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## **“Royal Show” in Qohelet 2:1–11. A māšal – a Mind Exercise**

### **“Królewskie przedstawienie” w Księdze Koheleta (2:1–11). Māšal jako ćwiczenie umysłowe**

**Abstract.** Much has been written on the so-called royal fiction in Qoheleth. Generally speaking, scholars agree that it is a literary fiction. However, there is no unanimity as far as the interpretation of its role in the Book is concerned. Some would claim that it expresses a hidden critique of monarchy, while others would argue that it is veiled praise of royal institutions. It is striking, though, that commentators rarely recognize the literary genre of the part concerned. The article offers a different approach to the interpretative challenge it presents. It mainly focuses on the core pericope of the royal part – Qoh 2:1–11 – determining its genre as a māšal. It is a “royal show” craftily fashioned by a brilliant teacher Qoheleth. It is meant to be a mind exercise helping the wisdom searcher to reflect upon his own mindset, goals, and expectations.

**Streszczenie.** Na temat tzw. fikcji królewskiej w Księdze Koheleta powstało już wiele opracowań naukowych. Komentatorzy w zasadzie zgadzają się, że chodzi o fikcję literacką, a nie o relację z jakiegoś faktycznego zdarzenia. Brakuje jednak jednomyślności w kwestii interpretacji roli, jaką rzeczona „fikcja królewska” pełni w Księdze. Podczas gdy dla jednych stanowi jakiś rodzaj zakamuflowanej krytyki monarchii, dla innych jest ona subtelną pochwałą instytucji królewskich. Co ciekawe, jednak komentatorzy rzadko zadają sobie trud, by rozpocząć swoje dociekania w tej kwestii od oznaczenia gatunku interesującego nas bloku. Ten artykuł proponuje inne podejście do wyzwań interpretacyjnych, jakie niesie on ze sobą. Skupia się głównie na zasadniczej perykopie „fikcji królewskiej”, a mianowicie na Koh 2,1–11. Jej gatunek określa jako māšal, a całość widzi jako „królewskie przedstawienie” – bardzo zręcznie odegrane przez genialnego nauczyciela Koheleta. Jest ono pomyślane jako intelektualne wyzwanie dla odbiorców, którzy przejęci są poszukiwaniem mądrości. Całość ma im pomóc w refleksji nad własnym nastawieniem, określeniem celów i oczekiwań. Całość przypomina współczesną mowę motywacyjną.

**Keywords:** royal fiction; book of Qoheleth; māšal; motivational speech; royal experiment.

**Słowa kluczowe:** fikcja królewska; Księga Koheleta; māšal; mowa motywacyjna; eksperyment królewski.

The story told in Qoh 2:1–11 confronts the reader with an extravagant enterprise by an eccentric king. He is first introduced as Qoheleth – “the son of David, king in Jerusalem” (1:1). Then, when he first speaks for himself, he gives a slightly nuanced self-introduction: “I Qoheleth have been king over Israel in Jerusalem” (1:11). The only historical figure who might fit that description would be king Solomon. Yet, the reader is left to his guesses, because nowhere in the Book the name of Solomon occurs. Most contemporary commentators are of the opinion that the figure at stake is fictional, and so is everything he shares – including Qoh 2:1–11. There is no unanimity though in assessing the meaning and function of those reflections. The differences seem to be nurtured by the evaluation of the author’s approach to kingship in Israel. Exegetes who ascribe to him negative sentiments toward monarchy would perceive them as an open or veiled criticism of royal institutions<sup>1</sup>. On the opposite side are those who argue that the author shows deep appreciation for monarchy as associated with wisdom<sup>2</sup>. It seems that the discussion has reached its limits and it is time to take a different path. Instead of determining what kind of sentiments toward monarchy the author is showing, one should rather focus on contemplating the literary and rhetorical artistry in imparting wisdom here present.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., J.L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes. A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia 1987) 68; R.N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (NCBC; London 1989) 25; L. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon 1994) 220–221.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, Y.V. Koh, *Royal Autobiography in the Book of Qoheleth* (BZAW 369; Walter de Gruyter–Berlin–New York 2006) 18, states: “I will seek to demonstrate that the royal voice is much more pervasive and integral to the entire work and that, rather than attacking the institution of monarchy by use of a guise, the author is deliberately taking on a royal persona in order to strengthen the book’s royal connections”. On the other hand, D. Gnanaraj, “Royal Autobiography and the ‘Anti-Royal’ Passages in Qoheleth: Some Observations”, *TTJ Torch Trinity Journal* 20.2 (2017) 155–166 [156], comments: “Those who believe we have here memoirs of real historical figure must wrestle with some contradictions. For example, how to account for passages sounding like antiroyal polemic: 3:16–17; 4:1; 4:13–16; 5:7–8 [ET vv.8–9]; 8:1–5; 10:5–7.16–17; 10:20”.

I want to offer a new approach to the meaning and function of the most colorful part of the royal narrative, namely Qoh 2:1–11 – which I will call here “royal show”<sup>3</sup>. I believe there are good reasons to take it as a theatrical convention, a show put on by a skillful teacher aiming at winning over the audience. He uses royalty as a literary motif to dwell on for fashioning an intriguing and engaging *māšal*. Its main task is to impart wisdom and disillusion the audience. The author makes of it a mind exercise for his audience. I will present my view addressing three successive issues: the lyrical subject, the dynamics of *māšal*, and the rhetorical purpose of the “royal show”.

### 1. The lyrical subject: king or teacher?

For the interpretation of Qoh 2:1–11 one first needs to determine “who is speaking here” – i.e., “who is the lyrical subject”?<sup>4</sup> I don’t mean to solve the old

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<sup>3</sup> There may be noted a sense of confusion in the literature on the subject as far as the labels are concerned. One needs to distinguish between “royal fiction/autobiography” or “royal experiment”. As for the first one, scholars determine its boundaries to Qoh 1:12–2:26 (e.g., W. Zimmerli, *Das Buch Predigers Salomo* (ATD 16/1; Göttingen 1962) 129; J.L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 68; R.N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*. 46; J. „al, “Reconfiguring Solomon in the Royal Fiction of Ecclesiastes”, in: G.J. Brooke, A. Feldman (ed.), *On Prophets, Warriors, and Kings. Former Prophets through the Eyes of Their Interpreters* (BZAW 470; Berlin-Boston 2016) 13–39 [13.30]), or to Qoh 1:12–2:11 (e.g., Ch.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Yale Bible; New Haven-London 1997) 98). The second one, though, is sometimes equated with the first in terms of its delimitation. For instance, S.L. Adams limits it to 1:12–2:26 (*Wisdom in Transition. Act and Consequence in Second Temple Instructions* (Leiden – Boston 2008) 112; See also T.J. „al, “Reconfiguring Solomon”, 13. A. Schoors, *Ecclesiastes* (Historical Commentary on the Old Testament; Leuven 2013) 97, who also follows this delimitation uses different nomenclature. He calls Qoh 1:12–2:26 “royal experience”. Some further alterations to the overall view are found as well, e.g.: B. Pinçon, sees “royal fiction” in 1:13–2:26 (*Lénigme du bonheur. Étude sur le sujet du bien dans le livre de Qohélet* (Supplements to the Vetus Testamentum 119; Leiden–Boston 2008) 219), D. Rudman determines “royal experiment” to 1:12–2:12 (*Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (JSOT.SS 316; Sheffield 2001) 11). One might conclude that scholars would see the beginning of the royal fiction – experiment in 1:12, but there is evident lack of unanimity in pinpointing where it ends. Ch.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 142, observes: “It is clear that 1:12 begins a new literary unit; the impersonal style of the introductory poem (1:3–11) gives way to the autobiographical account [...]. The question of the unit’s ending is however, disputed. Scholars have variously posited 1:18, 2:11, 2:26, or 3:15 as the end”.

