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**SCOTT B. NOEGEL, “WORD PLAY” IN QOHELETH**
“WORD PLAY” IN QOHELETH

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Qoh 12:10

Despite centuries of scholarly awareness of “word play” as a literary phenomenon in ancient Near Eastern literature, the topic remains under-researched. While for the most part, scholars have been content to note examples of “word play” or punning in various Near Eastern texts, typically in footnotes, few full-scale studies on “word play” exist. In fact, we currently lack a comprehensive and consistent taxonomy for the various devices usually categorized as “word play” and their proposed functions. This is especially the case with regard to the Hebrew Bible, for which no exhaustive examinations of any one “word


2 Compare, e.g., the very different taxonomies and approaches presented in
play” device exist. Indeed, not a single biblical book has ever been mined for all of its various types of “word play.” This brief contribution, which is part of a more comprehensive project, intends to help in filling this gap by offering analyses of the various types of “word play” found in the book of Qoheleth, a book largely neglected in terms of research on punning.

However, before providing said analysis, I note that I have placed the term “word play” in quotation marks in order to draw attention to its problematic nature. Indeed, neither the term “word” nor “play” is particularly useful when discussing the phenomenon of punning in ancient texts. This is because in Near Eastern languages, the word does not constitute the basic linguistic unit upon which puns are based. In Akkadian and Egyptian, for example, it is the sign that constitutes the fundamental element. In Hebrew and other consonantal scripts, it is arguably the syllable that serves as the basic linguistic unit for punning. Moreover, there is little that is “playful” about punning in the ancient Near East. On the contrary, it appears to have been a rhetorically serious device of some performative power. Nevertheless, the term...
“word play” is so pervasive in the literature, that it is often heuristically useful to use it. But I opt throughout to use the term “punning,” which is general enough to encapsulate all the devices collected in this study.7

With this in mind, I proceed to the data. I have divided the study into six sections, according to the six types of punning found in Qoheleth. The first focuses on alliteration, or the repeated use of consonants.8 This is the largest of the six categories. The second section collects examples of assonance, the repeated use of vowel patterns. Though both alliteration and assonance both fit generally under the category of paronomasia or “similarities of sound,” it is important to keep in mind that all examples of paronomasia are also effective on a visual register. The third section focuses on illustrations of polysemy; cases in which words bear more than one meaning in a single context. The fourth section, which is related to polysemy, details cases of antanaclasis. Antanaclasis occurs when a word is used multiple times, but with different meanings. In the fifth section, I provide an example of allusive punning, i.e., the use of words or forms that imply by way of similarity of sound another word that does not occur in the text.9 The sixth section is devoted to instances of numerical punning. After providing the data for each of these devices, I offer some general observations on punning in Qoheleth.

1. ALL ITERATION

Qoh 1:4–6

4 צוֹר חַלְךָ וְזוֹר גֶּרֶם לְעִילָם עַמָּה
5 צְוָהָה וְשָּׁמַעְתָּ וְאָמַרְתָּ שָׁאָמְרָה וְדִיוֹת שֶׁבֶגֶר וּמַע
6 חַלְך לְאִלִּיָּו וְיָשָׁב אִלִּיָּו מִסְיָבֳּ בֶּבֶס חַלְך לְעִילָם
7 לְעִילָם עָבְרָהָה שֶׁבֶגֶר

8 Like Casanowicz and others since him, I do not consider the repetition of the same root, even if found in a different form, to constitute alliteration. Thus, while a line like נְנִי חַלְךָ אָמְרָה כַּן הָלָּלָל נְנִי חַלְךָ נְנִי חַלְךָ in 1:2 may have an overall alliterative effect by repeating the root נְנִי, it lies outside this study (though some alliteration perhaps obtains in the consonants נ and כ which appear in both נְנִי חַלְךָ and נְנִי חַלְךָ חַלְךָ). Similarly, I leave out instances of the so-called cognate accusative construction, e.g., דָּרָר כָּרָר in Qoh 5:3.
9 On this form of punning see the many examples found in Moshe Garsiel, Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Name Derivations and Puns (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1991).
This passage provides an excellent instance of alliteration of the consonants ד and ס, which we hear twice in v. 4 in "generation," and again in ספ "south" in v. 6. In addition, the use of the verb הֵדָל in v. 6 creates the anticipation that הֵדָל will appear, as it did twice in v. 4, but instead the poet uses the alliterative word יָדוֹם. Thus, the repetition of הֵדָל in v. 4 and the use of יָדוֹמ in vv. 4 and 6 permit the alliteration to be perceived over the stretch of an intervening line. Also, the consonants ש and מ in the repeated word שֵׁמֶש in v. 5 echo in the word שֵׁם at the end of the verse.

Qoh 2:2

לְשֵׁתָה מָכְרָה מַכְרָה מַכְרָה מַכְרָה

Alliteration is achieved in this verse by repeating the consonants ש and מ in the words לְשֵׁתָה and מַכְרָה. The alliteration serves to strengthen the relationship between "laughter" and "merriment," underscored also by their parallelism. Also alliterative is the consonant מ, which appears four times in this brief line.

Qoh 3:3

שֶׁה לֶהוֹר וַנְתֵל לֶהוֹר

In this line it is the consonants מ and ר that appear in the words לֶהוֹר and לֶהוֹר. The repeated use of ל to mark the infinitive and the consonant ר in לֶהוֹר add to the alliterative effect. The alliteration here helps to connect the chain of famous merisms and lends cohesiveness to them.

