition	9
B. Structure	17
C. Dating	34
D. Excursus: The Problem of the Abstract Orientation of the Book of Ecclesiastes and Its Deliberate Avoidance of Historical and Contextual References	42
<i>Chapter 3: The Status Quaestionis in Scholarship on Ecclesiastes, Time, and Apocalypticism</i>	51
A. Ancient Perspectives on Apocalyptic Dimensions in Ecclesiastes	51
B. Categories and Problems in the Modern History of Scholarship	55
C. On the Approach of this Overview on the Status Quaestionis	63
D. Wisdom and Apocalypticism Since the Middle of the 20 th century	65
E. Ecclesiastes and Apocalypticism in Recent Scholarship	70
F. Scholarly Engagements with the Subject of Time in Ecclesiastes	71
G. Conclusions	73
<i>Chapter 4: Reflections on Method</i>	75
<i>Chapter 5: Polemic, Critique, and Intellectually Constitutive Interaction: Eccl 4:17–5:6 as a Test Case</i>	85
A. Dreaming as a Mode of Revelation	89
B. Mediation by Angels	96

<i>Chapter 6: Rhetoric and Discourse in Ecclesiastes and 4QInstruction: A Comparative Test Case</i>	107
A. Prolegomena	110
B. Discourse	112
C. Rhetoric	116
D. Conclusions	118
 <i>Chapter 7: The Genre Apocalyptic: Rethinking Morphologies</i>	121
A. What is Apocalypticism? Problems in Taxonomy	122
B. Prototype Theory	126
C. Constellations	130
D. Discourses in Ancient Jewish Thought – Three Propositions	139
 <i>Chapter 8: The Category of Time in the Book of Ecclesiastes and Its Place in the History of Ideas</i>	147
A. Time as a Total Category in the Hellenistic Period	147
B. Time as Ordered and Arranged	161
I. The Cyclic Dimensions of Natural Things: Eccl 1:4–11	162
II. The Poem on Time in Eccl 3	169
III. Time and Epistemology	172
IV. All is Transient	177
V. Death in the Book of Ecclesiastes	189
C. Comparative Reflections	196
D. Conclusions	204
 <i>Chapter 9: Time and Abstraction: Moving Across Traditions as a Mode of Literary Authorisation</i>	207
A. Authorisation by Ascription	208
I. Homer	209
II. Solomon	215
B. The Historical Blending of Ideas	222
 <i>Chapter 10: Pluriformity and Pluralism: Literary Diversity, Hermeneutical Openness, and the Function of Texts in Second Temple Judaism</i>	227
A. Ecclesiastes and Pluriformity	228
B. Method	232
C. Calendars and Total History	233

D. Variety and Vitality in the Dead Sea Scrolls	235
E. New Cultural Histories	237
F. Intellectual Pluralism in Ecclesiastes	239
G. Excursus: Literary-Theoretical Points of Comparison	245
H. Conclusions	247
 <i>Chapter 11: Conclusions</i>	 249
A. Coherence	249
B. Genre	251
C. Context, Discourse, and Rhetoric	253
D. Time	254
E. Outlook	258
 Bibliography	 261
 Index of Sources	 305
Index of Authors	315
Index of Subjects	323

Chapter 1

Introduction

Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis.
– Times change, and we change with them.

Just as times change, so does the way in which time is thought about. Within the history of Judaism, the book of Ecclesiastes occupies an important space in this dynamic. It is the earliest case in ancient Jewish literature of a treatment of this subject in its own right which explicates its temporal thinking and takes the engagement with time as more than an implicit assumption.

Ecclesiastes asks itself important questions about the world, life, order, meaning, and the human condition. What is that which remains for a man in all his toil at which he toils under the sun? Is there anything new under the sun? What are the limits of knowledge? What can humans do in a world in which they experience but glimpses of what orders and determines it?

The study of the book of Ecclesiastes, here with attention to the subject of time in particular, can operate on three levels. First, there are the intellectual dynamics of the text itself. Ecclesiastes is a notoriously complicated and puzzling book, which does not afford its readers the benefit of straightforward standards of coherence in its plot, structure, or argument. These challenges, which Ecclesiastes puts to its readers, must be negotiated so as to establish what the book's aims are, how it can be read without the risk of superimposing external assumptions onto the text, and whether modern standards of coherence and propositionality about its argument need to apply for the study of this ancient text. Second, there is the question of the intellectual contributions of the book at large. It invites inquiries into the function of the book, its overall rhetorical dynamics, its label as Solomonic as well as its modes of literary authorisation, and crucially its recurring interests. With respect to the subject of time, the question of "transience" (הֶבֶל) – the book's *Leitmotif* – imposes itself especially and is complemented by concerns on order and the place of humanity under the sun vis-à-vis broader unchanging and unknowable dynamics of the world, on epistemology and humanity's capacity for agency, the role of the divine, and a look beyond an individual life as the timespan for reflection. Third, there are the dialogues, interdependencies, and critical entanglements between Ecclesiastes and surrounding literatures, as well as the wider history of thought in Hellenistic Judaism. Especially on the

question of time and other associated subjects, the book of Ecclesiastes asks itself questions which are also of concern for many of its literary contemporaries. While the texts which are studied here in comparison with Ecclesiastes may have arrived at different answers to these questions and availed themselves of different forms, manners of historical contextualisation, or directions of argument, they are mutually illuminating in a profound way and invite comparative study. In this respect, one encounters the intriguing dynamic that Ecclesiastes seeks to avoid being contextually and historically referential – thus lending itself to be abstract, hermeneutically open, and to some extent timeless for its readers –, whilst its temporal thinking is to be understood as a product of its time within the framework of the Hellenistic Period. The advent of conceptions of time and history in the Eastern Mediterranean which were decoupled from events contained therein is a central force for new dimensions of thought to be introduced into ongoing vital traditions, here especially of the literature of ancient Israel. It speaks further to the intellectual and literary interdependencies across linguistic registers at this time. The central interlocutor for this innovation to temporal thinking in the history of thought in Israel is the contemporary emergence of what is usually labelled apocalyptic thinking. It looked beyond the limits of experiential reasoning which Ecclesiastes, too, acknowledged, considering history in its totality from its beginning to its end whilst ridding itself of the constraints of earlier temporal thinking which constructed history referentially. Most crucially, though, apocalyptic thinking sought to establish authority within existing discourses by means of recourse to transcendental revelation. Within this framework and dynamic of thought, the book of Ecclesiastes takes on an expositional or critical rather than a propositional function. It weighs and nuances questions on meaning, the extent to which knowledge is available, as well as time and history. It goes to great lengths to delimit the broader circumstances of reality from what humanity can grasp, let alone act upon. While it does not make explicit use of revelation, it only dismisses recourse to it when it is excessive, and there are subtle threads throughout the book which acknowledge that there is more to be known than what can be experienced and reasoned about. Crucially, it puts its thoughts, in self-contained experiential and exemplary pericopes of reasoning, yet with resonances to thought known from contemporary discourses, to the reader for them to grapple with it, seeking not to give the reader definitive answers but rather to charge them to ask themselves these important questions. Indeed, Ecclesiastes, this fashion of literature, and its embeddedness in the history of thought of its time are a microcosm of the vitality and intellectual pluralism which characterises ancient Jewish thought. The juxtaposition of various angles onto a subject – in this case especially the subject of time – and the openness to discuss it without resorting to proposition or polemic, to synthesis or systematisation over a negotiation of nuances, without closing an argument but leaving it open whilst limiting its appropriate scope, constitutes the profound richness of this text.

The study of time and corresponding elements of thought in *Ecclesiastes* oscillates between these three levels. Fourth, there is, in addition, the question of metacriticism. The discourses which are studied in this book traverse the boundaries of what in scholarship is commonly labelled wisdom and apocalypticism. It is important that both categories are inventions of modern scholarship in the 19th century and build up distinctions which this study seeks to break down. While these categories have a heuristic place, the proximities, interdependencies, and engagements, specifically on the subject of time, between texts commonly labelled as wisdom or apocalyptic literature, are a helpful indicator that the relationships, points of contact and dynamics between texts from Second Temple Judaism are too varied, vital, and multiperspectival as to be adequately described by conventions of genre. The ongoing process of an interplay of interpretation, discourse, and production, rather, allows the reader to bring texts, and especially motifs and themes therein, into dialogue by forming them into intellectual constellations, whose focal points, selection of materials to be compared, and accentuations are dependent not on the texts being part of consistently imposed categories but on the constellating practice of reading, and the way in which texts avail themselves to the relative vantage points of their readers. The appreciation of this openness, vitality, and hermeneutical availability can provide a helpful problematisation of overly teleological assumptions in the history of scholarship about the meaning, function, and place of texts and ideas in Jewish antiquity and provide a more nuanced approach towards them.

The main body of the book is overall divided into nine chapters. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 provide a background to the study from different angles and set out the structures within which it is undertaken.

Chapter 2, “The Date and Compositional History of the Book of *Ecclesiastes*”, provides an overview and discussion of the formation, structure, and dating of *Ecclesiastes*. It is understood – with exceptions – for the most part to represent one literary consciousness behind the text, which is embodied not least by the first case in Hebrew literature of a consequently maintained narrative ‘I’ throughout the book, which on critical grounds can be taken seriously. Further, it is suggested – especially on the grounds of linguistic dating due to the *Ecclesiastes*’ deliberate avoidance of positively traceable historical and contextual references – that the book came about in the 3rd century BCE. Its deliberately abstract and exemplarised orientation, combined with a subtle blending of contextual referents, is discussed in an excursus.

Chapter 3 discusses “The Status Quaestionis in Scholarship on *Ecclesiastes*, Time, and Apocalypticism”. It surveys critically the development of the thought about the central issues of concern in this study from the earliest engagements with the book of *Ecclesiastes* in antiquity, across the advent of the modern conceptions of ‘wisdom’ and ‘apocalypticism’, and towards recent priorities, findings, and accentuations in the study of time in *Ecclesiastes*, its relationship to those

realms of thought commonly labelled apocalyptic, and associated problems in exegesis and criticism, especially inasmuch as these indicate a potential which they yield to further study.