<sup>4</sup> I leave aside the questions concerning the division of the unit and its detailed exe-

dilemma concerning the identity of the speaker – is he the king Solomon or somebody vested in Solomon’s royal garments? I agree with most scholars that he could hardly be king Solomon incognito and that the story he tells is not a report from the scene either. On the other hand, the person/voice speaking is at pains to make the impression he is as real as one can be. The question is, though, if he really wants the audience to believe in his royal status or he rather plays a king winking at his readers to raise their awareness of the use of a theatrical convention here? I believe the latter is the case. Qoheleth is rather a wisdom teacher who chose to use this convention for educational purposes. Thus, there is no point in debating over his royal status – whether it is actual or fictional. To prove that we need to examine Qoheleth’s portrait in the Epilogue (12:9–14).

### 1.1. The protagonist’s portrait(s)

The final part of any literary work has a conclusive force. It is to be the last word. Hence, we may not ignore that data provided in the Epilogue of the Book of Qoheleth. There, among other things, we get a summary of who Qoheleth was. There is no mention of Qoheleth’s royal status. Instead, the reader is told that Qoheleth was a wise man and educator – a preceptor who taught wisdom to many (12:9). This is the portrait of Qoheleth that the author wanted to be left in the reader’s mind. The reader may be rightly puzzled by the fact that the author shows no trace of embarrassment in glossing over the initially introduced royal status of the main protagonist.

Commentators either ignore this problem<sup>5</sup> or explain it as a redactional work of a later scribe(s)<sup>6</sup>. One can of course assume that the Epilogue is a product of

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getical, which have already been done in many studies. My interest is in the overall message and function of the unit. As for its location in the Book I believe it is the core of the royal narration in Qoheleth. In my opinion that narration embraces Qoh 1:12–2:26.

<sup>5</sup> E.S. Christianson, *Ecclesiastes through the Centuries* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Malden – Oxford 2007) 247, notes: “The incisive comments about Qoheleth in verses 9–10 are often passed over by interpreters”.

<sup>6</sup> See a survey of the problematic, e.g.: G.T. Sheppard, “The Epilogue to Qoheleth as Theological Commentary”, *CBQ* 39 (1977) 182–189. M.V. Fox defends its unity (“Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qoheleth”, *HUCA* 47 (1977) 83–106). It is not rare among scholars to speak of two epilogues (e.g., J.L. Crenshaw, *Qoheleth. The Ironic Wink* (Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament; Columbia 2013) 26–27). See also A.G. Shead,

a different author who for instance tried to provide the reader with a less controversial and hence more orthodox picture of the main protagonist<sup>7</sup>. I believe that even if there were glosses or alterations done by a later author, they must have made perfect sense to him in the context of the whole work. Hence, I prefer to read the Book wholistically as a unified composition<sup>8</sup>. It is hardly probable that somebody who would be skilled enough to introduce substantial changes to the Book would overlook the obvious discrepancy in picturing Qohelet between the initial chapters and the Epilogue. Of course, there are inconsistencies and contradictions in the Book's message but that is how he perceives life<sup>9</sup>.

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"Reading Ecclesiastes 'Epilogically'", *Tyndale Bulletin* 48.1 (1997) 67–91 [68]: "In the quest to pin down the message of Qohelet, the epilogue (12:9–14) is perhaps the most unexplored of regions. This is primarily because it tends to be perceived as a later addition and—worse—one which "introduces wholly alien categories. The aim of this article is to challenge the second of these assumptions on both formal and thematic grounds, and to present instead an epilogue which, together with 1:1–2 and 12:8, provides the reader with the book's own key to the message it sets forth".

<sup>7</sup> M.V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes* (JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia 2004) xvii.xxxiii, observes: "Most modern commentators regard the epilogue (12:9–14) as an appendix added by a later scribe or „editor". [...] The epilogue (12:9–14) is commonly considered an addition by a later scribe, but it may be the words of the anonymous *author*, who has heretofore presented Koheleth, a persona, and quoted his teachings. (Some distinguish two epilogues, 12:9–12 and 12:13–14). The epilogue looks back and evaluates Koheleth from a more conventional and conservative standpoint, assuring the reader that he was a wise and eloquent teacher, but also warning that the words of the wise hold certain dangers. What is most important? Fearing God, obeying His commandments, and living in awareness of God's ultimate judgment. For Kohelet too, these are bedrock truths that experience can collide with but not dislodge".

<sup>8</sup> D. Rudman, "Woman as Divine Agent in Ecclesiastes", *JBL* 116.3 (1997) 411–427 [411]. In 1998 R. J. Clifford stated: „Today, most commentators are inclined to treat the book as a literary unity, though most regard 12:9–14 (or w. 12–14) as a correcting, "orthodox" addition to make the whole acceptable" (*The Wisdom Literature* (Abingdon Press Nashville 1998) 101). D. Gnanaraj, "Royal Autobiography", 155, comments: "In the recent years, Qoheleth scholarship has grown in its appreciation towards the coherence and internal unity of Qoheleth. Qoheleth's narrative "voice", "royal persona", "person" has been brought to the fore by a number of studies in their attempt to provide such coherence".

<sup>9</sup> M.V. Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series 71; Bible and Literature Series 18; Sheffield 1989) 11, notes: "I maintain that Qohelet is not merely caught up in contradictions (though this does happen occasionally). Rather, he recognizes and even sharpens them as evidence for his claim that "everything is absurd". In fact, they are more than evidence. Qohelet uses contradictions as the lens through which to view life; it is appropriate, then, that we use his contradictions as the angle

However, the switch in a person's identity within one composition would be a major breach in the work's logic and reliability. So, these two aspects may not be placed in one line.

So, if we dismiss the editorial changes as a possible reason for the discrepancy in portraying the main protagonist in the beginning and in the end of the Book, how shall we account for it? It seems that there are two possible solutions. First, the author may have intended to put an equal sign between kings and wisemen in order to elevate the status of the latter. Thus, they would get an extra recognition by placing them next to the crowned heads. This way the author would have been projecting the royal status on wisdom teachers. Such an approach may appeal to those who enjoy elevated metaphors and symbolism. The Jewish tradition attributes to the wise the title of king, in the sense "head of school" (*caposcuola*) or a respected figure whom others look up to<sup>10</sup>. Even the newlyweds – bride and groom – in the Sephardic tradition are pictured as respectively king and queen<sup>11</sup>. Why would a respected teacher be exempt from such an honor? Hence clothing Qohelet in the garments of a king would be a sign of appreciation for Qoheleth's wisdom and the respect he enjoyed. A somewhat more nuanced version of that claim was offered by Y.V. Koh. Against most scholars, he argued that the Book of Qoheleth in its entirety is a "royal autobiography"<sup>12</sup>. The main protagonist is

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of approach to his thought. Exegesis has usually sought to push Qohelet to one side or the other, to show him consistently pious or consistently skeptical and pessimistic. I have tried to be faithful to the uneasy tensions that I see as characterizing Qohelet's attitudes and world view". It is not impossible that some final redactor at some point stitched together loosely existing parts. Some would even see here a work of nine different authors (see discussion by J.A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* [Walter de Gruyter-Berlin-New York 1979] 6–8). See also e.g., J. L. Crenshaw, "Qoheleth in Current Research", *HAR* 7 (1983) 41–56 [43]; C. Newsom, "Job and Ecclesiastes," in: J.L. Mays et al. (ed.), *Old Testament Interpretation: Past, Present, and Future* (Nashville 1995) 187–190; M.V. Fox, "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet", *HUCA* 48 (1977) 83–106. A.G. Shead, "Reading Ecclesiastes «Epilologically»", 67: "This is primarily because it tends to be perceived as a later addition and – worse – one which "introduces wholly alien categories". The aim of this article is to challenge the second of these assumptions on both formal and thematic grounds, and to present instead an epilogue which, together with 1:1–2 and 12:8, provides the reader with the book's own key to the message it sets forth."

<sup>10</sup> R. Vignolo, "Maschera e sindrome regale: interpretazione ironico-psicanalitica di Qoh 1,12–2,26", *Teologia* 26 (2001) 12–64 [22–23].

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/marriage-in-judaism> (13.10.2021).