While alliteration is more effective when the consonants that alliterate are in close proximity, such devices help fill the gap. Moreover, I would argue that the peoples of the ancient Near East generally were more attuned to such devices, given their common practice of reading texts aloud. If we consider also the importance placed on the memorization of text, especially among the erudite elite, then we may assume that some visual puns also functioned even when not in close proximity. I develop this argument more thoroughly, and the evidence in support of it, in my forthcoming monograph "Word Play" in Ancient Near Eastern Texts.
This passage repeatedly employs the consonants ב, ה, and פ. See the two-fold use of the root לְרָוָה in v. 5, the use of אַלְּרָוָה in v. 5, and the word בְּהַבָּשֶׁה in v. 6. Bolstering this example is the fact that, unlike the other merismic pairs in this list, אַלְּרָוָה does not have an antonymic root. Instead, it is negated by the alliterative phrase אַלְּרָוָה מַטָּבֶּךָ. As in the previous example, here alliteration binds the sequential merisms and strengthens the cohesiveness of the list.

Qoh 3:11

Here Qoheleth offers alliteration between the consonants ב, ה, and פ in the words בְּהַבָּשֶׁה and בְּהַבָּשֶׁה, which echoes just the ב and the פ. The device serves to draw into contrast the concept of eternity (בְּהַבָּשֶׁה) that God has put in the human mind (בְּהַבָּשֶׁה) with humankind’s inability (בְּהַבָּשֶׁה) to fathom it truly. 

Qoh 3:18

Similarly, Qoh 3:18 echoes the consonants in the word בְּהַבָּשֶׁה by employing the words בְּהַבָּשֶׁה, which uses the closeness in sounds between the liquids ב and ה, and מ, which resounds both the ב and ה. Here the alliteration connects the matter (בְּהַבָּשֶׁה) of humankind to which Qoheleth has set his mind (בְּהַבָּשֶׁה), and his pondering that God has established it to test them (בְּהַבָּשֶׁה). In addition, the words בְּהַבָּשֶׁה provide two illustrations of epanastrophe, a
subclass of alliteration in which the final syllable of one word is repeated in the next word.\textsuperscript{11}

Qoh 4:6

The alliteration of the consonants \( ח, ל, \) and \( נ \) in the uncommon expression \( ח נ ח נ \) helps to emphasize the contrast between the small handful of ease and the two fistfuls of toil. The contrast is supported by additional alliteration of the \( ל \) and \( נ \) in the root מְלֵא, which appears twice, and the word מְלֵא.

Qoh 4:13

Here again Qoheleth uses alliteration, specially of the consonants \( ל, נ, \) to strengthen a contrast, this time between a poor wise youth (מְלֵא חָכָם) and an old, but foolish king (מְלֵא חָסִיל).\textsuperscript{12}

Qoh 4:14–15

In this passage, the poet alliterates the consonants \( ל, נ, \) and \( ב \) in the words מְלֵא, בְּמַלְכָּה, and the rare piel participial form בָּמַלְכָּה. Qoheleth has set up a motif of reversal in which one born without status, and presumably unfit for rule, comes to rule a large body of apparently willing followers. The alliteration underscores this reversal by drawing into comparison the institution of kingship (בָּמַלְכָּה) and those who follow (בָּמַלְכָּה).


\textsuperscript{12} The contrast is bolstered also by a partial assonance between the segholates \( ל \) and \( ב \).
Qoh 5:7

This verse contains two words in which the final ה is pronounced: הֶבַח and הֶבַח, the latter of which appears three times. The rarity of such words in biblical Hebrew suggests that the usage was deliberately chosen for reasons of alliteration. While I can see no immediate reason for the alliteration other than poetic choice, perhaps the repeatedly pronounced ה helped to add emphasis to the statement.

Qoh 5:9

In this verse Qoheleth alliterates the consonants ה and ב in the word הֶבַח, which appears twice, and in the words הֶבַח and הֶבַח. The consonant ב resounds also in הֶבַח. The alliteration serves to connect the love of wealth with futility (i.e., הֶבַח).

Qoh 6:6

Note in this passage the repeated use of the ש and ל in the words פָּרָךְ and לֵא שָׁמַיִם וְסָפִּיקוּ, and in the phrase לְאִשָּׁה לְאֵל. The use of the liquids ש and ל also may be considered alliterative. The repeated use of these consonants helps to place reiterated emphasis on the hyperbolic פָּרָךְ, which is contrasted ultimately with the same פָּרָךְ place all go upon death. As such the verse also contains an example numerical punning (more on this below).