Chapter 4, “Reflections on Method”, is the most abstract chapter of this book. It sets out a number of underlying conversation partners, which particularly comprise theoretical approaches towards history and literature that inform the following discussion. These include discussions, critique, and nuancing engagement with the study of the history of ideas in the Cambridge School, the question of the significance of authorship for the study of texts, the impact of the linguistic turn for the study of history, and the problems of *Traditionsgeschichte*. This discussion, though abstract, engages these theoretical interlocutors, especially inasmuch as they speak to the sources of concern here. Undoubtedly, authorship and the construction of history, for instance, can be understood in different shadings in the study of modern literature and of historical sources, and can, in modern cases, be studied from angles, especially with respect to their composition and background, which are obscured in the case of ancient materials. Nevertheless, these reflections on method speak beyond the immediate constraints of the study at hand and thus deserve treatment in their own right.

Chapters 5 and 6 are test cases which approach the specific questions on time and tradition in Ecclesiastes and its relationship with the book’s contemporary history of ideas with respect to specific thematic constellations.

Chapter 5, “Polemic, Critique, and Intellectually Constitutive Interaction: Eccl 4:17–5:6 as a Test Case”, devotes close attention to a passage in Ecclesiastes which exhibits two features in particular that illustrate how the book engages apocalyptic thinking. After a study of the structure of the passage, the discussion focuses on two motifs in it, namely the subjects of dreams and recourse to intermediation by angels. Both are important components of the passage, although the latter requires some text critical operation in order to bring it to the fore. The discussion elaborates, firstly, on how readings of the text fall short which label it as solely anti-apocalyptic, and accentuates the dialectic relationship between Ecclesiastes and the surrounding *Geistesgeschichte*. In focusing on dreams and angels, the passage attests to an interest in looking beyond immediately available realms of experience and towards access to revelation which elucidates broader perspectives on time as well as space and pervaded much contemporary literature.

The second test case in the following chapter 6, “Rhetoric and Discourse in Ecclesiastes and 4QInstruction”, takes a somewhat different angle. It focuses on the subjects of seeing, hiddenness and knowledge between Ecclesiastes and this interlocutor from among the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is established that the texts exhibit proximity to one another inasmuch as they share vocabulary, resonate with each other in a set of passages, and employ incoherence as an important element of their structure. The second part of the chapter then explores the differences

which are detectable besides the texts' overlaps and shared worldviews. It is shown how the intended rhetorical functions of the texts give them cause to accentuate different elements of the shared questions which they ask themselves and discuss before the background of their probable intended audiences.

Chapter 7, "The Genre Apocalypse: Rethinking Morphologies", serves as a hinge between the chapters which precede and those which follow it. It raises the question of metacriticism and provides a broader exposition of the findings to which the test cases of chapters 5 and 6 attested. It is proposed, namely, that the category of apocalypticism, which is taken centrally to entail discussions on time and associated questions, fails to encompass the full dynamic of this topic in Second Temple Judaism. Further, it indicates how taxonomies in the study of ancient Jewish literature implicitly or explicitly exhibit features of prototype theory in which thematic discussions as well as the relationships between texts are observed with a rather rigid starting point, a textual prototype, relative to which all others are understood. This teleology is problematised inasmuch as it is necessary to understand texts which participate in shared discourses in a more historically contingent manner than a taxonomy relying on prototype theory or variations thereof allowed. In the chapter, a set of features associated with temporal thinking is discussed in its recurrence across a set of texts from the Second Temple period, which demonstrates the iterability of an intellectual constellation on time beyond those texts commonly labelled apocalyptic and including the book of Ecclesiastes.

Chapter 8, subsequently, on "The Category of Time in the Book of Ecclesiastes and Its Place in the History of Ideas", contains a detailed discussion on time and the various engagements with this subject in the book of Ecclesiastes. It builds on the preceding discussions especially of the two test cases and the endeavour to establish constellations around temporal thinking beyond commonly held generic boundaries. The frame of this chapter situates this thinking in light of innovations to conceptions of time in the Hellenistic period, which allowed to read it as a total category and allowed for the possibility to speak about time in a manner which is not necessarily and immediately referential and bound to context in the history of events. centrally, the study accentuates the premise in Ecclesiastes of time as ordered and arranged. It highlights frameworks of order to the world and activities therein as epitomised in the poems of Eccl 1 and 3, nuances the discussion on epistemology and determinism in the book, considers reflective outlooks in Ecclesiastes beyond generations and the lifetime of the individual as the primary measure within which deeds, accomplishments, legacies, and aspirations were evaluated, and probes nuances of the book's *Leitmotif* הִבָּל, which, it is proposed, is best understood as meaning "transience". The chapter shows the book of Ecclesiastes to be literature of circumstances, an attempt to delimit whence meaning, knowledge, order, and expectations about the world and the human condition can be derived. It challenges readings which

take Ecclesiastes' argument primarily in propositional, morally evaluative terms. Finally, it shows how there is importance specifically to the function, rather than the object of temporal thinking, which allows to situate the seemingly idiosyncratic argument of the book before a wider set of contemporary interlocutors.

The concluding two chapters, 9 and 10, explicate elements which had pervaded the preceding reflections primarily in an implicit manner, and warranted explication.

Chapter 9, "Time and Abstraction: Moving Across Traditions as a Mode of Literary Authorisation", attends to the negotiation of authority and tradition in Second Temple Judaism. First, it considers the phenomenon of authorisation by ascription, which brings Hebrew literature into dialogue with comparable and influential dynamics in Greek, especially the role of Homer. It is suggested that the ascription of a text to a supposed author or an authorising figure whom any reader would easily identify as a central authoritative figure of the history of Israel – in the case of Ecclesiastes the figure of Solomon – constitutes a blending of tradition across time within which past, present, and future are taken to be mutually illuminating. Second, it discusses the historical blending of ideas. With respect to the book of Daniel in particular, which bears similarities with and also notable differences from Ecclesiastes, the modes of authorisation in apocalyptic literature are considered. These, in contrast with one another, speak to the authorising and generative dynamics of literature and tradition across the history of thought in Israel.

Chapter 10, "Pluriformity and Pluralism: Literary Diversity, Hermeneutical Openness, and the Function of Texts in Second Temple Judaism", finally, accentuates pluralism as a characteristic element of Hebrew thinking. With attention to Ecclesiastes in particular, it is observed that the engagement with the *book* of Ecclesiastes in antiquity is limited, while its entanglement in the history of ideas is profound. The chapter, in turn, highlights the hermeneutical potential of the juxtaposition of varying, at times conflicting ideas within ancient Hebrew literature. A glance at the Dead Sea Scrolls further suggests that the practice of accumulating a collection of literature which exhibits different perspectives on shared topical interests is not merely a circumstance with which modern readers are confronted, but rather an inherent phenomenon which characterises the history of literature in ancient Judaism. It is demonstrated further that the juxtaposition of ideas, which remain not propositional postulations but invitations to readers for intellectual engagement with them, is not a feature which only impacts the comparative reading of multiple ancient Jewish texts, but that there is a hermeneutical openness, in the case of Ecclesiastes in particular, which is detectable even to the smallest level of individual verses and expressions within a composition.

The discussions in these chapters are aimed to be more than the sum of their constituent parts. Of course, the set of interlocutors with which Ecclesiastes is

brought into conversation here is selective, and it is a central argument of this book that to read texts in a constellating manner is necessarily subjective. It is precisely a result of this approach, however, that the manner in which a text, namely the book of Ecclesiastes, and a thematic focus, namely the subject of time, are studied here is applicable methodologically in a broader sense.

At the same time, this book is an attempt at shifting accents in the study of Ecclesiastes. It is often taken to be an obscure, puzzling, or idiosyncratic text at the fringes of ancient Jewish thought, which is in need of dissection or disambiguation. The varieties of proposed readings, of suggested answers and resolutions to the problems which it raises, of specific events it allegedly spoke of despite its abstract outlook, and of attempts to equate it with the thought or systematics of other texts, schools, and thinkers are perhaps unparalleled for a text of a seemingly manageable quantity of 222 verses. In response to these approaches towards Ecclesiastes, this book is an attempt to take a step back, an attempt at appreciating the problem rather than seeking to propose the priority of one answer to it. The book of Ecclesiastes is an invitation to the reader to enter a dialogue with it, to think independently about important questions for which it sets out the determining circumstances, timeless conditions, epistemic limitations, and productive scope within which this dialogue can take place. Its argument is not merely a problem whose one solution can be extracted or which applies to but one context. Rather it attests to the timelessness of the subjects which it discusses, and to the transience of all outcomes which might come out of thinking about them and acting accordingly.

Finally, time is an exciting and immensely relevant subject. In religion and literature, it was for a long time not regarded as a subject which was studied in its own right, but rather only inasmuch as it related to phenomena, events, and people in time. At the face of the argument of the book of Ecclesiastes, it is not important for the evaluation of everything as transient, for acknowledging the absence of a lasting benefit or remembrance of one's accomplishments and legacy, or for the appreciation of constant patterns which make the earth stand in time as generations come and generations pass, whether the reader who engaged with these questions lived in antiquity or today. It is, however, important for the study of the history of literature and for the understanding of Ecclesiastes in particular, that the ability to articulate these timeless questions, the presence of a semantic repository which made it available to language, thought, and writing, did not always exist. Ecclesiastes stands at a crossroads between earlier referential and contextually bound engagements with time and new total conceptions of time and history which made texts of the Hellenistic period revisit and engage with the traditions in which they were culturally embedded whilst availing themselves of the new horizons of temporal thinking before which they participated in these traditions in generative, vital, and invigorating ways. It is this dynamic of interdependencies, interpenetrations, and interrelations which this book studies.

