

# Resilience through Disclosure and Meaning Making in Qoheleth and the Babylonian Theodicy

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## Abstract

This study rereads Qoheleth and the Babylonian Theodicy through a trauma lens as opposed to the generic lens of speculative wisdom encompassing retributive justice, retribution theology, and the deed-consequence nexus and their consequent view of the gods'/God's justice. According to retribution theology, actions correlate appropriately to consequences; however, in light of their suffering and resilience, both authors are disillusioned, struggling to make sense of life's predicaments despite their religiosity and placating of the deity, as they also resist retribution theology. Rereading Qoheleth and the Babylonian Theodicy through a trauma lens shows that both sufferers seek answers and cope with suffering similarly to modern readers.

This study acknowledges the use and limits of retribution theology operating within the Hebrew and Mesopotamian worldview to illustrate how these texts resist retributive justice. However, we also illustrate how the collective and individual aspects of trauma theory transcend ethic, cultural, epochal, and geographical boundaries. Furthermore, the juxtaposed ancient texts demonstrate how to cope with traumatic life experiences outside the confines of retributive justice by making meaning of self and others in the world and exhibiting resilience through effective coping strategies. Ultimately, Qoheleth affirms that while fearing God is right, navigating trauma includes enjoying God's simple gifts such as food, wine, work, and a spouse for momentary relief. The Babylonian Theodicy sufferer makes meaning and develops resiliency through self-disclosure to friends and acceptance.

## Keywords

Qoheleth, Babylonian Theodicy, trauma, trauma theory, resilience, meaning making

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## **I. Introduction**

Personal trauma is all too common in the world we live in, and humans must find ways to cope with trauma to survive. However, humans often fail to adopt healthy coping strategies and instead seek relief in ways that cause further harm. For example, children exposed to trauma have an increased risk of addiction (Karl 2021), and a significant correlation exists between adverse childhood experiences and subsequent abuse of substances (Khoury et al., 2010). One study found that 59 percent of young people with PTSD eventually abuse drugs and alcohol (Deykin and Buka, 1997). Among adults at an outpatient substance abuse treatment center, 85.12 percent had experienced at least one traumatic event in their lifetimes (Giordano et al., 2016). Readers could likely offer their own anecdotal experiences of trauma and the difficulty of navigating it well, which, along with the scholarly literature, illustrates a core assumption of the following discussion—all humans will experience some level of suffering, and all of us need help to integrate traumatic experiences into the narrative of our lives in non-destructive, healthy ways. Qoheleth and the Babylonian Theodicy do exactly that—they speak openly about suffering and injustice, and in the process, they offer readers healthy strategies for developing resilience in the face of trauma that can enable modern readers to integrate trauma in a healthy, meaningful way. Qoheleth advocates meaning making through enjoyment, and the Babylonian theodicy exemplifies the importance of disclosure. Furthermore, Qoheleth and the sufferer in the Babylonian Theodicy carefully investigate a common explanation for personal suffering—retribution for personal sin—and both find that explanation wanting.

Their critical examination of the prevailing wisdom of their time is the focus of most comparative studies of the Babylonian Theodicy and Ecclesiastes. They have typically been investigated through the generic lens of speculative wisdom, often in comparison to and in concert with the biblical book of Job. These works have been shown to resist the dominant wisdom of their time, particularly as that wisdom relates to a certain view of gods'/God's justice, variously called retributive justice, retribution theology, and the deed-consequence nexus. However, as Will Kynes (2019) has argued, generic considerations—particularly in the case of ancient wisdom literature—often act as blinders, unintentionally preventing the consideration of other profitable, interpretive lenses and conversation partners.

Thus, rather than examine Qoheleth and the Babylonian Theodicy specifically through the lens of genre, this paper puts them into dialogue with each other because of their shared subject matter—suffering and resilience—and reads them through a trauma lens to demonstrate how these ancient authors coped with the suffering they faced. Thus, while acknowledging the conflict between so-called speculative and traditional wisdom, our primary concern is to investigate that conflict in terms of trauma and trauma theory. Put another way, the tension between what previous studies have labeled speculative and traditional wisdom might be profitably understood as reflecting efforts to cope with what modern readers would call trauma outside of the dominant lens through which their culture viewed trauma, namely retribution. Ecclesiastes and the Babylonian Theodicy each recognize the inability of retributive justice to answer fully the question of human suffering, and their efforts to navigate their relationship to the divine vis-à-vis inexplicable suffering offers modern readers an ancient model of doing the same.