<sup>12</sup> Y.V. Koh, *Royal Autobiography*, 146.

king and teacher at the same time. The same protagonist assumes a double role here, namely the role of "autobiographer and wisdom instructor"<sup>13</sup>. Why would he need that royal twist for his portrait? Koh believes that it was to emphasize the continuity of tradition "where wisdom was once associated with the king and court"<sup>14</sup>. Besides, it was "to help lend credence and authority to his message and teaching despite its heavy questioning of traditional wisdom"<sup>15</sup>. The first option in this section may seem too good to be true, whereas opinions similar to Koh's – where the continuation of the royal presence is assumed beyond the first two chapters „have been gradually gaining momentum in the current scholarship"<sup>16</sup>. Within this perspective there is no discrepancy between the king (in the beginning) and the wisdom teacher (in the end). It is the same royal figure from the beginning to the end. Only in the end his role as educator is emphasized<sup>17</sup>.

The second solution would be to see things the other way around, namely that Qoheleth was a wise teacher all the way up to the Epilogue. The author could have naturally imagined a creative teacher taking on different roles or playing different roles for educational purposes. He would visualize him imitating different figures familiar to his audience if only that would engage his audience and facilitate imparting wisdom. I am much in favor of this solution. So, I see the main protagonist being the same figure of a sage, a wise teacher – from the beginning till the end. As for his royal status, it is rather to be regarded as king act. He was never meant to be a monarch, but rather a skilled teacher (as the epilogue story has it) who would adopt different means of communication and literary devices for imparting wisdom. One of them is playing roles or putting on masks – as in the Greek theater. For the sake of the play (drama or comedy)

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<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, 163.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, 185. S. Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism* (New York–London 2012) 18, notes: "ancient authors borrowed identities not in the way that a modern author might use a pen-name, but as a way of establishing the credentials of their protagonists, or as a way of providing a particular context in which their words were to be understood".

<sup>16</sup> D. Gnanaraj, "Royal Autobiography", 156.

<sup>17</sup> M. Shields, "Qohelet and Royal Autobiography," in: *The Words of the Wise are Like Goats: Engaging Qohelet in the 21st Century*, Mark Boda, Tremper Longmann III, and Cristian Rata, eds., (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns 2013) 117–136 [128]. Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 32, argues: "we cannot legitimately use the simple fact of Qohelet's account to suggest that he was a king".

actors would wear different masks on stage<sup>18</sup>. The mask (Gr. *prosopon*) would help the actor turn into the character he was to personify. None of the spectators would seriously think that such an actor was transformed into the character whose part he was playing. None would judge it a hoax. It would be a natural trick facilitating to the audience to live the drama that was carried out on stage. By analogy, our sage would adopt this strategy here.

I favor the second solution because it best solves the problem of discrepancy between the two contrasting portraits of Qohelet. It best explains the author's seeming carelessness about accounting for the discrepancy. From the point of view of the author there was no discrepancy because there were never two contrasting portraits. The royal guise was not meant so much for selling the reader on the idea of Qoheleth being a monarch, but to exemplify the creativity and artistry in transmitting wisdom on the part of the main protagonist<sup>19</sup>. It is frequently overlooked that in 12:9–10 the author is picturing him as a creative individual who was at pains to find the most efficient means for serving wisdom to his contemporary<sup>20</sup>. He was then stimulating his imagination and inventive powers to come up with right words in speech and writing (12:10). He would

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<sup>18</sup> R. Vignolo, "Maschera e sindrome regale", 12–64.

<sup>19</sup> To be precise that is rather to be ascribed to the author/redactor of the composition. Nevertheless, since he wants to stay in the shadows, it is legitimate to refer to the protagonist's skills.

<sup>20</sup> R.E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature*. Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes and Esther (Grand Rapids 1981) 5, notes: "The didactic SAYING is often characterized as an "artistic saying" (Kunstspruch), i.e., a saying that is carefully and deliberately formed with an eye to literary polish and finesse. Such literary finish was always a concern of the sage who held it up as a goal: There is joy for a man in his utterance; a word in season, how good it is (Prov 15:23; cf. 25:11; 26:25). It is written of Qohelet that he sought to find "pleasing sayings, and to write down true sayings with precision" (Eccl 12:10). In the discussion about the setting of the sayings it will become apparent that it is not possible to restrict such literary achievement to the "school" alone". E. Bickerman, "Kohleth (Ecclesiastes) or The Philosophy of an Acquisitive Society", in: *idem* (ed.), *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (New York 1967) 139–167 [143], observes: "Kohleth's "words of truth," on the other hand, were addressed to a crowd that gathered around him on the street: scholar turned haranguer." E. S. Christianson, *Ecclesiastes Through the Centuries*, 97, comments: "This general shift in view since Grotius's ground-breaking observation of Ecclesiastes' overall meaning reflects a shift in the 'consensus' perception of the implied author. Of course, there may be much to commend both the new and the old perceptions. One inescapable result, however, is that Qoheleth is no longer sitting comfortably behind any Solomonic mask".



coin and transmit proverbs containing breadcrumbs of wisdom – an easy way even for illiterate people to absorb knowledge (12:9). In other words, he would be a good teacher always trying to find the most efficient ways of educating his pupils – himself being eager to listen, examine and learn<sup>21</sup>. This characteristic justifies one more conclusion, namely that it is appropriate to consider the previous chapters as a product of Qoheleth's effort to convey wisdom efficiently and effectively.

The Book of Qohelet is a vault of information. Many commentators believe that as such it needs to take all possible measures to build confidence of its potential readers. For many commentators the royal part in the beginning of the book serves that purpose. In my opinion it is an overstatement, a cliché that is being accepted without further critical assessment. In fact, the Book does not need a royal figure for building its wisdom credentials. Otherwise, the redactor would have made sure that his final statement on Qoheleth left no doubt about the protagonist's royal status. Instead, in his last word he emphasized the creativity and skillfulness of this exceptional teacher in applying efficient means for transmitting wisdom. The most prominent of them being *māšal proverb* (12:9) – a genuine product of wisdom tradition. So, there is a good reason to think that the royal narrative serves as an exemplification of Qoheleth's mastery in employing efficient means of teaching. He is an outstanding teacher – skilled in imparting wisdom.

## 2. The dynamics of *māšal*

As it has been mentioned, in Qoh 12,9–10 the main protagonist is shown as a skillful teacher adopting various literary devices of which *māšal proverb* seems

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<sup>21</sup> N. Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*. Qoheleth's Pedagogy from a Rhetorical-Critical Perspective (BZAW 312; Berlin-New York 2002) 1, notes: "The epilogue of Ecclesiastes characterizes Qoheleth as a teacher of knowledge and as one who 'heeds, gathers, and arranges proverbs' (12:9), suggesting that Qoheleth was a master of his discourse. Moreover, the frame-narrator of Ecclesiastes understands Qoheleth as an orator within the former's discourse ('Says Qoheleth' in 1:2; 7:27; 12:8). Thus, Qoheleth is presented as the Teacher par excellence, who effectively crafts his discourse for the reader audience of Ecclesiastes". J.L. Crenshaw, *Qoheleth*. The Ironic Wink, 9, observes: "On the basis of an editorial identification of Qoheleth in 12:9 as a hakam ('professional wise man'), some scholars view him as 'Teacher'"

the most prominent. He gets recognition for having set in order many *mešalim*.<sup>22</sup> The very mention of *mešalim* may evoke one of the books in the sapiential corpus – namely the Book of Proverbs. In fact, scholars noted some points of contact between Qoh 12:9–14 and the book of Proverbs<sup>23</sup>. A brief reference to *māšal* as it was conceived in the Book of Proverbs would help shed some more light on the *māšal* at work in Qoh 2,1–11.