Chapter 2

The Date and Compositional History of the Book of Ecclesiastes

A. Composition

The compositional, redactional, and also rhetorical unity of the book of Ecclesiastes is rather a complicated matter.¹

It is clear that a redaction-historical study stands somewhat apart from the primary aim of this book, and is more at home in the realm of an introduction or a commentary.² Nevertheless, it is important to go to the necessary depth with respect to the compositional stages of the book of Ecclesiastes here in order to

¹ For the purposes of disambiguation, the reader may note that throughout this book I use the terms “Ecclesiastes” or “Book of Ecclesiastes”, rather than “Qoheleth” or Book of Qoheleth”, unless I am specifically citing sources. This should not be taken to imply any interpretative stance but rather to further coherence in the usage of terms throughout this book. There are approaches which distinguish between the two terms and label the biblical book with one term and the literary character or monologist with the other, thus e.g. WEEKS, *Ecclesiastes 1–5*, p. 6. I take it – as is discussed in greater depth in chapter 4 below and elsewhere – that it is a problem in the interpretation of texts to seek the reconstruction of a personalised, coherent, propositional agent in and behind the text of whom one can speak in personalised terms. This is why in this study, rather, I have elected to label the narrative ‘I’ of the text – in itself one of the features which sets the book of Ecclesiastes apart from other literature – as ‘the speaker’, ‘the monologist’, or the ‘literary consciousness implied in the text’, especially when discussing aspects of the function of the book’s argument being advanced through first person discourse. The preference for the consistent usage of the term “Ecclesiastes” over “Qoheleth” is foremost a matter of preference. Also, given the priority of attention devoted to the book of Ecclesiastes in this study, the reader may assume when verse numbers are quoted without positive identification of their biblical book that these are references to verses within the book of Ecclesiastes.

² Broader introductions which reflect important stages in recent scholarship on the book include BARTHOLOMEW, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 17–99; CRENSHAW, *Ecclesiastes. A Commentary*, pp. 23–54; FOX, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up. A Rereading of Ecclesiastes*, pp. 147–157; IDEM, *Ecclesiastes. The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, pp. ix–xxxv; KÖHLMÖS, *Kohelet. Der Prediger Salomo*, pp. 27–36; KRÜGER, *Kohelet (Prediger)*, pp. 11–67; LOHFINK, *Kohelet*, pp. 5–17; MICHEL, *Qohelet*, pp. 9–45.112–115; very differently PERRY, *Dialogues with Kohelet. The Book of Ecclesiastes. Translation and Commentary*, pp. 3–50; SCHOORS, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 1–25; SCHWIENHORST-SCHÖNBERGER, *Kohelet*, pp. 41–134; SEOW, *Ecclesiastes. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, pp. 3–69; WEEKS, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (vol. 1), pp. 1–228. These represent especially the contributions of the last few decades, and in them contain a broader exposition and discussion of the contributions in preceding generations.

establish a framework based on which a thematic and comparative study such as the one at hand can be attempted, particularly to set the scene for the endeavours of the present project that are dependent on insights about the place, date, and structure of the text in question. Especially in a project in which many primary texts of concern are diachronically so close as to be almost contemporaneous with Ecclesiastes, small distinctions within the material of either book may aid discussions of the relationships between texts and ideas, as well as help understand the broader framework in which the literary discourse constellations in question are encountered.

It is a problem in both the history and present of biblical scholarship, indeed, to approach any text either with great vigour to disentangle a plethora of redactional layers, thereby rendering the material in such an atomistic fashion as to make it practically unintelligible, or with preference for broad strokes and an alleged final text for the benefit of readability for the modern reader, readily dismissing subtle yet distinctive divisions in the textual material.³ This is not a question of qualitative evaluation of one element of biblical exegesis over the other, and both steps in the approach towards biblical texts serve important purposes in interpretation. The dissection of biblical texts as they present themselves to the modern reader is especially necessary if texts exhibit significant traces of revision, expansion, and redaction over time as well as indications as to their oral pre-history which inform how they are to be read and understood.⁴ The discussion on composition, further, hinges on the complicated question as to what constitutes coherence in a text,⁵ on the one hand, and authorship on the other. In the case of the latter, it is further significant that the potential import of the search of origins of texts is more limited than is sometimes assumed, and that the dynamics of their participation in discourses is more essential to understanding their place and time.⁶

It is argued here, and shall be justified on textual and literary grounds in greater detail below, that, unlike in the case of other biblical books, taking the

³ Cf. e.g. SIEGFRIED, *Prediger und Hoheslied*, and WEEKS, *Ecclesiastes 1–5*, pp. 45–53. For further discussion, cf. SCHELLENBERG, *Kohelet*, pp. 13–17.

⁴ Cf. e.g. STECK, *Exegese des Alten Testaments*, pp. 46–51. The place of rewriting and how it is best understood is explored in depth in ZAHN, *Genres of Rewriting in Second Temple Judaism. Scribal Composition and Transmission*, esp. pp. 74–97. More generally, cf. CARR, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible. A New Reconstruction*; KRATZ, *Die Komposition der Erzählenden Bücher des Alten Testaments*; DE TROYER, *Rewriting the Sacred Text. What the Old Greek Texts Tell Us about the Literary Growth of the Bible*; SCHMID, *Literaturgeschichte des Alten Testaments*, esp. pp. 15–58.

⁵ On this point, cf. TEETER and TOOMAN, “Standards of (In)coherence in Ancient Jewish Literature”, pp. 94–129. Further BERLIN, “Lexical Cohesion and Biblical Interpretation”, pp. 29–40; LYONS, “Standards of Cohesion and Coherence. Evidence from Early Readers”, pp. 183–208; SAMELY, “How Coherence Works. Reading, Re-Reading and Inner-Biblical Exegesis”, pp. 130–182; STACKERT, “Pentateuchal Coherence and the Science of Reading”, pp. 253–268.

⁶ Cf. NAJMAN, “Textual Unities and Poetic Processes in Ancient Judaism”, pp. 266–290.

Index of Sources

Hebrew Bible

Genesis

1:6–8	151
1:14–18	151
1:14	234
2–3	194
2:7	178, 193
2:19	193
3–4	179
3:8	193
3:14	193
3:17	193
3:19	178, 185, 193
5:18	220
5:21–24	220
5:22–23	157
6:1–4	127
8:22	132
9:12	149
15:18	131
17:7	149
17:9	149
20:3–7	96
26:32	131
28:10–17	96
30:35	131
31:10–13	96
33:16	131
37	89
37:5–11	96
40–41	89, 96
41	65
48:20	131

Exodus

3:15	148
5:6	131
8:18	131
12–13	155
12:1–20	22
12:43–49	22
13:8	131

14:30	131
15:26	111
16:1	234
19:13	170
20:1–17	91
21:23–25	198
23:14–19	155
23:30–23	98
28:3	219
31:3	219
31:6	219
31:16	149
32:28	131
34:18–26	155
34:29–35	134, 181
35:26	219
35:31	219
35:35	219
36:1–2	219

Leviticus

17:7	148
20:2	170
23	155
24:19–20	198

Numbers

9:1–14	155
28–29	155

Deuteronomy

1:1	19, 95
1:35	149
7:1–5	98
7:9	149
15:19–33	170
16	155
17:5	170
19:21	198
23:21–22	95
32:21	179
34:9	219

<i>Joshua</i>		<i>Esther</i>	21, 40, 49, 223
6–12	22	1:1	147
		9–10	22
<i>Judges</i>		9:23–32	155
5:6	147	9:27	172
7:13–23	96		
<i>Ruth</i>		<i>Job</i>	63, 117, 128, 138–139, 217, 246
1:1	18, 147	3:9	195
1:22	18	4:19	193
4:4	111	7:13	96
		8:19	193
<i>1 Samuel</i>		9:29	178
17:40	170	9:32	32
		10:9	193
<i>2 Samuel</i>	215	14:3	32
22:16	194	18:6	195
		21:34	178
<i>1 Kings</i>	215, 220, 253	22:4	32
1:53	216	27:12	178–179
3:5–15	89, 96, 216	28:20–21	100
3:16–28	216	31:40	19
5:8	176	33:4	194
5:9–10	217	33:16	111
5:12	216–218, 220	34:15	193
16:2	179	35:16	178, 180
16:13	179	36:10	111
16:26	179	38–41	134, 168
<i>2 Kings</i>		<i>Psalms</i>	45, 111, 187, 221
2	157	6:5	152
3:25	170	8:2a	18
10:30	149	8:10	18
17:15	179	16:10	157
		18:16	194
<i>1 Chronicles</i>		30:10	193
11	52	33:11	148
		44:1	164
<i>2 Chronicles</i>	40, 215	49:12	148
26:14–15	170	62:10	178
36:20–22	127, 224–225	77:9	148
		78:33	178
<i>Ezra</i>		79:13	148
10:14	172	81:4	155
		85:6	148
<i>Nehemiah</i>		88	157
1:1	19	89:2	148
2:6	172	102:13	148
2:8	39	103:14	193
10:34–35	172	104:29	193
13:31	172	106:31	148
		115:17	152
		118:1	18