## 2. Retributive justice and its discontents

The deed-consequence nexus—also called retribution theology, retributive justice, and retributive wisdom—holds that consequences correlate appropriately to actions.<sup>1</sup> That is, broadly speaking and put simply, the righteous will be rewarded for their righteousness, whereas the wicked will be punished for their wickedness. This understanding of the relationship between actions and consequences can be seen throughout Proverbs,<sup>2</sup> and in biblical passages such as Deuteronomy 28,<sup>3</sup> and Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve are expelled from Eden because of their disobedience to Yahweh's command. Job is perhaps the paradigmatic discussion of retribution theology in the Hebrew Bible, with the eponymous character's insistence that he does not deserve to suffer because he has not sinned and his friends' insistence that Job's suffering is the proof of his sin.<sup>4</sup> Despite their disagreement over the justice of Job's suffering, the human characters are steadfast in their conviction that consequences correspond (or at least *should* correspond) to deeds. Job as a piece of literature, though, argues that such an understanding of the deed-consequence nexus is an insufficient explanation for human suffering. Though Job and his friends never learn the truth about Job's suffering, readers know that God ordained Job's suffering at a meeting of the divine council.

In addition to Hebrew texts that question the value and validity of retributive justice, texts that raise similar questions have likewise existed since the beginning of the third millennium BCE in Sumerian and Akkadian.<sup>5</sup> One such well-known Mesopotamian text from the first millennium BCE is the Babylonian Theodicy (Oshima, 2014). These texts arose within a cultural context similar to and yet distinct from writings of the Hebrew Bible. Whereas works like Qoheleth, Proverbs, and Deuteronomy stress the fear of Yahweh as the driving principle of a rightly ordered life, the Babylonian Theodicy speaks primarily in terms of ritualistic behavior used to appease the gods and ensure one's own well-being. Because of this emphasis on ritual, as well as the influence of a polytheistic worldview, the deed-consequence nexus as an explanation for suffering features even more prominently in the Babylonian Theodicy as it attempts to understand suffering through the lens of retributive justice.

Paul-Alain Beaulieu (2007: 4) contends that so-called Mesopotamian wisdom literature was designed to “reinforce the sense of loyalty to the established order” while

1. See the now-classic discussion of retribution in the Old Testament (Koch, 1955: 1–42), which argues that there is no *theology* of retribution in the Old Testament.
2. For a discussion of retribution in Proverbs, see Adams, 2008: 53–100.
3. On retribution in Deuteronomy and various responses to Koch's article mentioned in the previous note, see Gammie, 1970: 1–12.
4. Aimers (2019: 359–70) argues that Job is not actually a theodicy concerned with suffering and divine justice. Rather, Aimers argues that Job and his three friends exemplify the fool as described in Proverbs.
5. See Anderson, 2014: 158. Samet (2015: 389) also discusses parallels to second-millennium Mesopotamian traditions using linguistic dating that highlights the role of Aramaic translations “spreading knowledge in the Persian and Hellenistic periods, particularly pertinent for Qoheleth's understanding of Gilgamesh and versions unknown to us. It is equally possible that Qoheleth would have access to versions of the other Mesopotamian texts; however, evidence has not yet suggested Qoheleth's early access to such texts

simultaneously “encouraging blind faith in the gods, especially in times of adversity.” Arguably, the purpose of “wisdom” in ancient Mesopotamia was to establish the foundation of civilized life with order and justice where wisdom and kingship were closely linked with leading the king’s subjects to civilization. However, in later, postdiluvian times, the king gave advice on how to submit “to the fate and to the order created by the gods” to avoid the catastrophic fate of those whom the gods killed through the great flood (Beaulieu, 2007: 6). Order was created by the gods, and living in light of this order was part of wisdom; neglecting some rite expected by the gods was the “cause of individual misfortune” (Beaulieu, 2007: 7).