### 2.1. *Māšal* in the Book of Proverbs<sup>24</sup>

The Book of Proverbs is a genuine example of how creative wisdom instructors were about literary devices utilized for imparting knowledge. As I have already mentioned, in the very first verse the author labels the Book as a work containing *mešalim* of Solomon. So, *māšal* is the key concept here. The term is generally rendered as *proverb*, but the English translation is deceptive because it suggests that in what follows we should expect a collection of short, condensed wise

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<sup>22</sup> J.A. Duncan, *Ecclesiastes* (Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries; Nashville 2017) 180, states: “His pedagogical vehicle is identified as the proverb. We see Qohelet at work, thoughtfully studying proverbs and arranging (perhaps editing) them for presentation. The three Hebrew verbs used to convey his scholastic labors exhibit sound play (assonance)—’izzēn/ḥiqqēr/tiqqēn—a favored device of wisdom teachers (e.g., Prov 3:35; 6:21; 9:5; 13:24; Eccl 10:11, 18). The second verb (NRSV “study”) means to search out or examine thoroughly (see Job 29:16 and Prov 18:17, where it refers to the thorough examination of legal cases). Thus, the commentator draws attention to the conscientious, deliberate process behind Qohelet’s contribution”.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. G.T. Sheppard, “The Epilogue to Qoheleth as Theological Commentary,” *CBQ* 39 (1977) 182–189. S.L. Adams, *Wisdom in Transition*, 113, pays attention to similarities between the Epilogue and the Book of Proverbs in technical terms (proverbs, wise ones) and verbs „indicating the process of instruction”. A.K. Farmer, *Who Knows what is Good? A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; Grand Rapids-Edinburgh 1991) 4, works on the assumption that „our ancestors in the faith intended for us to read Proverbs and Ecclesiastes together, as a collection with a ‘prologue’ (Prov. 1:2–7) and an ‘epilogue’ (Eccl. 12:11–14). In the following pages, the assumption will consistently be made that each book should be read in the light of the other, and that both should be interpreter in light of their present context within the whole canon of our faith”.

<sup>24</sup> For a thorough research on the subject see e.g.: T. Frydrych *Living under the Sun. Examination of Proverbs and Qoheleth* (Vetus Testamentum. Supplements 90; Leiden 2002).

sayings – i.e., *proverbs*<sup>25</sup>. It is undeniable that the Book includes a large quantity of what we are used to call *proverbs*, but it also contains longer discourses, second person addresses, instructions, fictional stories, metaphors, and wisdom speeches by personified Wisdom (Prov 1:20–33; 8:1–36; 9:1–6)<sup>26</sup>.

The latter are worth a brief comment in the context of our investigation. The basic idea behind the Wisdom speeches seems to be the reversal of perspective. Suddenly, the reader gets to see wisdom not only as a set of rules and knowledge and practical skills he should acquire<sup>27</sup>. Just for a change the author introduces wisdom as an attractive woman who wants to approach the reader. So, for the sake of this lesson wisdom is personified and turns into Lady Wisdom. She is not pictured as a dignified and aloof matron, but rather as a dynamic and communicative "friend to the world". As M. V. Fox said "she wants human attention"<sup>28</sup>. As such she engages in teaching and rewarding those who would make friends with her. Chapter 8 is the most elaborate example of her anthropomorphic activity and engagement in people's lives<sup>29</sup>. However, the most thought-provoking image of hers is to be found in chapter 9. There we see her busy throwing a banquet. "In

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<sup>25</sup> J. Vayntrub, "Before Authorship: Solomon and Prov. 1:1", *BI* 26 (2018) 182–206 [182], states: "The title framing the book of Proverbs is deceptive in its simplicity".

<sup>26</sup> E.g., R.E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature*, 50–52; B.K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*. Chapters 1–15 (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids – Cambridge 2004) 55–58.

<sup>27</sup> M.V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Yale Bible 18A; New Haven-London 200) 357, observes: "Wisdom is not a static body of knowledge, a mass of facts and rules. It is certainly not an esoteric corpus of truths resistant to human penetration. Wisdom is like a living, sentient organism, requiring interaction with other minds for its own vitality and realization". J.N. Aletti, "Séduction et parole en Proverbes I-IX", *VT* 27.2 (1977) 129–144 [143], comments: "Prov. viii présente la sagesse en un double mouvement, La sagesse est tout entière tournée vers les hommes, elle désire avoir avec eux des relations privilégiées, préférentielles, parce qu'elle est en mesure de combler leurs aspirations les plus hautes".

<sup>28</sup> M.V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 357.

<sup>29</sup> J.D. Martin, *Proverbs* (Sheffield 1995) 85, comments: "It is 8:1–36 which sees the most developed presentation of a personified wisdom. The bulk of this chapter presents in a more expansive and developed form primarily what has already been encountered in 1.20–33. Again, wisdom makes her appearance in the public places of the city (vv. 2–3; cf. 1.20–21) and utters an impassioned plea, this time to 'all mankind' (v. 4; not just to the 'simple fools' of 1.22) to choose her ways. There is, however, a greater confidence on wisdom's part in ch. 8 than any we have encountered previously".

her eagerness to attract adherents, she both sends out her maidservants and goes herself to the busiest quarters of the city (9:3). There she invites all men, including some rather unsavory types, to her symposium (9:4)<sup>30</sup>. The *māšal* here present does not tell a fictional story of an anthropomorphically pictured Wisdom who builds a home for herself and then throws a party and invites passers-by.

The image of Lady Wisdom painted in Prov 1–9 is a riot of colors. Wisdom is personified, dressed as teacher, friend, companion, and host. She does everything on a grand scale<sup>31</sup>. Applying all sorts means to make sure her message gets delivered. Yet, none of the ancient readers would believe that one day he would meet her round the corner. None of them would consider the personified Lady Wisdom a real person doing things she is said to have done. Instead, they would rather take the portrayal for a convention – a literary device aimed at making certain elevated ideas down to earth. Would it be appropriate to rule out the possibility that the author of these Wisdom speeches hides behind Lady Wisdom? Creating a living character, he is like an actor in the Greek theater who puts on a mask to get into character. He applies this as a literary disguise not to make the audience believe that wisdom exists in the human shape, but to capture their attention and foster the learning process in them. It shows his artistry in engaging his audience. He is in fact a skillful and efficient teacher. I believe the same can be said of the “royal show(off)” in Qohelet – from the point of view of the artistry of the author and the *māšal* strategy applied. The scale of the activity undertaken is not to be underestimated.

## 2.2. Defining Māšal(?)

As we observed above, the *māšal* is quite puzzling. In fact, commentators emphasize the difficulty in grasping the concept of *māšāl*. We must realize that there is no one adequate English word that might embrace the whole meaning of *māšāl*<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> M.V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 357.

<sup>31</sup> J. Vayntrub, “Before Authorship”, 204, concludes: „A reader inculcated in the biblical literary tradition would associate the attribution of מִשְׁלָּל of Solomon with his reputation for vastness and abundance – particularly with his capacity for speech, but also with his legendary excess in general: Solomon’s abundance in words, wealth, and women”.

<sup>32</sup> N. Molnár-Hídvégi, “The Paths Not Taken: Novel Insights on the Function and the Use of Mashal (מִשְׁלָּל) in the Old Testament”, *BN* 169 (2016) 83–110 [89 n.32].

From the etymological point of view *māšāl*, means “likeness” or “similitude”<sup>33</sup>. Its Greek equivalents are *paroimiai* and *parabolē*. The word may be derivative of two different meanings: *māšal* I *to be like, resemble* or *māšal* II *to rule, dominate*. “It is possible but not likely that the noun “proverb” plays on both words. If so, it would point to the fact that the proverb intends to draw comparisons so the recipient can stay in control of a situation”<sup>34</sup>.

That does not facilitate our task to define *māšāl*. The term is in fact “particularly resistant to definition”<sup>35</sup>. Fox rightly observes that the term “is applied to a great range of utterances, from one-line adages to extended poems. [...] it does not designate a single genre or category. Attempts to find a single feature common to all *mešalim* [...] have failed”<sup>36</sup>. N. Molnár-Hídvégi provides a survey of the so far made attempts to define *māšāl*<sup>37</sup>. Her conclusion is that they did not bring about any satisfactory solutions. However, Molnár-Hídvégi boldly criticizes the very search for definition in this regard and recommends much more promising way of research on the matter. Instead of dedicating so much time

<sup>33</sup> T. Hildebrandt, “Proverb, Genre of”, in: T. Longman III-P. Enns (ed.), *Dictionary of the Old Testament. Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press; Downers Grove, IL 2008) 528–539 [532].