118:29	18	2:11	32, 181, 184, 189–190
135:13	148	2:13	190
139:8	157	2:14–21	157
143:2	32	2:15	28, 32, 181, 184, 189
144:4	178–179	2:16	135, 158
146:4	152, 193	2:17	32, 184, 189
146:10	148	2:18	184
		2:19	32, 181, 189
<i>Proverbs</i>	47, 101, 111, 117, 128,	2:21	32, 144, 176, 181, 184, 189
	156, 183, 190, 215, 217,	2:23	32, 181, 184, 189
	220–221, 243	2:24–26	29, 47
1–9	117	2:24	118, 176, 201
1:1	19	2:26	32, 184, 189
1:20	100	3	65, 157
1:7	18	3:1–8	19, 72, 102, 161, 166,
3:16	156		169–172, 204, 227, 233,
5:21–23	156		255
7:21–23	27	3:1	114, 116, 202
9:11	156	3:2	197
10–29	109	3:9	171, 190
12:23	95	3:10–15	29, 174–175, 198
13:11	178–179	3:10–11	112–113, 118, 134
17:24	109	3:10	114, 178
19:16	156	3:11	24, 95, 101, 114, 158, 173,
30:1	19		175–176, 201
31:1	19	3:12	32, 38, 118, 176, 201
		3:13	22
<i>Ecclesiastes</i>		3:14	32, 158
1:1	18–19, 26, 43, 219	3:15	29, 162
1:2	17–19, 26–27, 52, 156,	3:16–18	29–30, 176
	177, 185	3:16–21	28
1:3	156, 189–190, 245	3:16	28, 32, 88, 115
1:4–11	26, 72–73, 116, 133–134,	3:17–18	28, 32
	155, 158, 162–169, 204,	3:17	116
	227, 233–234, 255	3:18	28
1:4	158	3:18–21	192
1:9–11	70	3:19–21	52
1:9	41, 70, 161–164	3:19	32, 181, 184, 191
1:10	155, 158	3:20	28
1:12–2:26	20, 45, 78–79, 88, 166,	3:21	188
	218–219	3:22	32, 118, 162, 176, 201
1:12–15	185	4:1–3	52
1:12	219	4:3	176
1:13–14	198	4:4	32, 184, 189
1:13	178	4:7–8	29, 181, 184
1:14	184, 185, 189	4:8	32, 189
1:15	46	4:13–16	29
1:16	46, 219	4:16	32, 184, 189
2:1	28, 32, 181, 184	4:17–5:6	4, 85–106, 117, 136, 144,
2:2	28		254
2:5	38–40	4:17	90, 243
2:7	46	5:1	88
2:9	46	5:2	89, 93, 95

5:3	88	8:10	32, 184, 189, 243–244
5:5	88, 96–97, 102–104	8:11	241
5:6	22, 89, 91	8:12–13	241
5:7	116, 181	8:12	241–242
5:8	32, 190	8:14–17	96
5:9	184	8:14–15	186
5:10	32, 181, 189	8:14	24, 28, 32, 115, 181, 184, 189
5:12–16	157	8:15	118, 176, 201
5:12	96, 115	8:17	23–24, 101, 141, 174, 200
5:13	24	9	22
5:15	37, 190	9:1–3	52, 191
5:16	24, 37	9:1	198
5:17–19	29	9:3–6	157
5:17	37, 118, 176, 201	9:3	24, 176
5:18	22	9:5–6	152
6:1–12	29	9:6	158
6:1	24, 176	9:7–9	201
6:2	32, 181, 184, 189, 198	9:7–10	29, 118, 176
6:3	28, 37	9:7	198
6:4	178	9:10	142, 152
6:5	37, 52	9:11	96, 176–177, 191
6:6	37	9:13–16	29
6:7	37	10:5	24, 176
6:9	32, 184, 189	10:10–11	190
6:10	95, 162	10:12–14	176
6:12	38, 40, 181	10:12	36
7:1–14	19	10:14	162
7:2	22, 37	11:3	36
7:3	37	11:5	176, 198
7:5	37	11:7–12:1	118, 176, 201
7:6	32, 37, 184, 189	11:7–12:8	195
7:10	97, 134	11:8	32, 157, 181, 184
7:12	190	11:9–12:1	195
7:13	96	11:9–12:7	194
7:13–14	134, 198	11:9	23, 26, 30–32
7:14–18	96	11:10	32, 181, 184
7:14	24, 173–174, 176	12	33, 46
7:15	157, 176, 181	12:1–7	51–52, 73, 135, 157
7:17	24	12:1–8	186, 203
7:23	28, 173	12:1	159
7:24	24, 162, 173–174	12:3	54, 134, 159
7:26–29	173	12:2	194
7:26	115	12:5	54–55, 158
7:27	26	12:7	55, 178, 192, 194–195
7:29	29	12:8	17–18, 26–27, 177, 181, 195
8:1–9	94	12:9–14	18, 20–23
8:1	134	12:9–10	20–21.23
8:6–8	134, 157	12:10	115, 174
8:6	32, 96, 116	12:11–12	20–21.23
8:7	162	12:12	23, 27
8:10–12	29, 241	12:13–14	20–26, 28
8:10–14	176, 240–245		
8:10–17	198		

12:13	24	29:10	127, 224
12:14	23, 30, 32, 136, 200	30–33	149
<i>Canticles</i>	44–45, 215, 217, 220–221	31:31–34	157
1:1	19	31:31	150
2:10–14	170	33:14–26	150
4:13	39–40	33:20–21	132, 150
		33:25–26	132
		34:14	111
<i>Isaiah</i>	62, 143, 195	35:15	111
1:1	147, 164, 209	36:32	209
3:14	32	44:5	111
5:2	170	51:64	19
5:30	195		
6:1–10	123	<i>Ezekiel</i>	53
13:10	132, 195	1:27	114
24–27	143, 157	24:5	165
25–26	187	32:7–8	195
25:7	187	37	133, 157
26:19	187	37:11–14	187
29:7	89	38	133
30:7	178–179	40–48	157
34:17	148	40:3	104
37:17	111		
38:18	157	<i>Daniel</i>	49, 54, 126, 203, 205, 223,
41:4	165		234, 251, 257
42:5	194	2	163
43:16–21	157	2:20–23	199–200, 202
43:18–19	70	2:20	162
49:4	178–179	2:22	201
51:9	157	2:27	93
55:3	111	2:28–29	162
57:13	180	2:45	162
57:16	194	4:13	99
57:17	31	4:19	93
59:21	149	4:21–22	99
65:17	70	5:12	89
65:22	144	7–12	30, 257
		7	163, 201
<i>Jeremiah</i>	21	7:11–12	202
1:1	19, 147	7:25	202
1:10	18	8:14	202
3:17	133	8:17	203
4:6–8	238	8:19	203
6:1	238	9	127, 224, 239
7:24	111	9:1–2	224–225
7:26	111	9:3–19	224–225
11:8	111	9:20–27	224
17:23	111	10–12	160
23:32	96	11:35	203
24:6	18	11:40	203
25:11–14	127, 224	12	22, 187
27:9	96	12:1–2	133–134
29:8	96	12:2	142, 187

12:4	24, 100, 136, 142	1-36	30
12:7	202	1:2	99
12:9	203	1:5	200
12:11-12	202	6-16	30
12:13	157, 203	6:1-2	99, 127
<i>Hosea</i>		8:3	103
1:1	209	10:10	133
6:1-3	187	14:1-2	89
6:2	134	15:6	133
11:8-11	157	22	187-188
13:13-14	187	72-82	30
14:5-9	187	85-90	30
		93:1-17	30
<i>Joel</i>	143	<i>Jubilees</i>	67, 126, 196-198, 203, 205, 214, 220, 234, 257
2:10	195	1:14-15	197
2:31	54, 159	3:29	196
3:4	195	4:32	198, 201
3:20	148	4:31-32	198
4:15	195	5:13	196
<i>Amos</i>		5:32.35	234
1:1	19, 147, 209	6:32-33	202
5:8	195	<i>Ben Sira</i>	25, 109, 117, 187, 231
5:18	132	3:21-24	103
7:10-17	136	34:1-2	103
8:9	195	40:11	193
9:1	114	42:19	66
9:2	157	44-50	65
9:11-15	25	<i>1 Maccabees</i>	
<i>Micah</i>		4:52-59	155
3:6	195	9:27	125
<i>Habakkuk</i>		<i>Wisdom of Solomon</i>	220
1:4	154	1:15	142
<i>Zechariah</i>	143-144	2:22	24, 100, 136
1:7-17	127, 224-225	3:7	134-135
1:9	103	<i>4 Ezra</i>	25, 53, 125, 220, 230
10:2	135, 178	12:42	125
12-14	157	14:23-26	24, 100
14:6-7	132, 134	14:37-48	24, 100
<i>Malachi</i>		<i>2 Baruch</i>	52, 231
4:5	54, 159	10:6-7	52
		14:10-11	52
Ancient Jewish Literature		19:5	52
<i>1 Enoch</i>	53, 67, 69, 126, 143, 151, 158, 160, 196, 220-221, 230, 234, 257	48:12.16	52

Testament of Levi 220

Testament of Abraham
220

2 Enoch 53

New Testament

Matthew
7:7–11
24:29 195

Mark
4:10–13 231
13:24 195

Luke
18:18–30 231
23:45 195

John 57

Acts 195
2:20 195

1 Corinthians
15:52 157

2 Corinthians
4:7–15 231

Colossians
1:15–16 200
1:24–26 200
1:25 100
2:1–3 200

Hebrews
8:8–12 150

1 John 57

2 John 57

3 John 57

Revelation 56–59, 127, 129
1:1 56
1:9–11 127
22:10 56

Hellenistic Jewish Sources

Ezekiel the Tragedian

Exagoge 214, 220, 230
ll. 68–69.82 89
ll. 77–78 114

Philo of Alexandria

De Opificio Mundi
xv–xvii 197

Dead Sea Scrolls

1QM 157

1QS 157, 236
v:17 194
xi:3–4 200

1QpHab 145, 155
i:12–13 154
ii:3 150

4QInstruction 67, 100–101, 108–119,
125–126, 129, 156, 174,
231, 236, 254

4Q416 li:2 116
4Q416 li:3 116
4Q416 2iii:14–15 115
4Q416 2iii 15–19 109
4Q416 2iii:18 111
4Q417 li:1–11 174–175, 197
4Q417 li:11–12 200
4Q417 li:6–7 117
4Q418 9:15–16 115
4Q418 43,44,45i:4–5 117
4Q418 69 117
4Q418 122ii:14 116
4Q418 123ii:3–4 100, 137