Qoh 7:1

Note the repeated use of the ש and מ in the words פָּרָךְ and מָשְׁמַךְ, and in the phrase מָשְׁמַךְ וּמָשָׁמָךְ. The use of the liquids מ and ש also may be considered alliterative. The repeated use of these consonants helps to place reiterated emphasis on the hyperbolic פָּרָךְ, which is contrasted ultimately with the same פָּרָךְ place all go upon death. As such the verse also contains an example numerical punning (more on this below).
Alliteration occurs here between the word לשון and שעם, as noted already by Casanowicz. Here the device underscores the contrast that the poet has established between the value of a good name and the value of fine oil. A similar alliteration appears in Song 1:3:

Qoh 7:4

לְבָלָה הָכָּתוֹב בַּבּוֹת אֶלֶּבֶּל כַּסְּרִילָה בַּבּוֹת שָׁמַחְתָּה

Qoh 7:5–6

5 וּלְבָלָּה לִשְׁמֹעַ חָמֵר הָכָּתוֹב מַאֵישׁ שָׁמַע שִׁיר כַּסְּרִילָה
   6 וּכְרֵי כַּסְרִיָּה חָתֹת חָסִיר כְּשַׁחְק כַּסְּרִילָה
   וּנְפִּרְהָה הָכָּתוֹב

As also noted by Casanowicz, this passage repeats the consonants ש and ר, in the words עַשְׁרִי וּעַשְׁרִי. The consonant ש is also repeated in the words כַּסְּרִיָּה and כַּסְּרִיָּה. The liquids ר and ל alliterate in the words עַשְׁרִי וּעַשְׁרִי, on the one hand, and the words כַּסְּרִיָּה and כַּסְּרִיָּה, on the other. The word שָׁמַע also alliterates with כַּסְּרִיָּה, and possibly with כַּסְּרִיָּה. In addition, the words כַּסְּרִיָּה and כַּסְּרִיָּה also illustrate antanaclasis (see below). According to Jacob Klein and Michael Fox, the alliterative effect is onomatopoeic, providing the crackling sounds that passage’s image evokes.

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15 Casanowicz, “Paronomasia in the Old Testament,” 128. Also observed by R. B. Y. Scott, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes (AB 18; New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 235, who includes the word שִׁיר. If we are to include שָׁמַע, however, because of the ש, then we also should include שָׁמַע, which appears twice, and שִׁיר.
Qoh 7:8–9

which appears three times in this short verse, and demonstrate again Qoheleth’s interest in alliteration. Both words employ the consonant ר. In addition, the consonants ר and ר in the word רר are anticipated by רר. Moreover, the words רר and רר also demonstrate assonance, specifically rhyme (see below). The use of alliteration again emphasizes the difference between patience and pride, the latter of which is connected with fools. Additional alliteration is achieved in v. 9 between the repeated consonants כ and כ in the words ככ and ככ. The sound effect connects angry behavior with fools (ככ).

Qoh 7:14

Here the expression ככ serves to alliterate the כ. Though the כ and כ cannot be considered alliterative, the close juxtaposition of the two in words bookended by identical consonants achieves an alliterative effect. As we have seen, alliteration tends to emphasize or establish contrast. Here again the poet has contrasted good times with bad times in life. His use of alliteration here serves to emphasize the importance of being circumspect (ככ) when times are bad (ככ).

Qoh 8:8

This passage reverberates three consonants (ר, כ, and ר) in the words ככ, ככ, and ככ, two of which reverberate also in the word ככ. Additional alliteration obtains by way of the consonants כ and כ in the words ככ, ככ, ככ, and by way of the consonants כ and כ in the words ככ, ככ, ככ, ככ. The contrastive purpose of alliteration is again clear. This time the poet contrasts the lack of control (ככ) that one has over determining one’s future, and the absolute control that wickedness has, allowing none to escape (ככ), in a way similar to not receiving a discharge (ככ) during wartime (ככ).
Qoh 8:12–13

This passage alliterates the consonants ר, נ, and נ in the hiphil form of the roots רד and the root רד, the first of which appears twice, and the latter three times. The alliteration allows Qoheleth to bring into sharp relief the acts of evil doers that may appear to prolong punishment and the long lives of those who fear God.

Qoh 9:5

Note in this line the alliteration between the consonants ב and ר (and possibly the ש and ל) in words שכר and שכר. The consonant ב also reverberates twice in the phrase לשתה in the same stich. Observe also how the word ידוע, used twice in this line, resounds in the preposition ידוע in the expression ידוע. As Johannes Hempel long ago noted, the “wortspiel” here serves to contrast “...die Toten wissen gar nichts, haben keinen Dank (akar), denn ihrer denkt (zakar) keiner!” Indeed, by linking שכר and שכר via sound, and by preceding these words with the expression ידוע, Qoheleth allows his audience to perceive a contrast between the lack of any knowledge or reward among the dead and the forgotten knowledge of them among the living.

17 Suggested first by Casanowicz, “Paronomasia in the Old Testament,” 157, and n. 144, who noted that the poet has opted to use instead of מן, as elsewhere in Qoheleth, for the sake of paronomasia.

In this verse, the poet repeats the consonants ְו, ַ, and ִ in the words הַכְּפַּיָּה, הַכְּפָּה, and הַכְּפַּיָּה. The aim of the alliteration here again appears to be to create a comparison and contrast, in this case between the warrior’s ability to achieve victory in battle (יקְהָה) and the ability of the wise (יִּכְּפָּה) to obtain food (יִּכְּפָּה). Qoheleth then subverts his own comparison by concluding that רֶקֶד אֵאֵרְכֵלֶל.

In this line, Qoheleth twice repeats the consonant ַ in a way that reverberates the onomatopoeic word וַשָּׁלֶל. The alliteration is perhaps strengthened by the consonant ֵ in וַתָּפֶה and ֵקְּפַּי, which is also a bilabial.