<sup>34</sup> T. Longman III, *Proverbs* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids 2006) 30; J.D. Martin, *Proverbs* (Sheffield 1995) 53. T. Hildebrandt, “Proverb, Genre of”, 532, notes: “There is a diversity of genres tagged by the label of *māšal* popular sayings (Jer 23:28; 31:29), literary aphorisms (Prov 10:1–22:16), taunt songs (Is 14:4; Mic 2:4; Hab 2:6–8), bywords (Deut 28:37; 1 Kings 9:7) and allegories (Ezek 17:1–10; 20:45–49). The *māšal* calls for one to reflect and make connections mapping the ideals expressed in the text onto the current situations”. Cf. also: N. Amzallag, M. Avriel, “The Cryptic Meaning of the Isaiah 14 *māšal*”, *JBL* 131.4 (2012) 643–662 [644]: „The term *māšal* refers to a wide range of literary genres in the Bible. It may designate a satire, a proverb, an epic poem, a parable, a fine wordplay (הגנינה) and even a riddle (הדיח). Wisdom literature also is referred to as *māšal*, and this term can even designate a prophecy. In Biblical Hebrew, the verb לַשְׁמַן means to „equal” (passive לַשְׁמַנָּה „becoming as/being equal/homologous to,” “being identified with”). This meaning is encountered in the *māšal* of Isaiah 14 (v. 10: “You have become like us” [NRSV]), suggesting that the choice of this term to introduce the poem (v. 4) points to the existence of parallels/homologies in the song”.

<sup>35</sup> S. Curkpatrick, “Between *Māšāl* and Parable: ‘Likeness’ as a Metonymic Enigma”, *HBT* 24 (2002) 58, notes: “*māšal* remains particularly resistant to definition”.

<sup>36</sup> M.V. Fox, *Proverbs*, 54. R.E. Murphy, *Proverbs* (WBC 22; Nashville 1998) xxii: “[...] its usage is so far-ranging that it is of little use for classification”.

<sup>37</sup> N. Molnár-Hídvégi, “The Paths Not Taken”, 85–90.

and effort to coining an adequate definition of the term scholars should rather focus its “communicative function”<sup>38</sup>.

I entirely share that view and believe that we should look at *māšāl* from the perspective of its educative goals. Hence, we are not so much to look for literary characteristics that help to identify genre and set it apart from other genres<sup>39</sup>. We would rather perceive it as a common denominator for different means of persuasion aimed at imparting wisdom<sup>40</sup>. *Māšāl* is rather a broad term encompassing all sorts of means in the wisdom teacher’s pedagogical repertoire<sup>41</sup>. If we assume that wisdom teachers wanted to be efficient, we should also consequently see them as creative in applying different methods and methodologies appropriate for their audiences. Besides we should bear in mind that imparting wisdom does not merely mean transmitting knowledge. It takes different skills to influence pupils’ choices and help them develop criteria for distinguishing what really brings about profit in life<sup>42</sup>. That would also include wise discerning of

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<sup>38</sup> N. Molnár-Hídvégi, “The Paths Not Taken”, 83.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, 90, states: “Authors of *mešalim* do not attempt to fulfill faultlessly semantic principles or produce an ideal form of a literary genre. They rather invite their hearers/readers to participate in their texts, they call upon them, they attract and admonish them, and in so doing, they innovatively and imperceptibly change them”.

<sup>40</sup> T. Polk, “Paradigms, Parables, and *MēSalim*: On Reading *māšāl* in Scripture”, *CBQ* 45 (1983) 564–583.566, comments: “Naturally, any given list cannot be expected to exhaust the possibilities since the *māšāl* is constituted not by type or form (it is not a *Gattung* in that sense), but rather, according to Landes, by content and function. [...] Nevertheless, the diversity is not without order, for he finds uniting all *mēSalim* a “basic meaning” having to do with “a comparison or analogy [constructed] for the purpose of conveying a model, exemplar, or paradigm”. M.V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, 349, notes: “In order to make a lasting impression, the father must not only command, he must persuade”. R.E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life. An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (ABRL; Doubleday: New York 1990) 15, argues: “[...] the real intent is to train a person, to form character, to show what life is really like and how best to cope with it. The favored approach is to seek out comparisons or analogies between the human situation and all else (animals and the rest of creation). It does not command so much as it seeks to persuade, to tease the reader into a way of life (although it must be admitted that chaps. 1–9 are much more dogmatic in style than the rest of the work)”.

<sup>41</sup> T. Longman III, *Proverbs*, 30.

<sup>42</sup> N. Shupak, “Learning Methods in Ancient Israel”, *VT* 53.3 (2003) 416–426 [419], notes: “It is not enough for the pupil to hear, acquire, and absorb the words of instruction. He also has to preserve and safeguard them so as to be able, when the time comes, to make proper use of these words”.

where the pupils stood, what their ability to be formed was, as well as what their expectations were from the process of acquiring wisdom<sup>43</sup>. Once established, they could employ different methodology. *Māšāl* would be ideal for this goal. As Polk said *māšāl* “wants to do something to, with, or for its hearers/readers”<sup>44</sup>. So, it is best to “recognize *māšāl* as a plastic term that can refer to more than a single form of speech”<sup>45</sup>.

### 3. “Royal show” rhetoric

In the verses above mentioned – 12,9–10 – we read about Qoheleth’s creativity, where he is praised also for setting in order many *mešālim*.<sup>46</sup> It has already been emphasized that the use and comprehension of *māšāl* in biblical literature calls for further studies. As we have seen in the final part of the Book, in the Epilogue, the redactor summarizes the life and work of his protagonist with no reference to his alleged royal status (12:9–10)<sup>47</sup>. He does not see in it anything that might need an explanation. That, I argued, is a clear-cut sign that he never saw Qoheleth as a real king. That royal guise was only a *māšāl* applied as a literary means and convention adopted for transmitting wisdom in an intriguing way<sup>48</sup>. That *māšāl* has its own rhetoric, which is to be appreciated. It is time then to prove on what

<sup>43</sup> N. Shupak, “Learning Methods in Ancient Israel”, 418.

<sup>44</sup> T. Polk, “Paradigms, Parables, and Mešālim: On Reading the *māšāl* in Scripture”, 567.

<sup>45</sup> T.J. Sandoval, “Revisiting the Prologue of Proverbs”, *JBL* 126.3 (2007) 455–473 [468].

<sup>46</sup> J.A. Duncan, *Ecclesiastes*, 180: “His pedagogical vehicle is identified as the proverb. We see Qoheleth at work, thoughtfully studying proverbs and arranging (perhaps editing) them for presentation. The three Hebrew verbs used to convey his scholastic labors exhibit sound play (assonance)—’izzēn/ħiqqēr/tiqqēn—a favored device of wisdom teachers (e.g., Prov 3:35; 6:21; 9:5; 13:24; Eccl 10:11, 18). The second verb (NRSV “study”) means to search out or examine thoroughly (see Job 29:16 and Prov 18:17, where it refers to the thorough examination of legal cases). Thus, the commentator draws attention to the conscientious, deliberate process behind Qoheleth’s contribution.”

<sup>47</sup> Cf. G.T. Sheppard, “The Epilogue to Qoheleth as Theological Commentary,” *CBQ* 39 (1977) 182–189.

<sup>48</sup> So far, only N. Toshiaki argued for a *māšāl* present in the first chapter of the Book, namely in Qoh 1:2–11 (“Un *mašāl* de Qohelet 1,2–11”, *Revue d’histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 59.3–4 (1979) 605–615).

basis I claim that the “royal show” is a *māšal*, what its rhetorical force might be and how it was expected to meet its purpose.

### 3.1. Identifying *māšal* in 2:1–11

N. Amzallag and M. Avriel when examining Isa 14 list out four types of parallels proving that *māšal* is at work there: *māšal* as parody, as archetype, as parable, and as riddle. All these are also discernible in Qoh 2:1–11, and others may be seen as well<sup>49</sup>.