Thus, there was a common tendency in Israel and Mesopotamia to understand human suffering and trauma in terms of divine punishment and human flourishing in terms of divine favor, whether in response to proper fulfillment of religious activity or in response to the supplicant’s covenant faithfulness (Van der Toorn, 1985: 56–57). A similar tendency also exists in both cultures to describe an “emblematic sufferer” or “righteous sufferer” who faces loss but is eventually restored by divine favor, such as we see in the Babylonian Theodicy and the biblical book of Job (Van der Toorn, 1985: 58). As will be discussed below, Qoheleth does not feature a single righteous sufferer but rather addresses suffering in broader generalities that can be applied to multiple situations.

In sum, both Israelite and Mesopotamian cultures operated within a worldview in which sin—whether disobedience to God/gods or failure to complete a religious ritual to the deities’ satisfaction—resulted in human suffering. However, both Ecclesiastes and the Babylonian Theodicy, among other texts, find retribution theology wanting as an explanation for human suffering; thus, as noted above, scholars have labeled them “speculative wisdom” as opposed to “traditional wisdom,” and comparative studies have focused on the differences and similarities within the “wisdom” genre. Those studies have been helpful in identifying these works’ rejection of retributive justice. However, it will be profitable to examine these texts not as an errant branch of wisdom literature but rather as examples of ancient attempts to identify a strategy for resilience in the face of trauma when the normative narrative is unsatisfactory, particularly given that each of these narratives forges paths through suffering that reject the dominant narrative in which they are situated (i.e., retribution theology). Reading these texts through a trauma lens will highlight how they use strategies for building resilience, such as disclosure (described below), that remain relevant to navigating trauma in the modern context. Thus, a trauma reading helps demonstrate how these texts transcend their original context and can be appropriated meaningfully in a modern context.

### **3. Trauma and the trauma lens**

Although trauma theory has only a very short pedigree<sup>6</sup>—and even shorter in the field of biblical studies<sup>7</sup>—the Hebrew Bible and other ancient literature clearly depict narratives

6. For an overview of the history of trauma studies, see; Leys, 2000; Micale, 2001; and Kurtz, 2018: 19–94.

7. For an overview, see Frechette and Boase, 2016: 1–23.

of traumas and the human struggle to make meaning out of injustice and suffering, thus giving voice to what we know intuitively to be true: trauma is a shared human experience that transcends ethnic, cultural, epochal, and geographical boundaries.

Although trauma may be acute, such as the death of a child or sexual assault, it can also be chronic, such as living as a refugee or as an ethnic minority in a hostile context. Trauma can also be individual, as typically described in psychological studies of trauma,<sup>8</sup> and it can be collective, as described in more recent social-scientific studies of trauma and in postcolonial readings of biblical and other texts.<sup>9</sup> These traumas are not the same, nor are they mutually exclusive, and different types of traumas call for different strategies of coping. What remains constant is that all humans suffer to one degree or another and that we are all trying to make it through this world with our hearts and minds intact, a process that trauma theorists term “resilience.” It comes as no surprise, then, that ancient and modern people alike sought ways to cope with their experiences of suffering, that is, to be resilient. Trauma theory, which “focus[es] on the relationship of words and trauma, . . . help[s] us to ‘read the wound’ with the aid of literature” (Hartman, 1995: 537).

An important way that literature helps us to ‘read the wound’ is through illustrating “disclosure,” or the process of talking to another human about one’s experiences. Though the normal human response is to avoid talking about traumatic experiences, the process of disclosure is extremely important for recovering from trauma (Hunter, 2018: 68). This is because “traumatic memories . . . need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language” (van der Kolk and van der Hart, 1996: 176, cited in Hunter, 2018: 68). To not share one’s experiences, to carry the burden by oneself, has been shown to carry significant negative consequences for one’s physical and mental health (see Pennebaker, 1997, along with the helpful summary and application to Psalms in Strawn, 2016). Herman similarly argues that silence, or refraining from telling one’s story, prevents healing from trauma. However, “When the truth is finally recognized,” she states, “survivors can begin their recovery” (Herman 1997: 1). Herman sees this process of disclosure as so significant, in fact, that it forms one of her three steps toward recovery from trauma (1997: 175).