A close examination of this pericope reveals an astonishing abundance of sibilants—twenty-two in all (sixteen ֶחָס, five ִה, and one ֵש). In addition, the word ֶכֶל alliterates in the passage the

19 For sibilants as a category of alliteration, see already Casanowicz, “Paronomasia in the Old Testament,” 28–29, and W. G. E. Watson, Classical...
with the words שֵׁית in one direction, and שֶׁית, in another. One wonders whether the many words containing sibilants were chosen in order to mimic the sound of the snake mentioned in vv. 8 and 11. In any event, the alliteration between the words שֶׁית, שֹׁית, שֶׁית underscores the irony of a snake charmer being bitten before having the chance to charm the snake.

The pericope is a veritable tapestry of alliteration. Note also the alliteration between שֶׁית in 10:8 and רַק in 10:9; the repeated מ and ר in 10:6 and סֵיה in 10:8; מ and ש in 10:9, and the ב and ה in 11 בָּרָח and נְבָר in 10:10. The device here appears to have been used to strengthen the cohesiveness of the occurrences listed.

Qoh 10:11–12

אֲמַרְיִישַׁל הַנַּהֲשָׁשׁ בַּלָּאַרֲלוֹתָשׁ אָזְתּ הַר חֶלְלָת שֶׁית

A brief demonstration of anagramic alliteration occurs in these two verses between the words לֹעַמ and עָלָמ. In addition, two of the consonants in these words (ב and ה) appear also in בָּלָה in v. 11. The alliteration allows Qoheleth to bring into contrast the irony of a snake charmer being bitten before being charmed and the fool’s lips which likewise have a destructive result.

Qoh 10:18

בִּשְׁפַלְתּוֹ וּכְנַשְׁרָה בְּשַׁפַלְתּוֹ צִדּוֹ קֶלֶף קֶהְתּ

Here we find alliteration between the words קֶלֶף. Note how they reverberate the consonants ד, מ, and ל.

Qoh 10:20

כָּמַכֵּא מַלָּךְ עַלְּמָלָךְ וּבְקַדְרִי מֶשְׁכַּבְת עַלְּמָלָךְ

Note here the frequent appearance of the consonants ו and ל in the verb לֹעַמ, which appears twice, and the word לֹעַמ. The ו and ל also alliterate with the ב and ל in the words בָּלָה and בָּלָה. The ל also


20 For a similarly alliterative use of these words see Prov 19:28 (with הבולע and בָּלָה) and 23:2 (with the hapax legomenon בָּלָה and הבולע).
resounds in the word קבוק. According to Graham Ogden, the words also echo קבוק in 10:11 cited above.²¹ Again the alliteration provides contrast by connecting one’s cursing of another with its possible consequence.

Qoh 11:1

שלא היה קבוק כי ערב ערב קבוק mamanok

Another example of alliteration appears in this verse in the first two words שלוחה תלוקח שלא, which repeat the consonants ש and ל in the same sequence. This particular form of alliteration is again a form of epanastrophe (see above). There is additional alliteration between the words קבוק and קבוק. The latter encourages the reader to connect action and consequence.

Qoh 12:3

כֶּכֶלֶלֶה חָסְרְנוּ בְּכָלָה חָסְרְנוּ לְאָרָה בְּאֶרֶבּות

Particularly striking here is the alliteration of the consonant ש three times in the first stich. The deliberateness of the alliteration is further suggested by the fact that this is the only place in biblical Hebrew where the root בֵּשָׁל occurs.²² Perhaps this alliteration aimed to mimic onomatopoeically the sound of grinding. If so, it is noteworthy that the consonant is not repeated again until the sound of the mill (קהול המוכתר) is said to grow dim in the next verse (12:4). Additional alliteration (and partial assonance) occurs in the words בְּאֶרֶבּות.

Qoh 12:6

דו אָשֶׁר לָא רָיִךְ רְחֵם יָבֵל קְפַסּוֹן וּחָרָי קְפַסּוֹן

Alliteration obtains here by way of the repeated use of the consonants י and ל in the words יָבֵל and יָבֵל, the consonants ר and ל in the words רְחֵם and רְחֵם (from רוח, see below under allusive punning) and תְּחִלַּה (niphal of תִּחַל), and the consonants ב and ר in תַּשְׁבָּר and תַּשְׁבָּר.²³ The

²² Though it appears in biblical Aramaic (e.g., Ezra 4:21, etc.).
²³ The ש and ב in תַּשְׁבָּר also resound in the verb יָבֵל, which occurs twice in the next verse.
alliteration lends cohesiveness to the line and abets the polysemy contained therein (see below).

Qoh 12:11

Here I note the alliteration between the words בביור and כדרות, which are essentially anagrams of each other.24 The alliteration brings the two words into comparison, thus underscoring the power of the simile.

2. ASSONANCE25

Qoh 7:8–9

The words והז and יז provide one of the clearest examples of assonance in the Bible. Moreover, since both words occur at the end of their respective stichs they also demonstrate a rare use of rhyming.

Qoh 10:11

I have discussed this line above with regard to its alliteration, but as Ogden also has observed, assonance occurs between the words בשמ and לַהֵש.26

Qoh 10:18


25 As with alliteration, I do not include here the repetition of similar grammatical forms. Thus the list of merisms in Qoh 3:2–8, which makes repeated use of infinitival forms, does not appear in this study. For other examples of assonance in the Hebrew Bible, see Watson, Classical Hebrew Poetry, pp. 222–225.