4QJeremiah^b 212

4QMMT 151

4QpPs^a 145

4QPseudoEzekiel 230
4Q385 frg. 2:3 31
4Q386 frg li:2 31
4Q388 frg 7:4 31

- | | | | |
|---|---------------|-----------------------------------|-------------|
| <i>4QQoheleth^a</i> | 34, 38 | <i>Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer</i> 21 | 198 |
| <i>4QReworkedPentateuch</i> | 214, 220, 230 | R. Isaac Aramah | |
| <i>Commentary on Genesis A</i> | | <i>Commentary on Ecclesiastes</i> | 250 |
| <i>4Q252</i> | 141 | | |
| <i>Damascus Document</i> | 145, 236 | <i>Targum Pseudo-Jonathan</i> | 198 |
| vi 19 | 150 | <i>Targum Qoheleth</i> | 52, 241–242 |
| viii 21 | 150 | | |
| xix 33–34 | 150 | | |
| xx 12 | 150 | | |
| <i>Genesis Apocryphon</i> | 214, 220, 230 | | |
| <i>Hodayot</i> | 67, 136 | | |
| <i>Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice</i> | | | |
| <i>4Q401 14ii:2</i> | 200 | | |
| <i>Temple Scroll</i> | 220 | | |
| <i>11Q19 xxix 7–10</i> | 150 | | |
|
 | | | |
| Epigraphic Sources | | | |
| from Ancient Israel | | | |
| <i>Gezer Calendar</i> | 197, 234 | | |
| <i>Inscription from Khirbet Bet Layy</i> | 49 | | |
| <i>Inscription from Khirbet el-Qom</i> | 187 | | |
|
 | | | |
| Rabbinic and Medieval | | | |
| Jewish Sources | | | |
| <i>Canticles Rabbah</i> | 217 | | |
| <i>Genesis Rabbah 22:8</i> | 198 | | |
| <i>Midrash Qoheleth Rabbah 3:5</i> | 170 | | |
| <i>Miqra'ot Gedolot</i> | 64 | | |
| <i>Mishnah Hagigah 2:1</i> | 103 | | |
| <i>Mishnah Yadayim 3:5</i> | 159, 229 | | |
|
 | | | |
| Ancient Near Eastern Sources | | | |
| <i>Epic of Gilgamesh</i> | 46 | | |
| <i>Inscription L⁴, Nineveh</i> | 46 | | |
| <i>Oracle of Hystaspes</i> | 199 | | |
|
 | | | |
| Greek and Latin Sources | | | |
| Aristotle | | | |
| <i>Metaphysics</i> | 191 | | |
| Cicero | | | |
| <i>Epistolae ad Familiares</i> | 211 | | |
| 3.11 | 211 | | |
| <i>Contest of Homer and Hesiod</i> | 216 | | |
| Heraclitus | | | |
| frgs. B12, 49a, 91a | 181 | | |
| Hesiod | | | |
| <i>Works and Days</i> | 78 | | |
| Homer | | | |
| <i>Iliad</i> | 45 | | |
| <i>Odyssey</i> | 232 | | |
| <i>Homeric Hymn to Helios</i> (Hymn 31) | 166 | | |
| Josephus | | | |
| <i>Contra Apionem</i> | | | |
| 1.41 | 123 | | |
| 1.2 | 210 | | |

Lactantius
Institutiones Divinae
 7.15 199

Plutarch
Life of Cato the Elder
 20.8 56
 Porphyry of Tyre
Against the Christians 223

Pseudo-Herodotus
Life of Homer 215

Sappho 215

Thucydides
Peloponnesian War
 2.48.3 82

Virgil
Aeneid 232

Xenophon
Anabasis
 1.2.7–9 39

Egyptian Sources

Harper's Song of Antef 167
Harper's Song for Inherkhawy
 168

Harper's Song from the Tomb of Neferhotep
 167

Instruction of Amenemope 218

Instruction of Any 46

Song of Khai-Inheret 168

Teaching for King Merikare 167

Early Christian and Patristic Sources

Apocalypse of Peter 56
 1:1–3 127
 3:1–3 127

Chalcedonian Definition 239

Gregory of Nyssa 229

First Homily on Ecclesiastes
 43

Seventh Homily on Ecclesiastes
 170

Gregory Thaumaturgus

Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes 51–55, 159–160,
 229, 251

Jerome

Commentary on Daniel 223

Commentary on Ecclesiastes
 134, 180–182,
 229

Ep. 49 182

Origen

Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans
 53

Further Sources

Russian National Library Ms Q.I.622
(15th c.), Miscellany
 fol. 189r–190r 55

Index of Authors

- Adam, Moritz F. 14, 101, 139, 220
Adams, Samuel L. 110, 187
Aitken, James K. 52
Albrektson, Bertil 165
Alexander, Philip 52, 133, 151
Allen, Danielle 152
Altman, Amnon 150
Amir, Yehoshua 181
Ammann, Sonja 192
Andersen, Francis I. 154
Anderson, William H. U. 18, 46, 218
Andriolo, Karin R. 148
Applegate, John 224
Archer Jr., Gleason L. 34, 223
Assefa, Daniel 160
Assmann, Jan 99, 167–168, 191
Auerbach, Solomon H. 170
Aufrecht, Walter E. 148
Ausloos, Hans 98
Austin, John L. 75–76
- Backhaus, Franz Josef 244
Bailey, Nicholas A. 148
Bakhtin, Mikhail M. 69, 80, 138–139, 245–246
Bakker, Arjen F. 67, 100–101, 115, 117, 137, 174, 236
Baldick, Chris 18
Balla, Emil 154
Barstad, Hans M. 159
Barthélemy O. P., Dominique 115
Barthes, Roland 44, 48, 69, 78–80, 130, 249
Bartholomew, Craig G. 9, 231
Barton, George A. 18
Bate Jonathan 252
Bauer, Uwe F. W. 32, 70
Beardsley, M. C. 79
Beck, Eric J. 69
Becker, Uwe 99
Becking, Bob 158
Beentjes, Pancratius 186–187
Ben-Amos, Dan 191
Ben-Dov, Jonathan 30, 100, 116, 133, 151
- Benjamin, Walter 14, 232
Berlin, Adele 10, 32, 57, 91, 148, 210
Berrin, Shani 145
Beyerle, Stefan 25, 124, 169
Birnbaum, Elisabeth 134, 180, 182, 229
Blenkinsopp, Joseph 105, 133, 151
Bloch, Ernst 152
Blum, Matthias 58
Bochi, Patricia A. 167
Bolin, Thomas M. 44
Bonora, Antonio 241
Boyarin, Daniel 126
Braudel, Fernand 78, 237–238
Braun, Rainer 105, 241
Brettler, Marc 165
Briggs, Charles A. 241
Brockington, Leonard H. 44
Brodersen, Alma 213
Brooke, George J. 68, 100, 107, 141, 145, 232
Brown, Francis 241
Bruch, Johann Friedrich 60–62
Brueggemann, Walter 219
Brummett, Barry 69
Bruns, J. Edgar 231
Buchanan, George W. 160
Buddeus, Johann Franz 61
Bundvad, Mette 72–74, 171, 204, 220, 233
Burkitt, Francis C. 243
Byargeon, Rick W. 45
- Cancik-Kirschbaum, Eva 150
Čapek, Filip 96
Cappelørn, Niels J. 183
Carlyle, Thomas 78
Carr, David M. 10, 34, 194, 213
Castelli, David 244
Cavallin, Hans C. C. 134
Cavin, Robert L. 200
Ceresko, Anthony R. 173
Černý, Ladislav 159
Chester, Andrew 157–159
Cheyne, Thomas 179

- Christianson, Eric S. 21, 51, 181–182, 219, 229, 231
 Clark, Elizabeth A. 82
 Clines, David J.A. 168
 Cohen, Abraham 98, 170
 Cohen, Sol 216
 Cohen, Yoram 47
 Collins, John J. 49, 57, 67–70, 94, 100, 112, 115, 121–124, 126, 128, 133–134, 144, 157, 160, 168, 187, 199, 202, 222–223
 Coogan, Michael D. 143
 Cook, Edward M. 241
 Cook, Stephen L. 143
 Corley, Jeremy 109, 231
 Crawley, Richard 82
 Crenshaw, James L. 9, 65, 113, 187, 216
 Culler, Jonathan 69, 137, 232
 Cundall, Arthur E. 98
 Curnow, Trevor 47

 Dahood, Mitchell 187
 Dam, Raymond van 51
 Danby, Herbert 103, 229
 Davage, David W. 44
 Davies, Philip R. 150, 157, 199
 Davis, Ellen F. 20
 Day, John 47, 151, 202
 De Troyer, Kristin 10
 Déchaine, Rose-Marie 184
 Delitzsch, Friedrich 62, 143, 176
 Dell, Katharine J. 12, 44, 63, 72, 124, 126, 156, 178, 185, 219, 230
 Derausseau, Louis 241
 Derrida, Jacques 107
 Devine, Minos 176
 DeVries, Simon J. 164
 Di Palma, Gaetano 186, 242
 Dietrich, Jan 238
 Dietrich, Walter 154
 Díez Merino, Luis 241
 Dillmann, August 67
 Dimant, Deborah 21
 DiTommaso, Lorenzo 52
 Doering, Lutz 25
 Dor-Shav, Ethan 185
 Dörfel, Donata 169
 Dorival, Gilles 53
 Douglas, Jerome N. 70
 Drawnel, Henryk 89, 99
 Drescher, B. Elan 35
 Driver, Godfrey R. 243
 Driver, Samuel R. 199, 241
 Drower Ethel S. 190

 Duhm, Bernhard 154
 Dunham, Kyle C. 170

 Ebach, Ruth 136
 Eco, Umberto 15, 152
 Edwards, Mark J. 52–53
 Ego, Beate 21–22, 49, 223
 Eichhorn, Johann Gottfried 210
 Eichner, Hans 79
 Eichrodt, Walther 238
 Eidevall, Göran 209
 Eley, Geoffrey H. 82
 Elgvin, Torleif 69, 101, 115
 Eliade, Mircea 152, 165
 Eliot, Thomas S. 79, 130, 212
 Ellis, E. Earle 53
 Elster, Ernst 20
 Emerton, John A. 218
 Emonds, Joseph E. 184
 Erman, Adolf 218
 Estes, Daniel J. 12, 173–174
 Evelyn-White, Hugh G. 166
 Everson, A. Joseph 159
 Exum, J. Cheryl 44