Just as Strawn (2016) has shown how psalms gives readers access to an ancient data set of how their authors dealt with trauma, the Babylonian Theodicy provides another data point as it relates to disclosure and rejecting a common explanation for suffering. Qoheleth likewise rejects a common explanation for personal suffering, and though that work does not advocate disclosure as the Babylonian Theodicy does, it does indicate that trauma can be navigated through making meaning through joy in temporal gifts from God. Thus, each work grapples with trauma and attempts to understand its experiences of trauma outside the confines of retributive justice, the primary lens through which trauma was viewed in their cultural contexts.

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8. See, for examples, Herman, 1997: 7–32; Van der Kolk, Weisaeth, and Van der Hart, 2007: 47–74.

9. For collective trauma, see, e.g., Erikson, 1976, Erikson, 1994, Alexander, 2012. For postcolonial trauma studies, see, e.g., Watkins and Shulman, 2008; Craps, 2012; Visser, 2014: 106–29; Visser, 2015: 250–65; Claasens, 2021: 576–87.

#### 4. Resilience through meaning making in Qoheleth

Early trauma theorists focused on what is called punctual trauma, a singular wound—or even a “perception of threat” (Frechette and Boase, 2016: 4)—that “shatters persons” core assumptions regarding self and one’s relations to others in the world, including a sense of self-protection, personal invulnerability, and safety and predictability in the world” (Beste, 2003: 6). On this view, the mind cannot and does not process a traumatic event, such that the person experiencing trauma does not have access to the actual event; rather, it surfaces only in images and flashbacks that are by nature unknowable.<sup>10</sup> As Caruth (1995: 4-5) states, “The [traumatic] event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in the *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatised is precisely to be possessed by an image or event.”

More recently, theorists have recognized two shortcomings of the early articulation of trauma theory. First, it is *prima facie* clear that not all trauma is unspeakable or inaccessible.<sup>11</sup> As Barry Stampfi (2014: 16) argues, “The unspeakable may be merely a phase in the process of traumatization, not its predetermined endpoint”; that is, “traumatization need not *necessarily* conclude in a state of involuntary, deeply conflicted silence.” Second, the punctual or event-based model of trauma does not “account for ongoing everyday forms of traumatizing violence” (Rothberg, 2000: 226). That is, if no singular event (or threat of such) occurs, such as a sexual assault, divorce, or death of a child, then the punctual model of trauma has no way to account for a person’s wounding and suffering because that view makes a single event a priority at the expense of what would commonly be called microaggressions or the general malaise of living under stressful conditions for a lifetime.<sup>12</sup> More recent studies have therefore argued for a more comprehensive model of trauma that includes longer periods of suffering that, piece by piece, can destabilize a person’s view of themselves and their place in the world.

This sort of long-view destabilization is precisely what Qoheleth addresses during his meditation on suffering and injustice. He does point to punctual events, such as death (e.g., 3:19–21) and oppression (4:1–2), but even when discussing those events, Qoheleth frames them more as general circumstances than as one-time experiences that strike a blow to his or another person’s psyche.

Instead of punctual trauma then, Qoheleth speaks more broadly of the series of injustices and frustrations that pile up over the course of a lifetime. Taken individually, the injustices and frustrations Qoheleth addresses may be little more than blips on the screen a person could ignore as they carry on about their lives. Taken together, though, the accumulation of inconsistencies destabilizes the dominant worldview that lies under the surface of the book of Qoheleth, that is, retribution theology. Were retributive justice fully operative, his experience would be different. Death would not come to the righteous in the same way as to the wicked (9.2), humans and animals would not suffer the same fate (3.19–21), the wicked would not prosper and receive honor (8.10), work would not be driven by envy (4.4), and fools would not inherit the fruits of another’s labor (2.18–22).