26 Ogden, Qoheleth, p. 171.
Assonance here occurs between the dual forms בְּנָשָׁלָתָם and בְּנָשָׁלִיתָם, and also with בְּנָשָׁלָתָם. Scholars have had difficulty understanding the form of בְּנָשָׁלָתָם, but regardless whether one understands it as a dual of intensity or as a metaphor for the hands (i.e., “the two lazy ones”), it here serves the poet’s need for assonance.

3. Polysemy

Qoh 1:7–8

As noted by Fox, the use of בְּנָשָׁלִיתָם in v. 8 is ambiguous. It can mean “things” or “words.” Not noted by Fox, however, is the fact that as such, the passage constitutes an example of Janus Parallelism, a device in which a word points back to the previous stich in one of its meanings, and ahead to the following stich, in another of its meanings. In this case, when read as “things,” בְּנָשָׁלִיתָם points back to the natural phenomena described in the previous verses that weary Qoheleth. But as “words,” בְּנָשָׁלִיתָם looks ahead to the weariness of the other human senses (i.e., seeing, hearing) in v. 8.

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27 The various approaches to this word are summarized by A Schoors, The Preacher Sought Pleasing Words: A Study of the Language of Qoheleth (Leuven: Department Oriëntalistiek/Peeters, 1992), pp. 70–72. Compare similarly the form נֶפֶשׁ תָּוָה in 10:12 instead of the expected dual form. Perhaps it was chosen to anticipate the two feminine abstract forms in the following line.

28 Fox, JPS Torah Commentary: Ecclesiastes, p. 6.

29 The list of Janus parallels continues to grow. See Scott B. Noegel, Janus Parallelism in the Book of Job (JSOTS, 223; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), and the online bibliography cited above for publications on the subject.

30 So Rashbam who translates נֶפֶשׁ תָּוָה in 10:12 as נֶפֶשׁ תָּוָה. See Japhet and Salters, The Commentary of R. Samuel ben Meir Rashbam on Qoheleth, p. 95.
Qoh 1:13–14

The polysemy in this passage occurs in the expression לְעָנָן בַּעֲצֵה שָׁלוֹם which may be translated either as “to busy him with it” or “to afflict him with it.”

The device is anticipated by the phrase לְעָנָן בַּעֲצֵה שָׁלוֹם which could mean a “wicked or harmful task or business.” The expression לְעָנָן בַּעֲצֵה שָׁלוֹם appears again in Qoh 3:10, where again its meaning may be ambiguous, but there לְעָנָן appears without the adjective שָׁלוֹם.

Qoh 2:25–26

Here the verb שָׁלוֹם in v. 25 is ambiguous, meaning “feel pain” or “feel pleasure.” As such it allows Qoheleth to encapsulate and anticipate the two men mentioned in v. 26, i.e., the one who pleases God and enjoys himself, and the other who displeases God and suffers loss in the end. With one breath he rhetorically asks “For who eats and feels pain/pleasure other than me?” and thus captures the futility of merriment.

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31 Fox, *JPS Torah Commentary: Ecclesiastes*, p. 9, notes that “both connotations may come into play here.”

32 Thus Fox, *JPS Torah Commentary: Ecclesiastes*, pp. 22–23.

33 It also can mean “hurry, excite” (e.g., Job 20:2), and this is how Ibn Ezra understood it, but I do not see how this meaning is operative here unless it refers to the rapid gathering of personal wealth. On the various translations of this word see Fox, *JPS Torah Commentary: Ecclesiastes*, p. 19.

34 Perhaps this verb was selected for its aid in creating partial alliteration with the late idiom שָׁלוֹם מַכָּל.
Qoh 3:14

This passage contains polysemy in the words נָתַן, which one can read either as "(mankind) will fear him" (from the root רָדָה, and as implied by the metheg) or as "see him" (from the root בֶּאֶר), in the sense of "observe him, learn from" (e.g., the idiom in Judg 7:17 with מַפְּלָג), or perhaps in the sense of "choose him" (e.g., 2 Kgs 10:3 also with מַפְּלָג).

Qoh 4:3–8

Although he does not elaborate, Fox notes that the expression מַפְּלָג in v. 5 (but also v. 4) is "rich in the potential for wordplays and secondary connotations."36 This is because the orthography of the word מַפְּלָג, especially in the consonantal text, permits us to derive it from several Proto-Semitic roots: מַפְּלָג "pursue, shepherd" (PS r y¹), מַפְּלָג "associate with, be friends or companions with" (PS r y²). מַפְּלָג "desire, longing" (PS rdy), מַפְּלָג "break, destroy" (PS rdd), or מַפְּלָג "be