 Falk, Daniel K. 53
 Farmer, Kathleen A. 113
 Farrell, Thomas 69
 Faulkner, Andrew T. 53
 Faure, Richard 153
 Feeney, Denis 152
 Feldman, Liane M. 234
 Fendler, Lynn 233, 238
 Finkelstein, Israel 216
 Fischer-Bovet, Christelle 161
 Fischer, Alexander A. 28–29, 71
 Fischer, Stefan 167
 Fishbane, Michael A. 105, 145, 166
 Fisher, Deborah A. 241
 Fletcher-Lewis, Crispin 121
 Floyd, Michael H. 135
 Foley, John 183
 Foster, John L. 168
 Foucault, Michel 44, 69, 145, 222, 227, 237
 Fowler, Robert 212
 Fox, Michael V. 9, 13, 21–22, 27, 47, 72, 76, 90, 114, 156–157, 169, 182–183, 186, 190, 218, 242, 256
 Fraade, Steven D. 145
 Frahm, Eckart 46
 Frampton, Travis L. 60
 Fredricks, Daniel C. 34
 Freedman, David N. 150, 165

- Fremantle, William H. 182
 Freuling, Georg 151, 243
 Frevel, Christian 99
 Frey, Jörg 127, 160
 Friesen, Steven J. 69
 Fröhlich, Ida 145
 Frydrych, Tomáš 12
 Fuhrmann, Justin M. 98
 Fürst, Alfons 52–53

 Galling, Kurt 72, 114
 Gammie, John G. 71, 105
 García Martínez, Florentino 116–117
 Garrett, Duane A. 46
 Geddes, William D. 216
 Geerlings, Wilhelm 53
 Genette, Gerard 48, 142, 207, 224, 232, 247
 Gericke, Jaco 105
 Gerlemann, Gillis 72
 Gerstenberger, Erhard S. 169
 Gertz, Jan Christian 151, 194
 Gese, Hartmut 141
 Gibson, John C. L. 128
 Gilbert, Maurice 72
 Gillmayr-Bucher, Susanne 221
 Ginsberg, Harold L. 176
 Ginsburg, Christian D. 114, 242
 Glasson, Thomas F. 188
 Glenn, Donald R. 186
 Goff, Matthew J. 71, 101, 103, 109–110, 112, 115–116, 118, 124, 175, 230, 236
 Golfin, Emmanuel 153
 Goodrich, Richard J. 181
 Gordis, Robert 13, 98, 170, 241
 Gore-Jones, Lydia 25
 Gorssen, Leo 114
 Goswell, Gregory 12
 Grabbe, Lester L. 230
 Graetz, Heinrich 162
 Grasso, Elsa 153
 Graziosi, Barbara 210
 Greenstein, Edward L. 63–64
 Greenwood, Kyle R. 199
 Greer, Rowan A. 68
 Gregory, Bradley C. 230
 Grelot, Pierre 188
 Gretler, Trix 72, 199, 204
 Grossman, Maxine L. 145
 Guillod-Reymont, Daphné 231
 Gunkel, Hermann 151, 202
 Gupta, Nijay K. 71
 Güthenke, Constanze 69
 Guyer, Jane I. 152

 Haak, Robert D. 154
 Hagedorn, Anselm C. 44
 Hahn, Ferdinand 127
 Halbwachs, Maurice 191
 Hall, Edith 169
 Hall, Jonathan 139
 Hall, Robert G. 69
 Hall, Stuart G. 43, 170, 229
 Hamerton-Kelly, Robert G. 143
 Hamidovic, David 128, 145
 Hanson, Paul D. 132
 Hardy, Edward R. 239
 Harrill, J. Albert 54
 Harrington SJ, Daniel J. 67, 101, 108, 115–116
 Hartog, François 152
 Hartog, P. Barry 123, 145
 Hausmann, Jutta 151
 Hawking, Stephen W. 153
 Hayman, A. Peter 231
 Heaton, Eric W. 199
 Hehn, Johannes 177
 Heinz, Marion 62
 Hellholm, David 67, 70
 Hempel, Charlotte 100, 145
 Hendel, Ronald S. 35, 37, 39–40, 143, 192, 208
 Hengel, Martin 69, 105, 188
 Henze, Matthias 52, 231
 Herder, Johann Gottfried von 59, 61–62
 Hermann, W. 154
 Hertzberg, Hans Wilhelm 241, 243
 Hess, Richard S. 148
 Hibbard, J. Todd 143
 Hieke, Thomas 148
 Himmelfarb, Martha 30
 Hirsch, Eric D. 107
 Hitzig, Ferdinand 21, 109
 Hogan, Karina M. 25
 Høgenhaven, Jesper 141
 Holladay, William L. 154
 Holmstedt, Robert D. 35, 172
 Honigman, Sylvie 209
 Hopf, Matthias R. 44
 Horne, Milton P. 12
 Hornkohl, Aaron D. 150
 Hossenfelder, Malte 47
 Huffman, Herbert B. 198
 Hultgren, Stephen 160
 Humbert, Paul 154
 Hunt, Lynn 82, 237
 Hurvitz, Avi 35
 Hyland, Ken 218

- Iliev, Ivan I. 55
 Isaksson, Bo 34
 Ivry, Alfred L. 76

 Jacobs-Hornig, B. 39
 Jacobsen, Howard 89, 114
 James, Kenneth 13, 76
 James, William 14
 Jameson, Fredric 152
 Janowski, Bernd 151
 Japhet, Sara 19, 162
 Jarick, John 11, 18, 34, 51, 53–54, 105,
 159–160, 171, 181, 184, 195, 229
 Jasper, F.N. 76
 Jastrow Jr., Morris 176, 244
 Jenni, Ernst 158, 163
 Jobes, Karen H. 21
 Johnson, Marshall D. 148
 Johnson, Sara R. 49, 223
 Jokiranta, Jutta 100, 145
 Jones, Robert E. 30
 Jong, Irene F. de 153
 Joüon, Paul 32

 Kaiser, Otto 71
 Karrer, Martin 141
 Kashow, Robert C. 231
 Kato, Kumiko 46
 Kautzsch, Emil 162
 Khan, Geoffrey 69
 Kirk, Geoffrey S. 215
 Kister, Menahem 25, 115, 124
 Klein, George L. 143
 Kline, Meredith G. 150
 Knaake, Joachim K. F. 132
 Knibb, Michael A. 143
 Koch, Klaus 72, 99, 121, 151, 183, 240–241
 Köhlmoos, Melanie 9, 11, 25–26, 89, 95, 209
 Kooij, Arie van der 213
 Körner, Christian 150
 Koselleck, Reinhart 152
 Koskenniemi, Erkki 53
 Kosmin, Paul J. 83, 152–153, 191, 201, 203,
 205, 235, 247, 254–255
 Kramer, Lloyd S. 82
 Kratz, Reinhard G. 10, 49, 53, 141, 208–209
 Krauß, Andrea 14, 233
 Kronholm, Tryggve 190
 Krüger, Thomas 9, 15–17, 19, 21, 29, 32, 70,
 78, 87, 90, 112, 151, 162–163, 189, 209,
 231
 Kugel, James L. 68, 100, 128, 198, 220
 Kulik, Alexander 56

 Kwon, JiSeong J. 25
 Kynes, Will 61, 63, 124, 126, 230, 251

 Laato, Antti 148
 Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe 68
 Lagarde, Paul de 94, 227
 Lambert, Wilfred G. 143, 151
 Lamberty-Zielinski, H. 194
 Lamparter, Helmut 241
 Lange, Armin 21, 71, 101, 110–112, 241
 Larsen, Marianne 237
 Lauha, Aarre 21, 105, 177, 241, 243–244
 Laurence, Richard 67
 Lauro, Elizabeth A. D. 52
 Lavoie, Jean-Jacques 171
 Lee, J.A.L. 39
 Lee, Ralph 69
 Lefkowitz, Mary R. 210, 215
 Lehne, Susanne 150
 Lepre, Cesare 241
 Lessing, Eckhard 238
 Leuenberger, Martin 49
 Levin, Christoph 208
 Levy Oscar 213
 Levy, Isidore 169
 Levy, Ludwig 170
 Lichtheim, Miriam 167–168
 Lieberman, Saul 69
 Lim, Timothy H. 145
 Lincoln, Bruce 69
 Lincoln, Lawrence R. 52
 Lindquist Pekka 53
 Loader, James A. 90, 170, 243
 Longman III, Tremper 44
 Loretz, Oswald 46, 169, 177, 243–244
 Lössl, Josef 53
 Lowth, Robert 91, 148
 Lücke, G. C. Friedrich 57–60, 66, 125
 Lux, Rüdiger 45, 103–104, 148, 151
 Lyons, John 184
 Lyons, Michael A. 10, 210
 Lyotard, Jean-François 140
 Lys, D. 72

 Macchi, Jean-Daniel 172
 Macdonald, Duncan B. 105
 MacDougall, Byron 51
 Mach, Michael 169
 Machiela, Daniel 123
 Machinist, Peter 76
 Macintosh, Andrew A. 209
 Macuch, Rudolf 190
 Maier, Daniel C. 158