10. See Hunter, 2018: 67.

11. See Balaev, 2014: 3.

12. See discussion in Craps, 2014: 45–61.

However, those experiences do exist, which forces Qoheleth to address inconsistencies with retributive justice, namely, death, oppression, the inability to enjoy wealth, loneliness, poverty, the reversal of the consequences for righteousness and wickedness, and the general incongruence between actions and rewards.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the most direct indicator of the destabilization of Qoheleth's worldview comes in 7.15–18, a passage that illustrates well the various situations that cause the author discomfort and that he describes throughout as *hebel*. These include the finality of death, the shared fate of the fool and wise, human and animal, and the inability to know whether one's progeny will properly handle the wealth for which one labored. This particular text has been described as "strange," "problematic," and prone to misinterpretation.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, Qoheleth 7.15–18 is considered a "theological and ethical core of the Jewish tradition."<sup>15</sup> While exhorting readers to fear God (v. 18), Qoheleth acknowledges retribution theology does not account for his experience. He has seen the righteous perish and the wicked prolong their lives:<sup>16</sup>

Everything I have seen in the days of my *hebel*;<sup>17</sup> there is a righteous one who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked one who lives long in his evil. Do not be too righteous, and do not be too wise. Why destroy yourself? Do not be too wicked, and do not be a fool. Why die before your time? It is good that you hold on to this, and also from that do not let your hand rest. For the one who fears God will go forth with both. (Eccl. 7.15–18, author's translation)

Qoheleth does not necessarily doubt the general principle of retributive justice in terms of its ultimate reality (see Eccl. 3.17; 8.12–13), nor does he personally represent an individual "righteous sufferer" who experiences punctual trauma, even though he attempts to understand a righteous sufferer's predicament. Qoheleth is, though, clearly troubled by the same injustices that we see around us: the righteous suffer while the wicked prosper (Fox, 1998: 231). Put another way, Qoheleth has recognized the insufficiency of retribution theology to account for the suffering he sees around him and is thus wrestling with what Andrew Barnaby (2018: 22) has called "the sudden, shocking discovery that the consciousness by which we think, engage the world, and even know ourselves is an illusion or, worse, a lie."

Within this context, the meaning of אַל-תִּהְיֶה צַדִּיק הַרְבֵּה ("Do not be too righteous"; 7:16a) is "crucial" for understanding Qoheleth's purpose and what exactly he is advocating in the book as a whole (Whybray, 2005: 93). Not surprisingly, interpretations abound. Inspired by ancient Greek philosophy, Schwienhorst-Schönberger (2000) offers a *tertium quid* between the extremes of righteousness and wickedness involving godly behavior that is good in every case. Thus Schwienhorst-Schönberger (2000: 154) concludes

13. See also Qoh. 2.15–16, 24–26; 3.9–15, 16–22; 5.5–6, 17–6.2; 8.10–15; 9.1–6, 11–12; 11.9–10; 12.8–14.

14. See Fox, 1998: 234; Longman III, 1998: 192; Dietrich, 2018: 131.

15. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, 1998: 202.

16. An early death for the righteous is contrary to Prov. 3.2, 16; 4.10; 10.2; 11.4; and 12.21; a long life for the wicked is contrary to Prov. 7.24–27; 10.27; and 11.5.

17. Given the sharp disagreements over how best to translate *hebel*, it is left untranslated here. For an overview of interpretive options, see Meek, 2016: 279–97.

that Qoheleth 7.15–18 teaches restraint rather than any concept of moderation or a golden mean in connection with the Greek Hellenistic stoic philosophers. Furthermore, as Whybray (2005: 93) points out, a middle path or golden mean reading of 7.16 essentially means that either righteous or wicked behavior does not affect “men’s fortunes in terms of divinely imposed reward or punishment” and that extremes are likely to result in disaster.

Whybray (2005: 93) first argued that this verse means, “Do not pretend to be a righteous person” or “Do not be self-righteous,” though more recently he proposed that Qoheleth warns against being “too self-righteous” in a pretentious, extreme manner.<sup>18</sup> Fox notes that Qoheleth does not “repudiate righteousness just because its pay-off is uncertain” but speculates that Qoheleth may find righteousness “less problematic,” or he may be “less convinced of the practical value of righteousness than of wisdom since he is not primarily a moralizer,” giving “less effort to inspiring righteous behavior.”<sup>19</sup>