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35 The polysemy is made possible by the defective spelling of יָד for the expected יָד. See similarly יָד in 1 Sam 17:11. A similar pun may be at work in Qoh 12:5.
bad, evil” (Ps r ).37 In addition, this passage exploits the double meaning of קָרָע as “wind” and “spirit.” The doubly polysemous phrase here constitutes a Janus parallel, but one of the most elaborate examples of it in the Bible. In this instance, the expression קָרָעַת קָרָע in v. 4, when understood as “wickedness of spirit,” points back to קָרָע אֶשֶר נִנְבָּשׁ תַּהֲלֵת “every evil under the sun” in v. 3. But when understood as “befriending the wind” or as “longing for the wind” it points ahead to קָרָע אֶשֶר נִנְבָּשׁ תַּהֲלֵת “mankind’s envy of his friend” in v. 5. However, when the expression קָרָע appears again in v. 4 it exploits the other meanings inherent in these words to form another Janus parallel. This time, when read as “destruction of spirit,” the same expression points back to אֶשֶׂר אַבָּדֶקֶשׁ “eats his own flesh” in v. 5, an idiom for destruction (see, e.g., Ps 27:2, Mic 3:3, Isa 49:26), and when read as “pursuit of wind,” it points ahead to בַּל “vanity, breath” in v. 7.38 Similar polysemy may be at work wherever the expression appears in Qoheleth (e.g., 1:14).

Qoh 5:8–9

The case of uni-directional polysemy in this passage involves the word קָרָע, which can be rendered either as “agricultural produce” (e.g., Exod 23:10) or as “revenue” (e.g., Isa 23:3). In its former meaning קָרָע נִנְבָּשׁ points back to the words קָרָע לִשֵּׁדֶד and קָרָע אֶשֶׂר נִנְבָּשׁ, and in its latter meaning, back to קָרָע הַבַּל אֶשֶׂר נִנְבָּשׁ קִסֵּק.

Qoh 8:8

As in Qoh 4:6, here again Qoheleth employs the word קָרָע for its dual meaning of “wind” and “spirit.”39 Upon reading the first stich in this verse, readers are encouraged to think that he is contemplating the


38 The words are a pair in Isa 57:13: אֶשֶׂר אַבָּדֶקֶשׁ וּשְׁאָרָיו קִשֵּׁדֶדֶד “The wind will carry all of them off, a mere breath will blow them away.”

futility of life by likening it to controlling the wind. However, when one reads the second stich, the mention of רוח ביוֹת suggests that indeed meant “spirit.”

Qoh 12:2

ותר אָדָדְרוֹא בֵּית בָּהֲרָתִיך
du אֵאַשֶּׁרִי בֵּן שַׁרְקֵה
זָהָה עַמֶּנֶּה אָשֶּׁר אָסֶּר אֵאָיִל בֵּית תַּמִּין

As has long been recognized, the word בְּדַרְקִי in v. 1 suggests several meanings.40 Two in particular are possible: “your creator” (from בַּר) and, with Fox,41 “your vigor, health” (from a homophonous root בַּר). Both make sense in the passage, and both point back to the end of the last chapter where Qoheleth admonishes his audience to enjoy life in your youth because God will call one to account (11:9).

Qoh 12:6–7

דֶּנ אָשֶּׁרִי לַאֲדָדְרוֹא יִרְכַּנְיָה הַכָּסָּח זַרְקֵי הָלָּה הַקָּב
וּתְשָׁבְּרֵכְיָו כְּעַל הַרְמָהוֹת הַזְּרֵי הַכָּלָל אֶל הָאוֹר
יָרְשֶׁבְּכְּסָר חִלְּכָאֵיָא בַּשָּׁחַר
וּזֶרָחְזָאֵי אֶל הָאָסֶּר אַשֶּׁר נַחֲנֶה

Of specific interest here is בְּדַרְקִי in v. 6, the common meaning for which is “cistern.” However, the same word can mean “grave” (e.g., Isa 14:9, 45:15, 38:18, Prov 28:17). In its meaning “cistern,” בְּדַרְקִי faces back to “spring” in the same line, but as “grave” it faces ahead to the description of death in the next line;42 thus, another Janus Parallelism.

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40 R. Aqiva understood it midrashically as suggestive of “your well” (semen) from בַּר, “your pit (the grave)” from בַּר, and “your creator” (God) from בַּר. Cited in Fox, JPS Torah Commentary: Ecclesiastes, p. 78.
41 Fox, JPS Torah Commentary: Ecclesiastes, p. 78.
42 See, e.g., Ezek 31:14, 31:16 where בַּר and בַּר have the same meanings occur in parallelism.
4. Antanaclasis

Qoh 4:1

The existence of antanaclasis in this passage was identified first by Jack Sasson, who observed that the expression occurs twice, the first time meaning “no one to comfort them,” and the second time, meaning “no one to avenge them.”

Qoh 7:5–6

In addition to demonstrating alliteration, the words and also illustrate the poet’s use of homophonous nouns in the service of antanaclasis. The first time the lexeme occurs it means “thorns” (as in Isa 34:13). The second time it appears it means “pot” (as in Ps 60:10).

Qoh 7:12

In this verse the word means “shelter.” However, we have previously heard these consonants used to refer to “shade” in 6:12. Its use here for “shelter,” thus constitutes a case of antanaclasis.

44 Noted by Greenstein, “Wordplay, Hebrew,” p. 969. The polysemy of these same words is similarly exploited in the vision of Jeremiah in Jer 1:13.
45 Is it possible that the juxtaposition between “shadow” in 6:12 and in the next verse (7:1) is meant to allude to “darkness”? This would be especially meaningful in light of the statement in 6:12 that one cannot know what will occur under the sun after one is gone. If such is intended, it
In his study of the antanaclastic use of the verb יָּכְצָה in Qoheleth, Anthony Ceresko pointed out that the verb occurred eight times in 7:23–29 with four different nuances: “grasp, understand” (7:24), “find” (7:26, 7:28a, 7:28b, 7:28c), “learn” (7:27a, 7:29), and “reach” (7:27b). It would belong in the category of allusive punning above.