- Malamat, Abraham 148
 Mandelbaum, Maurice 228
 Mann, Thomas 207
 Marböck, Johannes 187, 231
 Marksches, Christoph 53
 Marry, John D. 215
 Martens, Peter W. 52
 Mason, Steve 123, 125
 Mathias, Dietmar 72
 Mauchline, J. 234
 Mazzinghi, Luca 67, 72, 173–174, 186, 231
 McCabe, Robert V. 173
 McComiskey, Bruce 145
 McNeile, Alan H. 244
 Meerson, Olga 139
 Mendels, Doron 161
 Merezhkovsky, Dmitry S. 139
 Michel, Diethelm 9, 71, 114, 244
 Milik, Józef T. 66, 89, 115
 Millar, Suzanna R. 47
 Miller, David J.D. 180
 Miller, Douglas B. 126, 185
 Miller, Shem 145
 Milstein, Sara J. 20, 22
 Miltenova, Anissava 55
 Mitchell, Stephen 51
 Mizrahi, Noam 31
 Montgomery, James A. 72
 Mowinckel, Sigmund 159
 Moyer, Ian 153
 Muilenberg, James 11, 34, 72
 Müller, Hans-Peter 45
 Muraoka, Takamitsu 32
 Murphy, Roland E. 44, 124, 169, 176

 N'Shea, Omar S. 46
 Najman, Hindy 10, 25, 33, 45, 47–48, 53, 56, 61, 67–68, 77, 99, 107, 111, 122, 125, 129–130, 135, 140, 208, 210, 213–214, 217, 220, 222, 227, 253
 Nancy, Jean-Luc 68
 Nati, James 227
 Nel, Philip 46, 186
 Neuschäfer, Bernhard 52
 Newman, Judith H. 68, 129, 156, 222
 Newsom, Carol A. 57, 62, 69, 100, 121, 137–139, 145, 225, 245, 250
 Nichols, Francis W. 13
 Nickelsburg, George W.E. 30, 69, 133, 160
 Nietzsche, Friedrich 45, 139, 213
 Nihan, Christophe 44
 Nogalski, James D. 135, 159
 Nünlist, René 153

 O'Connor Michael 114
 O'Keefe, John J. 53
 O'Leary, Stephen D. 69
 Ockinga, Boyo 167
 Ogden, Graham S. 165, 244
 Oppenheim, A. Leo 165
 Oppenheimer, Benjamin 181
 Ossandón Widow, Juan Carlos 123, 125
 Otomo, Satoshi 94
 Otto, Eckart 98, 219

 Palm, August 105
 Paran, Meir 18
 Paz, Yakir 221
 Peirano, Irene 212
 Penchansky, David 124
 Perdue, Leo G. 70, 110
 Perrin, Bernadotte 56
 Perry, Theodore A. 9, 13, 97
 Petersen, David L. 143
 Peterson, Jesse M. 71
 Pfeiderer, Edmund 105
 Pioske, Daniel D. 192
 Plum, Karin F. 148
 Podechard, Emmanuel 176
 Polaski, Donald C. 143
 Pollmann, Karla 53
 Porten, Bezalel 190
 Portier-Young, Anatheia E. 30, 128, 133, 161, 257
 Portnoy, Stephen L. 143
 Preston, Theodore P. 250
 Preuss, Horst Dietrich 124
 Provan, Iain W. 170, 186, 242
 Puech, Emile 11, 34, 231

 Qimron, Elisha 38, 116, 174
 Quack, Joachim Friedrich 47

 Rad, Gerhard von 65–67, 91, 110–112, 141, 143, 149, 151, 160, 165, 216
 Rainey, A. F. 20
 Ramelli, Ilaria L. E. 52
 Ranke, Leopold von 81–82
 Ranston, Harry 105, 169
 Rasmusen, Eric 252
 Redditt, Paul L. 69, 132, 224
 Reed, Annette Y. 133, 151, 169
 Reichenbach, Gregor 70
 Reiner, Erica 178
 Reinhardt Tobias 135
 Reiterer, Friedrich V. 187
 Renan, Ernest 24

- Rendtorff, Rolf 221
 Reno, R. R. 53
 Repgen, Konrad 82
 Reventlow, Henning Graf 157
 Rey, Frédérique Michèle 69, 101, 109–110, 115–116
 Rezetko Robert 35
 Rhyder, Julia 192
 Richardson, N. J. 216
 Richter, David H. 139
 Ricœur, Paul 48, 152, 235
 Rigger, Hansjörg 224
 Roberts, Jimmy J. M. 187
 Rodríguez Ochoa, J. M. 72
 Rofé, Alexander 96–98
 Rogerson, John W. 60
 Rollston, Christopher A. 99
 Römer, Thomas 44
 Rosch, Eleanor H. 126
 Rosen, Nathan 246
 Rosen, Ralph M. 216
 Rosenmeyer, Patricia A. 215
 Rosenzweig, Franz 152
 Roth, Mitchell P. 198
 Rozanov, Vasily V. 139
 Rudman, Dominic 105, 110, 176, 231
 Rudolph, Kurt 68
 Rudolph, Wilhelm 135, 154

 Sailer, Susan S. 13
 Salters, Robert B. 19
 Samely, Alex 10, 211
 Samet, Nili 22, 24, 33, 40–42, 46, 76, 162, 164–165, 169, 173, 181, 190
 Sanders, James A. 213
 Särkiö, Pekka 216
 Sarna, Nahum 179, 221
 Sartre, Jean-Paul 183
 Saur, Markus 12, 48, 70, 76, 88, 104–105, 128, 185, 219
 Sawyer, John F. A. 186
 Scanlan, James P. 246
 Schäfer, Peter 169
 Schellenberg, Annette 10, 41, 63, 79, 113, 124
 Schiffman, Lawrence H. 145
 Schiffman, Zachary S. 152
 Schipper, Bernd U. 20, 44, 57, 109, 218
 Schironi, Francesca 211
 Schleiermacher, Friedrich D. E. 57–58, 61–62
 Schmid, Konrad 10, 12, 45, 47, 49, 53, 58, 60, 62, 103, 111, 122–123, 125, 150–151, 168, 196, 209, 224, 228, 238
 Schmid, Ulrich 140, 246
 Schmidt, Werner H. 150, 157
 Schnabel, Eckhard J. 25, 187
 Schniedewind, William M. 35
 Scholten, Tineka 184
 Schoors, Antoon 9, 11, 19, 24, 29, 31, 34, 36, 38, 41, 46, 71, 76, 90, 93, 97–98, 114–115, 142, 162–163, 165, 169, 186, 190, 242–244
 Schröter Jens 12, 122, 208
 Schultz, Richard 70–71
 Schüpphaus, J. 92
 Schwienhorst-Schönberger, Ludger 9, 21, 29, 105, 170, 173
 Scoralick, Ruth 109
 Scott, R. B. Y. 176
 Screnock John 172
 Seeligmann, Isac L. 136
 Segal, Benjamin J. 171
 Segal, Michael 154–155, 198–200
 Sellin, Ernst 132
 Seow, Choon-Leong 9, 34, 37–38, 46, 162, 169, 190, 194–195
 Seters, John van 166
 Seybold, K. 177–178, 180
 Sheppard, Gerald T. 124
 Shestov, Lev 139
 Shuckburgh, Evelyn S. 211
 Shupak, Nili 218
 Siegfried, Carl G. A. 10
 Sierszyn, Armin 60
 Silberman, Neil A. 216
 Simkins, Ronald A. 143
 Simon, Maurice 217
 Simon, Richard P. 60
 Simpson, William K. 167
 Sinclair, Cameron 97, 184
 Skehan, Patrick W. 109
 Skinner, John 179
 Skinner, Quentin 48, 75–77, 228
 Slusser, Michael 51
 Small, Ian 92, 258
 Smend, Rudolf 58
 Smith, Mark S. 99
 Sneed, Mark R. 63, 105, 124, 173, 183
 Sokoloff, Michael 190
 Sommer, Benjamin D. 99
 Spicq, Ceslas 56
 Spieckermann, Hermann 27
 Spiegel, Gabrielle M. 81
 Spronk, Klaas 187
 Stackert, Jeffrey 10, 53, 211
 Star, Christopher 69
 Starowieyski, Marek 229

- Steck, Odil Hannes 10, 80–81, 94, 128
 Stegemann, Hartmut 101
 Steinberg, Naomi 148
 Stern, Sacha 157
 Stollberg-Rilinger, Barbara 75
 Stone, Michael E. 121
 Strauss, David Friedrich 60
 Strazicich, John 143
 Striedl, Hans 49, 223
 Strobel, Albert 98
 Stroud, Ronald 82
 Strugnell, John 67, 101, 108, 116
 Stuckenbruck, Loren 158
 Suter, David 30
 Swanson, Dwight D. 150
 Sykes Jr., John D. 139
 Szondi, Peter 48
- Tal, Abraham 190
 Taylor, John R. 127
 Teeter, D. Andrew 10–12, 53, 208, 211, 230
 Thomas, Samuel I. 100, 115
 Tigchelaar, Eibert J. C. 108, 116–117, 132, 174
 Tilly, Michael 56
 Toews, John E. 82
 Tolstoy, Helen 139
 Tompkins, Phillip K. 14
 Tooman, William A. 10–12, 25, 187, 211
 Torjesen, Karen J. 52
 Tov, Emanuel 38, 212
 Treu, Max 215
 Tucker, Gene 209
 Tuplin, Christopher 39
 Tyler, Thomas 105
 Tzoref, Shani 100, 145, 200
- Ubigli, Liliana 71
 Uden, James 216
 Uehlinger, Christoph 46, 166
 Ulrich, Eugene 11, 213
 Utzschneider, Helmut 148
- VanderKam, James C. 196, 213
 Vayntrub, Jacqueline 126
 Veijola, Timo 187
 Verheij, Arian 45
 Vernant, Jean-Pierre 80
 Volten, Aksel 46
 Volynsky, Akim L. 139
 Vonach, Andreas 72
- Wacker, Marie-Theres 188
 Wallenstein, Frederik 191
 Waltke Bruce K. 114, 209
 Wassen, Cecilia 100
 Wasserman, Nathan 47
 Way, Thomas von der 167
 Weber, Otto von 215
 Weeks, Stuart 9–11, 20–22, 29, 34, 39, 41, 59–60, 63, 87–88, 90, 93–94, 114, 124, 162, 171, 176, 179–180, 182–184, 216, 219
 Weinfeld, Moshe 98
 Weiss, Meir 160
 Weissberg, Liliane 191
 West, Martin L. 211, 216
 Westermann, Antonius 216
 Whiston, William 210
 White, Hayden 82
 Whitley, Charles F. 105, 158, 162
 Whitmarsh, Timothy 69
 Whybray, R. Norman 118, 165, 175–176, 243
 Wilch, John R. 160
 Willi-Plein, Ina 135
 Williamson Jr., Robert 126
 Williamson, Hugh G. M. 123
 Wilson, Ian D. 192
 Wilson, Lindsay 162
 Wilson, Norman S. 113, 173
 Wilson, Robert R. 148
 Wimsatt, W. K. 79
 Witte, Markus 124, 154
 Wittgenstein, Ludwig 76, 126
 Wolf, Friedrich August 61, 210–211
 Wolff, Hans Walter 209
 Wolters, Al 132, 135
 Worthington, Martin 16
 Wright III, Benjamin G. 25, 126–127, 187
 Wright, David P. 198
 Wright, Jacob L. 192
 Wright, John S. 76
 Wyrick, Jed 18, 213
- Yarbro Collins, Adela 144
 Yardeni, Ada 190
 Young, Ian 35
- Zahn, Molly M. 10, 15–16, 53, 141
 Zapletal, Vincenz 241
 Zimmerli, Walther 31–32, 53, 155, 209, 241