However, Qoheleth neither teaches wanton hedonism nor advocates wickedness—he remains convinced that fearing God is right and appropriate. In addition to the concluding statement that fearing God is “the whole of humanity,” in 8.12, Qoheleth states, “For I myself even know that it will be well for those who fear God.” This unwillingness to abandon the primacy of fearing God makes Belcher’s interpretation particularly compelling; he contends that the passage is “aimed at the failure of wisdom,” meaning there is no guarantee that wisdom will bring benefits and thus “fails to deliver on its promises” (Belcher, 2000: 157). This is the crux of Qoheleth’s problem: wisdom, for all its worth, is *not* a foolproof hedge against experiencing the fate of Abel, who, though righteous, experienced the fate of the wicked and thus represents the upside-down nature of the world that has destabilized Qoheleth’s worldview and that he labels *hebel*, or Abel, throughout his work.<sup>20</sup>

This struggle between beliefs and reality becomes a central concern in navigating life. For Qoheleth, it is clear that suffering and trauma exist, and it is also clear that the deed-consequence nexus does not and cannot account for the examples he lists. Michael V. Fox argues that Qoheleth’s central concern is therefore “meaning—not transience, not work, not values, not morality”—metaphorically conveyed with a word meaning “vapor” but more appropriately denoting an “existential vacuum” (הבל) (Fox, 1998: 225–26) or the basic lack of correspondence between actions and rewards, as exemplified in the life of Abel (הבל) (Meek, 2013). According to Fox, while the collapse of meaning for Qoheleth is found in life’s contradictions, he nevertheless finds meaning by reconstructing and recovering meanings, or what trauma theorists call “meaning making” (Fox, 1998: 225). One of the ways Qoheleth finds meaning is by deconstructing the contradictory concept

18. See Schwienhorst-Schönberger, 1998: 182–83; Whybray, 2005: 97–98. Belcher (2000: 154) argues that the “warning against self-righteousness and a pretense to wisdom” is problematic given the “syntactical similarity between vv. 16 and 17.”

19. Fox (1998: 234) contrasts Qoheleth with Proverbs and Ben Sira “who identify wisdom and righteousness.”

20. Space prohibits developing the thesis here, but for an argument that *hebel* should be understood as a cipher for the injustice and brevity exemplified by the life of Abel, see Meek, 2013: 241–56; Meek, 2022.



of traditional retributive justice while finding a way to uphold the contradictions. That is, rather than rationalize or explain away violations of justice, Qoheleth holds them in tension with the fear of God, or “the dogmas we consider conventional” (Fox, 1998: 234).

Having both established the inconsistencies of life (and the trauma they cause) *and* refused to let go of fearing God, Qoheleth’s primary method for meaning making, or for constructing another pathway for navigating life, is to shift the reader’s focus away from accounting for suffering through retributive justice and toward the active enjoyment of what he frequently labels God’s gifts and humanity’s portion: joy in food, work, wine, and a spouse (see Eccl. 2.24–26; 3.10–15, 16–22; 8.10–15; 9.7–10; 11.8–10). Such enjoyment does not solve the contradiction, but it does offer a means of developing resilience, of coping with suffering, of making “meaning in the context of highly stressful situations” (Park, 2010: 257). This unique stance makes his words compelling and timeless because he recognizes that a person’s only recourse is the momentary experience of pleasure—if God allows it.<sup>21</sup>

Qoheleth is not alone in his struggle to reconcile retributive justice with his life experiences; his concerns were similarly raised in Mesopotamia during the second millennium BCE—but this time by individual righteous sufferers.

#### 4. Resilience through disclosure in the Babylonian Theodicy

The Babylonian Theodicy is structured much like the book of Job is, as in this poem two friends engage in a dialogue in which the one, the “righteous sufferer,” discloses to the other the trauma he has experienced and struggles with the inability of retributive justice to account for his suffering.<sup>22</sup> A critical difference between this text and the text of Ecclesiastes is that Qoheleth acts as an outside observer to multiple situations in which he has seen the failure of the retribution principle. But the righteous sufferer in the Babylonian Theodicy discloses traumas he has personally experienced, thus aligning more closely with the punctual model of trauma that early trauma theorists developed. The sufferer describes for his friend and later readers what Frechette and Boase (2016: 3) call a “distinct type of suffering that overwhelms a person’s normal capacity to cope.” Though his trauma is not unknowable, it is certainly unexplainable within the cultural framework in which he explores suffering, for the righteous sufferer in this poem has experienced repeated trauma through no fault of his own.