Ceresko, “The Function of Antanaclasis (םֶז) ‘to find’ // (םֶז) ‘to reach, overtake, grasp’ in Hebrew Poetry, especially in the Book of Qoheleth,” 551–569, especially 565–569. According to Ceresko, the sophisticated employment of יָּכְצָה in Qoheleth may be due to two proto-Semitic roots concealed by the orthography of יָּכְצָה: the first is מֶז/מֶז “find,” and the second is perhaps derived from מֶג “reach, arrive, overtake.” On the punning use of this verb in Qoheleth, see also Diethelm Michel, Untersuchen zur Eigenart des Buches Qoheleth (BZAW, 183; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), p. 236. Perhaps we should include the verb יָּכְצָה among the many key words used by Qoheleth and noted by Fox, JPS Torah Commentary: Ecclesiastes, pp. xvii-xxi. According to Greenstein, “Wordplay, Hebrew,” p. 970, “word play” can serve to enforce what he calls
In Qoh 8:17, he observed that the verb appears three times. The first and third times it requires that we translate “grasp, understand,” since there it parallels the verb יד “know.” However, the second time it occurs, we must render it “find,” because of its connection there with the verb בקע “seek.” As he concluded:

Qoheleth exhausts the possibilities of the verb מָשׁ as he exhausts all avenues of investigation to try to understand (מָשׁ) “what God is doing under the sun.” Despite his skill in the use of language in his rigorous search (Qoh 12:9–10) he cannot find (מָשׁ) the answer; in honestly admitting such, he marks the boundaries for human wisdom beyond which one dare not attempt to reach (מָשׁ) in order to grasp (מָשׁ) the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and bad...

Qoh 10:4

וכסרו המוששים עלכלו עתים מסקנות אתייתות

Antanaclasis in this passage is demonstrated by יָשָׁה and יָזָה. Though both forms derive from the same root (יגָז), the first instance means “leave, forsake” and the second “put to rest.”

5. **ALLUSIVE PUNNING**

Qoh 2:1–3

וכסרו אר חלבぬ לחהאנ סכסופה בשמה
וֹצֵא בָּשְׁבֶּה נִנְנָה פֶּרְדוֹת בָּלָק

In this passage is achieved by way of the word מְשָׁל in v. 2, which ordinarily means “praiseworthy,” but here “madness” in the sense of “folly.” But the mention of wine in v. 3 suggests that מֶשֶׁל

“leading words.”


49 Thus already Rashbam. See Japhet and Salters, The Commentary of R. Samuel ben Meir Rashbash on Qoheleth, p. 65.
may mean “drunkenness,” as it does in Jer 25:16. In addition, “I will test you” in v. 1 suggests by way of sound the verb קסך “pour out,” again reinforcing the allusions to liquids and drinking.

Qoh 2:20–21

This passage is very sophisticated in the way it alludes to the word אדס twice used in v. 21. Note, for example, how both the verbal hapax legomenon אדס and the phrase אדס echo the word אדס “man,” which is not present in the text. Here the allusion underscores the mortality and fragility of mankind that is the focus of the passage.

Qoh 10:8

Allusive punning occurs in this line in the hapax legomenon קמך “the rafter,” which reminds us by dint of sound of Qoheleth’s repeated use of the word מקר “fortune, fate” (e.g., Qoh 2:14, 2:15, 3:19 [3X], 9:2, 9:3). The allusion allows readers to equate poor fortunes with laziness. This allusion is bolstered by the presence of the verb קסך (from קסך “be low,” which appears elsewhere means “humiliation” (e.g., Ps 106:43, Job 24:24). Ogden also sees here a “play” between the lowering of the rafter in 18a and the lowering of hands in 18b.

Qoh 12:5

The phrase קפר has evoked a good deal of comment from exegetes because of its difficulty. The versions make it clear that the word קפר means “caper-berry” or “caper bush,” though the word is a hapax legomenon in Hebrew. On the other hand, the verb קפר, presumably a hiphil form of the root פרד “frustrate, make ineffectual,” makes little sense here. Some interpreters have opted to resolve this difficulty by seeing the line as a metaphor for the diminishment of

50 The root קסך also carries the connotation of “humiliation, baseness.”
51 Ogden, Qoheleth, p. 178.
52 Thus LXX, Syriac, and Vulgate.
sexual desire or ability in old age, since the caper-berry appears to have been considered an aphrodisiac (hence its derivation from the root הָבָא "desire"). Others have suggested that we emend the verb to הָפָר "and buds." I suggest that we have allusive punning at work. Though the pointed text forces us to translate הָפָר הָבָא as "(even) the (aphrodisiac) caper-berry is ineffectual," the verb is close enough in sound to suggests also a hiphil form of the root הָפָר "bear fruit," especially since it immediately follows the mention of the almond tree.

Moreover, the phrase יָנָא הָשָׂקֵד is similarly allusive. The mention of the almond suggests that we read the verb as a hiphil of the root נָעַה "blossom," but its orthography demands that we derive it from הָעַה, "contemn, spurn." In addition, early interpreters saw the almond here as denoting the testicles. Read in this way, this stich too would suggest the lack of sexual appetite or ability in old age.