#### – *māšal* as parody

The author is dwelling here on a genre of royal autobiographies – Akkadian and Egyptian<sup>50</sup>. Thus, he strikes a note with his contemporaries. On the one hand the story puts on airs of being an account of a king’s activities and achievements like those known from the West Semitic royal inscriptions. However, there is a significant difference to be observed. Koh noted that “Qoheleth appears to have adopted this literary convention although there is a notable difference in content between the extravagant description of his accomplishments in 2:4–9 and those found in the West Semitic royal texts. The boasting of the West Semitic kings in their inscriptions often comprise deeds done on behalf of their people. [...] In clear contrast, Qoheleth’s boasting is centered on his self-indulgent merry-making activities”<sup>51</sup>. Seow argued that this section of Qoheleth is a parody of ANE political propaganda<sup>52</sup>. D.B. Miller described Qoh 2:1–11 as “a careful pastiche of aggrandizing statements typical of ancient Near Eastern royalty”<sup>53</sup>.

<sup>49</sup> N. Amzallag, M. Avriel, “The Cryptic Meaning of the Isaiah 14 *māšal*”, *JBL* 131.4 (2012) 643–662 [644].

<sup>50</sup> D. Gnanaraj, “Royal Autobiography”, 155.

<sup>51</sup> Y.V. Koh, *Royal Autobiography in the Book of Qoheleth*, 78–79.

<sup>52</sup> Ch.-L. Seow, “Qoheleth’s Autobiography”, in: A. Beck et al. (ed.), *Fortunate the Eyes That See*. Fs. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids 1995) 275–287.

<sup>53</sup> D.B. Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes*. The Place of Hebel in Qoheleth’s Work (SBL Academia Biblica 2; Leiden – Boston – Köln 2002) 107.



– *māšal* as archetype

The proper name of the king is not mentioned in this section. The reader is given an illusory certainty that he understands who the protagonist is. The description is specific and enigmatic at the same time. It evokes associations with king Solomon, even though the reader cannot be sure of it. The fiasco of an outstanding show that he puts on in 2:1–11 may serve as an archetype (*māšal*) for the failure of certain attitude of those searching for wisdom.

– *māšal* as parable

The narration about the hero’s activity in 2:1–11 is often interpreted against the descriptions of royal – and especially Solomon’s – achievements and grandeur from the books of Kings, Chronicles and Nehemiah. However, with such an approach one significant point is missed “that Qohelet not only poses as a king, but even – for a moment – as God. [...] in its actual wording this passage is a paraphrase of the planting of the Garden of Eden, with indeed Qohelet himself as subject, instead of God [...]. For Qohelet the result of his effort is opposite to what God is said to have seen. After the completion of creation in Genesis, “God saw all that he had wrought, and behold, it was very good” (Gen. 1.31). Qohelet, for his part, having acquired all imaginable wealth, “turned to all the works that my hands had wrought, and to the labor that I had labored in working, and behold, all was worthlessness and pursuit of wind, and there was no profit under the sun”<sup>54</sup>. So, the parable dimension of *māšal* is also present.

– *māšal* as riddle

It has to do with the above-mentioned archetype and the ambivalent identity of the protagonist. That is in fact already introduced by the first verse of Book, repeated the in 1:12, but not mentioned in 2:1. “The identity of Qohelet is the first riddle which confronts readers of Ecclesiastes immediately they start reading the book”<sup>55</sup>. That very self-introduction may be taken as a type of riddle – as Farmer argues. With that “in effect he is saying, “Given these clues (I was king over Israel in Jerusalem and known for my wisdom), guess who I am?” Then Qohelet uses the facts of Solomon’s life (which would have been well known to his audience through their traditions) to argue that even one who had all the

<sup>54</sup> A. Verheij, “Paradise Retried: on Qohelet 2:4–6”, *JSOT* 50 (1991) 113–115.

<sup>55</sup> D. Ingram, “The Riddle of Qoheleth and Qoheleth the Riddler”, *JSOT* 37.4 (2013) 485–509 [494].

wisdom and wealth of Solomon would come to the same conclusions as Qohelet has: “all I breathlike”.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, in 2:2 there are two questions asked regarding the value of merriment and pleasure<sup>57</sup>. They sound rhetorical, but they equally may be designed as a challenge to the reader’s ability of critical thinking just like the question: what came first chicken or egg? In other words, they may be riddles engaging to debate<sup>58</sup>.

So, given the above facts it is reasonable to assume that the pericope of Qoh 2:1–11 is kept in a *māšal* form. As such it was not fashioned to make the reader believe that the figure at stake was a royal figure or the figure of Solomon. It was a literary means employed to impart wisdom. It may be well considered as an illustration of the richness of pedagogical repertoire of Qoheleth (cf. 12:9–10). The last question to be asked is then what rhetorical outcome he expected to achieve.

### 3.2. Why putting on a royal show?

The question of Qoheleth putting on a show in 2:1–11 has already been touched upon in a few studies. K. A. Farmer, referring to 1:12, starting from grammatical observations made a significant remark. “The use of the completed-action form of the verb (suggesting “I used to be king”) gave rise to an early Jewish legend that Solomon went by the name Qohelet after he had been dethroned by the “king of the demons”. It seems much more likely that Qohelet is here playing a role in order to argue a point”<sup>59</sup>. When she turned to 2:1–11 she somewhat abandoned her first intuition about the main protagonist “playing a role”. She named that short comment on 2:1–11 : “The “Confessions” of a Conspicuous Consumer (2:1–11)”. “Someone like Solomon, who could be said to have done

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<sup>56</sup> A.K. Farmer, *Who Knows what is Good? A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids-Edinburgh 1991) 154.

<sup>57</sup> I follow Ch.-L. Seow’s emendation of the MT and the translation of the verse: “Regarding merriment, I said: “<what> does it boast?” And regarding pleasure: “What does it really accomplish?” (*Ecclesiastes*, 118.126).

<sup>58</sup> N. Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 40, observes: “Qoheleth frequently uses questions with an interrogative particle in 1:3–3:9 (1:3; 2:2, 3b, 12b, 19a, 22, 25; 3:9). Due to the assumed pessimistic tone of Ecclesiastes, many exegetes regard them as rhetorical questions that expect negative answers. However, as Ogden and others have correctly demonstrated, Qoheleth responds to those questions in his own discourse, even though most of the answers are negative”.

<sup>59</sup> A.K. Farmer, *Who Knows what is Good?*, 154.

almost anything he wanted to do and to have possessed everything his eyes and his heart desired, makes a convincing witness to the ultimate lack of satisfaction such things give to the one who has them. The conclusion Qohelet draws from his experimentation is this: hard work is useless if done only to acquire material possessions. The value hard work has is the pleasure one feels in doing it (v.10), but no amount of work can produce material benefits that can be grasped and permanently gained "under the sun" (v. 11)<sup>60</sup>.

The most colorful opinion on the matter so far provided seems to me the one by N. Lohfink. He calls it a masquerade or royal masquerade. He applies the term practically to the whole section 1:12–3:15 and first observes that the narrative form adopted "leaves the reader free to compare his/her own life with its experiences, and to accept its logic only after critical examination. A subtle playing with the identity of the narrator further extends the free space for the reader". In 1:12 "he veils himself once again by the literary technique of a royal make-believe, a masquerade in which he assumes the image of a philosopher king of Jerusalem, the famous Solomon (see especially the references to 1 Kgs 1:4–8); and yet he is not Solomon [...]. The royal robe then sinks imperceptibly to the floor; its last appearance is in 2:25. Still, Solomon's project in 1:3 begins to be answered only in 3: 10, and so the royal masquerade may be thought truly to end only in 3:15. Through use of this masquerade in which a person is presented in a higher social level, it is possible, without forfeiting the advantages of narrative presentation, to base an anthropology not on the experiences of people who fail to grow or to achieve anything in life, but rather on the experiences of the highest human possibility, in the most fortunate world situations, joyfully lived. This makes only more devastating what then appears: the inevitable approach of death, the uncontrollable freedom of others regarding that world reality which I have shaped, and the uncontrollability of joy even for those who have brought about all its conditions for themselves<sup>61</sup>.