This text is particularly important for examining trauma because the righteous sufferer models disclosure and thus allows trauma survivors to process their own (perhaps unknowable and unspeakable) experiences through the words and disclosures of others. This ability to give voice to the common experience of human suffering partially explains the durability of ancient literature that gives voice to the common human experience of suffering: readers can use the words of others to express their own experiences of trauma and to navigate life after trauma.

21. See Fox, 1998: 237–38.

22. See *COS* 1.154.492–95.

The poem opens with a disclosure of childhood trauma that, even thousands of years later, captures the deep anguish caused by the loss of one's parents, whether through death, divorce, or state intervention.<sup>23</sup>

I am without recourse, heartache has come upon me.  
 I was the youngest child when fate claimed (my) father,  
 My mother who bore me departed to the land of no return,  
 My father and mother left me, and with no one my guardian! (Stanza 1)

To this and other complaints, the friend in the dialogue responds with arguments drawn from retributive theology. Various rebuttals to the sufferer's observations include the following:

He who looks to his god has a protector. (Stanza II)  
 Seek constantly after the [rites?] of justice.  
 Your mighty will surely show kindness. (Stanza IV)  
 Seek after the lasting reward of your god. (Stanza VI)  
 Follow in the way of a god, observe his rights,  
 [ . . . ] be ready for good fortune! (Stanza XX)  
 Seek after the favorable breeze of the gods,  
 What you lost for a year you will recoup in a moment. (Stanza XXII)

The friend's statements seem aimed at confirming the necessity of continuing to worship the gods piously even when injustices occur. However, at each step—until the poem's conclusion—the sufferer refuses to accept the friend's explanation and instead offers counterexamples that demonstrate the failure of retribution. His frustration with the friend's commendation of retribution theology reaches its height in stanza VII:

Your reasoning is a cool breeze, a breath of fresh air for mankind,  
 Most particular friend, your advice is e[xcellent].  
 Let me [put] but one matter before you:  
 Those who seek not after a god can go the road of favor,  
 Those who pray to a goddess have grown poor and destitute.  
 Indeed, in my youth I tried to find out the will of (my) god,  
 With prayer and supplication I besought my goddess.  
 I bore a yoke of profitless servitude:

23. Oshima, (2014: 126) notes the protagonist is likely to be a highly educated man involved in scholarly activities and not "just any scribe" given the "extravagant flattery."

(My) god decreed (for me) poverty instead of wealth.

A cripple rises above me, a fool is ahead of me,

Rogues are in the ascendant, I am demoted.

The sufferer parallels themes from Qoheleth, as both acknowledge the failure of retribution and search for a way to navigate suffering for which the dominant narrative cannot account. For example, the sufferer asks, “Can a happy life be a certainty? I wish I knew how that might come about!” (Stanza III). The sufferer does not have a happy life; he does not have enough to eat, and even beer, “the sustenance of mankind” (Stanza III), provides no relief. Like Qoheleth, the sufferer recognizes that sometimes the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer: “those who seek not after a god can go the road of favor, Those who pray to a goddess have grown poor and destitute” (Stanza VIII). And like Qoheleth, this disconnect between reality and retribution theology causes no small psychological discomfort.

The sufferer contends that he has tried to understand the reasoning of deity with respect and prayer, and in return the “deity has imposed (on me) poverty instead of riches.” So instead of remaining faithful to the gods, the sufferer imagines himself becoming rebellious and doing evil, an avenue similar but more extreme than Qoheleth’s suggestion in 7.15–18: “I will open a well, I will let loose a fl[ood?],” “I will roam about the far outdoors like a bandit,” and “I will stave off hunger by forcing entry into one house after another.” In addition, the Babylonian sufferer imagines disrespecting the gods: “I will ignore (my) god’s regulations, [I will] trample on his rights” (Tablet XIII). Though the friend assumes the sufferer is normally “righteous,” he rebukes the sufferer for “cast[ing] off justice” and “scorn[ing] divine design” (Tablet VIII).