Index of Subjects

- 4QInstruction 67, 100–101, 108–119,
125–126, 129, 156, 174, 231, 236, 254,
see also *Index of Sources*
- Akkadian 12, 16, 46, 165, 177–178, 190
- Alexander the Great 47
- Alexandria 52–53, 89, 132, 197
- Angels 54, 69, 86, 96–106, 117, 144, 160,
169, 182, 224, 252
- Antiochus IV. Epiphanes 202, 223
- Antisemitism 57–60
- Apocalyptic Thinking, see Apocalypticism
- Apocalypticism
– Jewish esp. 121–146
– Christian 52–58, 69, 127–129
- Aramaic 40, 66, 93–94, 99, 131, 162, 177,
190, 199–200
- Author 15, 43, 48, 69–71, 78–80, 106, 139,
141–142, 144, 207, 209, 222, 232, 246
- Author-function, see Author
- Authorisation 6, 20, 62, 79, 152, 207–225,
252
- Bakhtin, Mikhail 69, 80, 138–139, 245–246
- Barthes, Roland, see Author
- Benjamin, Walter, see Constellation
- Biblical Canon 56, 58, 67–68, 73, 81, 209,
213, 236
- Calendars 196–197, 202, 233–235
- Cambridge School, see History of Ideas
- Coherence 1, 10–16, 26–27, 31, 33–34, 117,
139, 153, 158, 185, 210–211, 217, 221–222,
235–236, 249–251
- Constellation 14, 47, 56, 68, 122, 130–146,
208, 221, 232–235, 248
- Critique 2, 30, 65, 74, 75–85, 88, 99, 102,
106, 122, 136, 142, 153–154, 212, 231,
237–239, 258
- Cyclicity 72, 162–169, 192, 227, 233
- Daniel, Book of 49, 54, 126, 203, 205, 223,
234, 251, 257, see also *Index of Sources*
- Dating, of Ecclesiastes
– Linguistic 3, 13, 34–40, 150, 208
– Literary-Critical 13, 17, 20–26
- Dead Sea Scrolls 11–12, 16, 37–38, 66–67,
81, 100–101, 109–111, 115–117, 136–137,
141–145, 154, 174, 200, 213, 235–237,
see also *Index of Sources*
- Death 51, 70, 142, 156–157, 167, 171, 181,
184–188, 189–195, 243–244
- Determinism 5, 65–66, 101, 105, 118–119,
137, 172, 175–176, 196–197, 205
- Diachrony 10, 16, 38–41, 209, 218
- Dialogism, see Bakhtin, Mikhail
- Discourse 10, 14, 20, 24–26, 30, 35, 47–48,
59, 67–69, 76–78, 82, 85, 112–116, 122,
129, 131, 137–146, 160, 208, 214–216,
220–222, 231–233, 238–239, 253–254
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor 138–139, 245–246
- Dreams 65, 85–96, 100, 103, 106, 135–137,
144, 199
- Egypt 27, 39, 45–47, 98, 161, 166–168, 177,
179, 209, 217–218
- Enoch, Book of 53, 67, 69, 126, 143, 151,
158, 160, 196, 220–221, 230, 234, 257,
see also *Index of Sources*
- Epilogue 18, 20–24, 26, 28, 30, 32, 114–115,
200
- Epistemology 1, 5, 7, 85, 88, 92, 94–95,
101–102, 108, 110, 113, 117–118, 142, 161,
172–176, 182, 184, 192, 201, 252, 254, 256
- Esotericism, see Hiddenness
- Ethiopic 67, 69, 99, 177
- Exemplarity 19, 44–45, 47–49, 53, 61, 79, 87,
92, 127–128, 131, 135, 139, 153–154, 156,
169, 191, 198–199, 203–204, 208, 215–222,
227, 246, 253, 256
- Experience 2, 14–15, 28–29, 31, 49, 59,
61–62, 65, 72–73, 85, 88, 92, 101, 103, 105,
110, 113, 117–118, 154, 157, 175–176,
182–183, 188, 195–197, 214–215, 218, 224,
240–243, 256–258
- Genealogy, see Generation
- Generation 5, 7, 26, 133, 147–152, 156–157,
163–168, 188, 191, 205

- Genre 5, 10, 19, 45, 48–49, 56–57, 63–64, 67–71, 107, 121–146, 154, 214–218, 221–222, 251–253
- Greek 38–42, 47, 56, 61, 76, 88, 98, 105, 107, 117, 127–129, 142, 153, 178, 180–181, 188, 208–215, 218, 220–222
- Gregory Thaumaturgus 51–55, 159–160, 229
- Hebel*, Leitmotif 1, 17, 20, 25, 29, 52, 86, 92, 117, 156, 175–176, 177–189, 191–192, 195, 204, 227, 240, 256, 254–258
- Hellenistic Period, Conceptions of Time in 82, 147–161, 191, 201, 203
- Hiddenness 24, 46, 85, 100, 102–103, 113–115, 118, 136–137, 142, 145, 167, 174, 200, 254
- History of Ideas 4–6, 42, 47–51, 53, 75–78, 81–83, 85, 105–106, 147, 161, 174–175, 205, 228
- Homer 45, 61, 166, 208–216, 220–222, 232, 253
- Idiolect 24, 33, 41, 76, 116, 164, 174
- Incoherence, see Coherence
- Intellectual History, see History of Ideas
- Intertextuality 12, 46, 50, 60–64, 105, 110, 122, 137, 142–143, 230–235
- Jerusalem 15, 20, 38, 43, 78, 94, 118, 133, 145, 224–225, 244
- Job, Book of 63, 117, 128, 138–139, 217, 246, see also *Index of Sources*
- Jubilees, Book of 67, 126, 196–198, 203, 205, 214, 220, 234, 257, see also *Index of Sources*
- Knowledge 1–2, 24, 69, 85, 89, 92, 96, 100–103, 113, 117–118, 134, 136–138, 140, 142, 145, 173, 175, 183, 189, 200, 227
- Linguistic Turn 4, 81–83, 216
- Longue duree* 78, 131, 191, 203, 238, 245
- Lücke, Friedrich 57–60, 125
- Masoretic Text 30, 37, 97, 114, 212
- Mesopotamia 22, 46–47, 148, 151, 166, 188, 198, 205, 209, 218
- Metacriticism 3, 5, 82, 251, 258
- Mortality, see Death
- New Cultural History 214, 216, 237–239
- Nietzsche, Friedrich 45, 213, 220
- Ontology 118, 142, 161–162, 182, 184, 187, 194, 197
- Persia 34–35, 38–40, 49, 69, 115, 125, 144, 202, 205
- Philosophy 24, 41, 45, 47, 56, 59–62, 76, 81, 105, 117, 153, 175, 181, 193
- Pluralism 6, 15, 55, 138–139, 142, 227–248
- Pluriformity 33, 48, 67, 128, 141, 214, 227–231, 248
- Prophecy, End of 111, 122, 125
- Prototype Theory 5, 122, 126–130, 138, 143–144
- Proverbs, Book of 47, 101, 111, 117, 128, 156, 183, 190, 215, 217, 220–221, 243, see also *Index of Sources*
- Qumran, see Dead Sea Scrolls
- Reception History of Ecclesiastes 51, 55, 114, 159–160, 181, 195, 217, 229–230, 241
- Reciprocity 33, 35, 48, 59, 61, 92, 106, 161, 208, 237
- Referentiality 2, 5, 7, 12, 44, 49–50, 55, 127, 131–132, 135, 175, 196, 198, 203, 234, 252, 255–257
- Rewriting 10, 15–17, 51–53, 141
- Rhetoric 1, 9, 11, 18, 27, 43–44, 48, 50, 69, 78–79, 87–88, 90, 106, 107–119, 131, 135, 139, 154–156, 170, 173, 195, 218, 221–222, 239, 253–254
- Secrecy, see Hiddenness
- Seleucid Empire 82, 152–153, 161, 196, 200, 223, 254–257
- Seleucus I. Nicator, see Seleucid Empire
- Semantic Availability 41
- Solomon
- Authorship 19–20, 34, 43–44, 216–220
- History 215–222
- Superscriptions 18–20, 26, 43–44, 56, 209, 215–216, 221
- Synchrony 16, 50
- Teleology 3, 5, 58, 77, 119, 165, 258
- Traditionsgeschichte* 4, 47, 80–81, 83
- Transience, see *Hebel*
- Vitality 2–3, 65, 74, 78, 80, 111, 128, 130, 146, 213–214, 220, 228, 230, 235–237, 249, 251, 258
- Wolf, Friedrich August 61, 210–211
- Zoroastrianism, see Persia