I am closest to Lohfink's position on the meaning of Qoh 2:1–11. I too believe Qoheleth masquerades as a king. I would differently account for it though. In my own wording: he puts on a royal show that turns into a royal show off. All is kept under the umbrella of *māšal* and aims at imparting wisdom. It all develops according to a neatly thought-out strategy. I would indicate its pillars as follows:

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<sup>60</sup> A.K. Farmer, *Who Knows what is Good?*, 157.

<sup>61</sup> N. Lohfink, *Qoheleth*. A Continental Commentary, tr. S. McEvenue (Minneapolis 2003) 44.

### Attention capture

By alluding to the famous royal figure, he simply wants to capture his audience's attention. So, he is winking at the audience and says: *Imagine I was a king. Not just any king. Say, I was the King! (Can you think of any other greater than him – Solomon?).* For the sake of the show, he virtually puts on royal garments at the same time alluding to an outstanding figure who everybody would want to make friends with. It is different from taking the audience for a ride because he already made sure that none would really believe he claimed to be an actual king – king Solomon for example. Instead, in an amusing way, he plays on associations with THE King.

### Speaking to the heart

Rhetorically speaking to his heart, he is actually speaking to the heart of his audience. So, he wants to meet them at that personal level. The speech is to be amusing but touching on serious matters at the same time. It gets almost unnoticed by the audience, that he addresses their hopes and expectations accumulated deep in their intimate shrine.

### Alluding to expectations

Wisdom paved the way for Solomon to enormous wealth and prosperity. In fact, Solomon was not only a role model for those willing to become wise. He was a living proof of how successful one who strives for wisdom can become. A wiseman is in a way sentenced to success. The reader who would want to follow in Solomon's footsteps might easily imagine himself reaching a somewhat similarly successful life down the road. He might naturally see similar advantages awaiting him round the corner. As a matter of fact, wisdom was never thought of as art for art's sake. Wisdom offered great future – prosperity in all possible ways (cf. Prov 1:20–33; 8:1–9:6). One of Qoheleth's favorite words is *yitrôn profit, gain, surplus*. It occurs in the last verse of the passage we are interested in here. Its "fundamental notion is advantage" and "[...] the sages who composed the book of Proverbs believed that wise conduct brought lasting gain"<sup>62</sup>. Another one is *Heleq portion*, which shows in 2:10.

### Challenging the common sense

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<sup>62</sup> J.L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 59. M.V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down & A Time to build Up. A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids – Cambridge 1999) 112, observes that "yitrôn means "advantage" (when two things are being compared) or "profit" (when used absolutely)".

He starts off with a glass of wine. One should rather say that a substantial jug of wine is at stake (2:3). That is the first signal sent to the audience – a wink that the experiment may not be a serious one. Commentators view wine mentioned here as “closely tied to enjoyment (e.g., Isa 16:10; 24:11; Jer 48:33)” and hence fitting the context where joy and pleasure are the matter of examination<sup>63</sup>. That would be true if Qohelet did not make it clear that he did not mean moderate socially oriented drinking. He intended to reach the extreme – to have a large amount of wine and get intoxicated. It would be difficult to celebrate by himself. Heavy drinking is contrary to wisdom’s attitude and is not appropriate for a king – especially a wise king (Prov 31:4–5). So, I see here a first contradiction, or even nonsense served to the audience with curiosity of their reaction. This is aimed at challenging their common sense. The nonsense pops back in the very same verse where Qohelet expresses his naïve plan of embracing folly, after having drunken enough wine, and still be guided by a wise heart. That is internally contradictory. It may be compared to illusions of a drunk man who insists he would be able to drive. The truth is that alcohol affects his driving ability long before signs of being drunk show (e.g., loss of coordination or balance, impaired judgement, or vision changes).

### **The illusory world**

So Qoheleth offers to his readers a walk into a delusional world he created for the sake of his *māšal*. It is a world where the rules of logic are suspended. It has all the aura of normalcy but in fact is illusory. Nonetheless, it can be attractive and appealing to the reader. Not only the naïve and unexperienced (Prov 1:4) but also the wise and learned may take it at face value. Hence it is perfect for engaging and keeping the audience’s attention. It is also important to observe that the author does not want to make the readers believe that his world is real. All he expects from them is to suspend the disbelief. Only then the mind-exercise he intends to offer can become efficient and educative.

### **Sky is the limit**

He plays a mighty and wealthy king in an ideal world of power for whom sky is the limit. The king is boasting about his achievements. The impression he gives is that he hoped to long enjoy the work of his hands. But there is another puzzle. He never did anything with his own hands. When he talks of planting vineyards

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<sup>63</sup> N. Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 65.

and parks, building awesome infrastructure he speaks of other people's labor. So, he appropriates someone else's toil claiming its fruits to be his own achievements. Even though it is in line with the style of ancient royal inscriptions, the reader gets the sense of a pastiche<sup>64</sup>. In the descriptions of those specific achievements there is a noticeable an egotistic perspective. The protagonist's "I" frames the passage (vv. 1 and 11). He constantly points to himself using the personal pronoun *li* for myself, for me (2:4–9), and reference to his body members (*my heart* 1:1.3.10; *my eyes* 1:10; *my hands* 1:11). It makes the impression of being self-centered and narcissistic<sup>65</sup>. So the reader can become. Unnoticeably to himself he can turn into a self-centered individual obsessed with searching for his Utopia – i.e., his "royal portion". Only there he would reach his lasting joy and be able to enjoy the fruits of his efforts. Being so fixated on the goal and so intensely looking up to a certain famous king whose proper name is never mentioned in the text, he runs the risk of seeing the picture of that king's career. The end of it was far from successful. What went wrong? The story narrated in 2:1–11 is just one of the possible ways of approaching the question. One might spend his life constantly chasing after wisdom in hope of achieving what Solomon had gained: wealth, power, glamor, and superiority. One may even become so fixated on the gain that ironically delusions develop. By addressing the audience's hopes and expectations he transforms the addressees into the cast<sup>66</sup>.

### Setting the goal

Qoheleth the sage is a great teacher. He puts on the royal show to tell a story of a third party, but in fact he provides a mirror for the reader to look into. All that to identify problems or obstacles that can prevent him from acquiring wisdom and maturity. I believe this may be viewed in terms of a coach's work. One of the conditions of self-development is setting goals. They need to be realistic. In

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<sup>64</sup> D.B. Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes*, 107, speaks of: "a careful pastiche of aggrandizing statements typical of ancient Near Eastern royalty [...]"

<sup>65</sup> J.L. Crenshaw, *Qoheleth*, 18, observes: "Qoheleth's huge ego has been recognized by interpreters, partly on the basis of the prominence of self-references in the description of royal achievements but also because of the many first-person verbs describing his thought processes. In 2:4–9, which boasts of Qoheleth's royal accomplishments, "for myself" (Hebrew *li*) occurs nine times, and the first-person indicator affixed to a verb appears eleven times. The cumulative effect is almost comedic, if not satiric".

<sup>66</sup> See my presentation of L. Alonso Schökel's concept of the dramatic reading of Job (D. Iwański, *The Dynamics of Job's Intercession* (AB 161; Rome 2006) 31–32).

Qoh 2:1–2 we have a report of goals set by the main protagonist. They hardly seem realistic. Yet, he strives for them. The following verses may be considered an illustration of how he intended to carry out the project. Unrealistic goals and expectations may only bring about discouragement and frustration. Ambitions of this kind are also hardly to be achieved by self-centered individuals. So, as Vignolo phrased it: “Only by dismissing [...] one’s own – naïve or conscious royal pretensions – one gets access to a crumb of wisdom! Therefore, the royal fiction in Qoh [...] maintains a crucial communicative and hermeneutic role. [...] Beginning of wisdom: stop dreaming of yourself as a king, no longer think of yourself as the only one, the unique one!”<sup>67</sup> His audience would gladly enter the play with a Solomon like figure on stage. In search for wisdom, they could be fixated on their all-successful idol to such an extent that they might miss the fact that he ended up poorly. Having all the means at his disposal, having achieved so much in the material world he could not fill that certain void he sensed in his heart. Even the wise can get charmed by the Solomonic like drive for success. He may dedicate his life to the good cause of searching for wisdom, and yet waste his life chasing the wind – i.e. illusory self-completion he believes it guarantees. Striving for one’s own success, teamwork excluded brings to an inevitable failure.