Qoh 12:6

דָּעַת אַשֶּׁר לֹא יָרַיחְּתָה הָכַּסִּיקָה וּרְחֵית יָדָה הָחָה וּנְמַכֵּרוּנָה דֶּלְכּוּתָה וּאֶלְיָכָה

In addition to employing fine examples of alliteration, this passage contains examples of allusive punning. On the one hand, the Qere in the expression נְמַכֵּר הָכַּסִּיקָה suggests that we read the stich as referring to the snapping of a silver chord (seeing here the root קָסָה, i.e., "the cord of life." On the other hand, the fact that the word דָּעַת may also mean one's lot or portion suggests that we may retain the Kethib and render the stich "...before the portion of silver becomes distant," i.e., one is separated from one's wealth upon death (cf., Job 1:21).

The words הָכַּסִּיקָה וּרְחֵית יָדָה הָחָה are typically translated as if the verb here derives from the root קָמַע "crush, break." However, the way the verb is pointed, coupled with the fact that הָכַּסִּיקָה can refer to a lamp

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54 See Fox, JPS Torah Commentary: Ecclesiastes, 2004), p. 81.

55 I.e., the form יָנָא.

56 Note the comment of Keil and Delitzsch, Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament: Psalm LXXXVIII/III to Isaiah XIV, p. 1116, "...we leave to those interpreters who derive יָנָא from יָאָה, and understand הָשָׂקֵד of the glans penis (Böttch, Fürst, and several older interpreters) to follow their own foul and repulsive criticism."
containing golden oil (e.g., Zech 4:12) suggests that we derive the verb from the root יד “run,” and see the line as referring to the running out of golden oil, i.e., the end of one’s life.

6. Numerical Punning

Qoh 4:8–14

This passage exploits the idiomatic use of numbers in a way that constitutes numerical punning, a device also known from elsewhere in the ancient Near East. Though Fox notes here the presence of key words based on the number “two,” which can mean “companions” or “fellow,” and possibly “successor,” the numerical punning operating in this passage is more elaborate. While words based on two do appear in vv. 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12, the number one also appears in vv. 8, 9, 10 (2X), 11, and 12, as does the number “three-fold” in v. 12.

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58 As does the Vulgate’s recurrat.


60 Fox, JPS Torah Commentary: Ecclesiastes, p. 27.

61 The word פָּשֵׁל apparently meaning “successor” appears also in v. 15. On
The numerical punning here adds significance to the Qoheleth’s main point that the more companions one has, the better off one is.

Qoh 6:6

אלהו קהל אלפ ישנים ושמם לא רקח הלת אלי

In this line numerical punning occurs in the words אלי “thousand,” ישנים “two times,” and איל “one” (here meaning “the same [place]”), but also the word ישנים “years,” which subtly suggests the word ישנים “two.” The numerical punning follows closely upon another use of numbers in v. 3 which mentions מאה “one hundred,” ישנים “years” and ישנים “his years,” themselves perhaps puns on the number two (סמלל אשמ ישנים בראש ילהוב יהוד המחישנ). The examples of numerical punning given above makes sense in light of the numerical idiom that Qoheleth later employs in 7:27 to express the process of reasoning that lies behind his words: לאלהו לא יפה שהבלוב. 62

CONCLUSION

The aggregate evidence shows Qoheleth to be a linguistically sophisticated text. Its manipulation of language, especially by way of alliteration and numerical punning, serves to underscore the many contrasts to which Qoheleth draws our attention. 63 His puns contribute to Qoheleth’s rhetoric of ambiguity. As Doug Ingram observes, the ambiguity of his words “...often leaves the reader in a state of perplexity, confusion or indecision. By doing so, the implied author has consciously constructed a text which he experienced in real life.” 64

Qoheleth’s use of numbers, see also J. L. Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes: A Commentary (OTL; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1987), p. 112; Schoors, The Preacher Sought Pleading Words, pp. 75–76, 218–219; See also the observations in Klein and Fox, “Qoheleth,” pp. 182, 184. However, the aforementioned authors do not remark on the other numbers “hidden” in the text.

62 The numbers one and ten also appear in 7:19 as do one and one thousand in 7:28, and one hundred in 8:12, but there they are used literally. The idiomatic uses of seven and eight in 11:2 and of one and two in 11:6 do not constitute punning, though the use ישנים “years” of in 11:8 may be a play on two.


Indeed, the text’s clever use of ambiguity, in the form of polysemy, allusive punning, and antanaclasis, forces readers to contemplate the meaning of Qoheleth’s words at every turn, and thus, to participate in the quest for meaning that is central to the book. Both in its content and in the manner in which that content is delivered, Qoheleth conveys his frustration with words and deeds, and his inability to know anything with certainty. As he reminds us in 8:17: יכ אל ויהי חכם למלוא אשתים. It is as if Qoheleth uses ambiguous words in a way that embodies the impossibility of interpreting the vagaries of life. Indeed, as Qoheleth puts it in 8:1: יהיה יהיה ויהי ויהי ויהי, “who is (wise and) able to interpret any thing/word”?65

65 On the interpretation of this line as posing the following stich as a riddle, see Klein and Fox, “Qoheleth,” p. 196.