The righteous sufferer’s repeated experiences of trauma—in addition to a few more general observations of injustice—destabilized his understanding of himself, his place in the world, and how the world operates. Despite the sufferer’s clear pain, disillusionment, and quest to demonstrate that the gods are unjust by experimenting with rejecting the gods himself, at the end of the poem, the sufferer becomes less defensive, appeals to his friend for help, and ultimately turns back to the gods. Similarly, Ecclesiastes ultimately argues that people must fear God; however, whereas Qoheleth holds in tension the contradictions and points his readers toward another method of building resilience—temporal enjoyment—the righteous sufferer does not turn his or his readers’ attention away from the contradictions. Rather, the sufferer concludes with a final plea for help from the gods, whom he sees as ultimately responsible for and solely able to alleviate his suffering.

However, just before his final request to the gods, the sufferer also makes a final plea to his friend: “be considerate of (my) misfortune. Help me, see (my) distress, you should be cognizant of it.”<sup>24</sup> Though the poem does not fully develop this line of thought, trauma theorists recognize both telling one’s story and being heard by others as significant aspects of recovery from trauma.<sup>25</sup> Thus, while Qoheleth makes meaning in his

24. See Hallo 1997: 1.154.495.

25. On the importance of disclosure in recovery from trauma, see, e.g., Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, 1995: 158–82; Pennabaker, 1997.

destabilized world through enjoyment, the righteous sufferer navigates trauma through what later writings will fully develop, namely, disclosure.

## 5. Conclusion: Rereading Qoheleth and the Babylonian Theodicy through a trauma lens

Although Qoheleth and the Babylonian Theodicy reach different conclusions regarding the best way to address trauma in their contexts, they each recognize the inability of retributive justice to adequately account for human suffering, and they each present ways of coping with trauma that trauma theorists have recognized as significant for resilience, or overcoming traumatic life experiences, whether chronic or punctual.

In Ecclesiastes 7, the author argues that humans should be neither too wise nor too righteous, for neither righteousness nor wisdom provide a bulwark against the inconsistencies of life. There is no foolproof system that will protect us from suffering, and retributive justice too often fails to deliver on its promises. There is no bank in which one can store righteousness and wisdom as insurance against retribution's failure. However, Ecclesiastes confirms in that same passage and at the book's end that fearing God is right and appropriate. What, then, should a person do—apart from fearing God—to navigate trauma and alleviate suffering? Simply put, enjoy the gifts of God. Six times in Ecclesiastes the author affirms joy in the face of injustice, and six times he tells readers to take pleasure in the gifts of God, which he identifies as food, work, wine, and a spouse. Taking pleasure in these temporal gifts of course does not guarantee a life free of suffering and trauma, but it does provide moments of relief. Pleasure in God's gifts also does not solve the problem of retributive justice, but Qoheleth is not aiming to untie that particular knot. Rather, he aims to make meaning—and thus cope with trauma—where the dominant narrative has failed.

The Babylonian Theodicy, for its part, does not advocate a new way of life in the same way Ecclesiastes does. Whereas the latter copes with suffering through meaning making, the former does so through disclosure. We see this most obviously in the structure and text itself, which is a dialogue between two people in which the sufferer laments the trauma he has experienced and the inherent injustice of it. His devotion to the gods has failed to inoculate him against suffering, as it should have according to the deed-consequence nexus. He copes with this in part by disclosing his trauma—and the destabilization it has caused—to a trusted friend. At the poem's end, he makes explicit the importance of disclosure as he articulates what readers have sensed throughout: he longs for his friend to listen to him, to affirm his experience of suffering. By his own admission, the sufferer is not looking so much for a *solution* to his problem as he is looking for someone to *listen* to his problem.

Significant time and space separate modern readers from Qoheleth and the Babylonian Theodicy, but in reality not much has changed since these two works were penned. Humans still don't understand why or when or how we suffer. We still expect righteousness to be rewarded while wickedness is punished, and yet we still see around us that life does not always work out that way. Reading Ecclesiastes and the Babylonian Theodicy through a trauma lens therefore proves profitable for modern readers in a few ways. First, simply reading these narratives invites us to enter into the suffering they address—a

vital step in learning to acknowledge and work through suffering of our own. Second, Ecclesiastes advocates a still-helpful method for developing resilience by taking joy in life's momentary pleasures. Third and finally, the sufferer's poem and final plea to be heard illustrate the power of both disclosure and witnessing disclosure.

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