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Abstract of Paper

"Nothing is Good in Them:" The Prestigious Voice in Eccl 3:9-22

This paper analyzes the construction of Qohelet's character through the speaker's prestigious voice in Ecclesiastes 3:9-22. The goal of my dissertation is to seek out the development of the Qohelet character, and therefore, narrative criticism plays a crucial role in deciphering the first-person autobiographical voice in this book. In this section, the speaker i.e. Qohelet's evaluating voice addresses humankind's labor and God's judgement with emphasis on the timeliness of the world. Eccl 3:9-22 is a crucial place in the book where the speaker consistently addresses humankind using the third-person indicator (such as בם in v. 12) while emphasizing his personal first-person seeing (ראיתי) and knowing (ידעתי) of God's judgment. This paper examines this literary strategy in order to bring light to how Qohelet's speech distinguishes him as a didactic authority mediating and spectating between God and humankind with his divine yet empirical knowledge of time and eternity. It is as if he is a superior being than the common people. At the same time, Qohelet's usage of the "I"-Heart formula to ponder upon himself about God's judgment (vv. 17-18) and the rhetorical questioning[1] about the uncertainty of the spirit's final destination (v. 21) seems to bring him back to the level of humans. Therefore, using the textual analyses of these terms and the narrative close reading of this passage, I seek to locate where the didactic voice of Qohelet is placed in relation to humankind and to God. The findings may suggest that the literary strategies in Eccl 3:9-22 allow the speaker to establish himself above all living beings with privileged knowledge while remaining personal, flawed, and "human" at the same time.

- Keywords: Qohelet, first-person speech, mediator, empirical knowledge, prestigious voice

[1] Using the interrogative מִי יוֹדֵעַ ("who knows…") and הֵ ("if, whether…").