### Careful what you wish for

I think the trick at work in here is projecting forward and imaging. The overall question in every human activity should be: “why?” So, then why would you pursue wisdom? Can you give the reason for it? As the saying has it: “if you do not know where you are going how are you going to get there?” Aware of that, Qohelet – the coach – alludes to the goals that must be set. Contemporary motivational speaker B. Tracy calls a similar mind exercise “idealization”. “In idealizing, you create a vision of a perfect future for yourself in every area of your life. You practice “no limit” thinking. Imagine that you have all the time and money, all the friends and contacts, all the education and experience, and all the talents and abilities that you could possibly need to *be, have, or do* anything. If this were your situation, what would you really want to do with your life?”<sup>68</sup> In the words of Qoheleth – would you really wish for Solomon’s fortune? Is the success of the great king something you would wish to experience? Do you really

<sup>67</sup> R. Vignolo, “Maschera e sindrome regale”, 24.

<sup>68</sup> B. Tracy, Ch. Stein, *Kiss that Frog!* 12 Great Ways to Turn Negatives into Positives in Your Life and Work (San Francisco 2012) 12.

believe the value of wisdom is in being rewarded for your effort in acquiring it to the extent that you can do things on a grand scale? If so, you may wake up to a very bitter reality. What then is the advice? Dream big and go slow.

## Conclusions

To recapitulate, the goal of this paper was to offer new light on the interpretation of Qoh 2:1–11 – the so-called royal experiment. I claimed that it should be interpreted as a *māšal* given by a wise teacher who wishes to challenge his audience's ideas about seeking wisdom. It took on the amusing and, at the same time, challenging form of a one-man show. Since royal rhetoric was applied there, it might be rightly labeled a “royal show”.

The perspective I offered is not entirely new in its point of departure. Namely, I started by addressing the old problem: “who is the person speaking?” Like many other scholars, I found the statement from the Epilogue (12:9) decisive in answering that question. Qoheleth is to be viewed as a wise man and a wisdom teacher. Then followed another question to be answered: how to account for his alleged royal status in 2:1–11 and the rest of the so-called royal fiction? Exegetes often seem to ignore that a solution to that enigma can also be found in the same Epilogue. It says, that Qoheleth was keen on imparting wisdom (12:9–10) and in doing so he would fashion many *meshalim proverbs*. There are good reasons for seeing Qoh 2:1–11 as an example of this genre. The newness of the perspective I offered lies in looking at the problem of Qoheleth's royal status through the length of the genre employed in the pericope concerned.

So basically, the answers to the two questions mentioned above are to be found in the Epilogue (12:9–10). It is common among contemporary commentators to accept the unity of the book while at the same time considering the epilogue a later addition<sup>69</sup>. Moreover, it is quite probable that “the original epilogue consisted only of vss. 9–11 and that vss. 12–14 should be ascribed to a second epilogist”<sup>70</sup>. Nevertheless, I am in favor of a holistic reading of the Book. Its basic assumption is that no matter how many additions are to be detected in the Book,

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<sup>69</sup> S. Parisi, *Qoheleth*. Introduzione, trauzione e commento (Nuova Versione della Bibbia dai Testi Antichi 23; Edizioni San Paolo: Milano 2017) 31.

<sup>70</sup> A. Schoors, *Ecclesiastes* (Historical Commentary on the Old Testament; Peeters Publishers: Leuven 2013) 828.



they all must have made sense to the final redactor/editor. In other words, I take the text as it has been transmitted to us and treat all its parts as equally important.

The Epilogue is rightfully regarded as crucial to understanding the Book's meaning. M.V. Fox stated that "the essential function of the Epilogue is to mediate Qohelet's words to the reader in a way that makes them more plausible and more tolerable"<sup>71</sup>. However, there may be more to the content of the Epilogue than merely helping the audience to "digest" the intolerable words of the main protagonist. I argue that the Epilogue contains valuable hints accounting for the fashioning of the figure of the main protagonist as well as the literary means applied in the Book. So, the verses above mentioned (12:9–10) leave no doubt that we should view Qoheleth as a wisdom teacher rather than a king. This is not an earthshaking conclusion. Nevertheless, once we adopt this view, we still need to account for the royal status of the main protagonist in the initial chapters of the Book. For example, how come in Qoh 2:1–11 he presents himself as a king performing extraordinary acts?

Scholars differently approach this issue. Sometimes, instead of facing the problem directly, they seem to cover some secondary or imaginary matters. A good example of this approach can be found in the scholarly debate over the author's approach to the monarchy based on the data present in the Book. Surprisingly, based on the same data, commentators may radically differ in their opinions. Some may see the book as a celebration of the monarchy, while others may see it as a critique of royal institutions. I chose to focus on the meaning of the royal fiction employed in the initial parts of the Book. It was natural to turn again to the Epilogue for some hints helping to interpret Qoheleth's royal status. The answer, in my opinion, can be found in 12:9–10. There is mention of Qoheleth's activity in imparting wisdom. He would coin *meshalim proverbs* to make his teaching more efficient. I argued that it should be the prism through which royal fiction in general and the royal experiment in particular should be viewed. Māšal is the key answer.

Māšal is a flagship genre in the biblical wisdom literature. However, the problem is that we do not have an adequate English translation of the term. When rendered as a *proverb*, it seems to obscure the beauty and multifaceted character of the phenomenon at stake. In the preceding analyses, I briefly discussed other difficulties associated with the term's comprehension that contemporary scholars must contend with. In general, it must be regarded as a broad term encompassing

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<sup>71</sup> M.V. Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, 316.

various literary tools in the wisdom teacher's pedagogical repertoire. Instead of defining *māšal* we should rather pay attention to its educative role. Quoting Polk we would say that *māšal* "wants to do something to, with, or for its hearers/readers"<sup>72</sup>. Once we recognized a *māšal* in Qoh 2:1–11 it was then necessary to draw further conclusions, namely: what does it do for its hearers/readers?

It was observed that it was not a report of facts regarding an experiment by an eccentric king. It is *māšal* presented in the form of a show by an excellent teacher, Qohelet. For the sake of this study, I labeled it a "royal show". As such, this *māšal* is meant as a mind exercise for Qoheleth's audience. Regardless of its length, *māšal* may amuse, provoke, challenge, and educate at the same time. By applying the royal context and alluding to the greatest of Israel's kings, Qoheleth aims at engaging his readers in a process of imparting wisdom. Here we see the artistry of a skillful teacher who knows how to capture the attention of his audience. The *māšal* used in 2:1–11 turns the readers into the cast. Only then is the author able to deliver his neatly designed message. It is subtly served with the admixture of irony, folly, and incitement. Qoheleth touches upon some sensitive registers of his reader's daily struggle in searching for wisdom. He mostly wants to challenge them on the ground of their expectations.

It was legitimate to believe that those who took to heart the need for searching wisdom had their own expectations regarding the benefits that their efforts would be rewarded with. A wise man should prudently visualize his future and have specific expectations. Solomon, as "the patron saint" of all the sages, stands as a role model to imitate but also as living proof of how immensely one can be rewarded for his efforts in acquiring wisdom. However, even Solomon was not immune to stupidity. As absurd as it may sound, he decided to embrace folly for the sake of wisdom. Qoheleth, as an outstanding teacher, makes use of *māšal* addresses all those nuances, and invites the audience to a mind exercise. He puts on a "royal show" to amuse and to hold a mirror up to his readers to reflect their follies. It is tricky in its logic – riddle-like – but that is exactly what a wisdom teacher would employ to get his audience to think. This "royal show" can be considered a highly sophisticated motivational speech. Its goal is not to encourage the reader to imitate anybody—not even Solomon—but rather to challenge the reader to reflect upon his own mindset, goals, and expectations. His own fate is at stake. Selfish fixations on unrealistic goals as well as illusory expectations of immense profits for one's efforts may equally make one forfeit his life.

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<sup>72</sup> T. Polk, „Paradigms, Parables, and Mešālim”, 567.

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