



Approach #1: The book has Torah in it, so we judge the rest favourably

1. Talmud, Shabbat 30b

ומפני מה לא גנזוהו? מפני שתחילתו דברי תורה וסופו דברי תורה. תחילתו דברי תורה דכתיב (א:ג) "מה יתרון לאדם בכל עמלו שיעמול תחת השמש" ואמרי דבי רבי ינאי "תחת השמש הוא דאין לו, קודם שמש יש לו." סופו דברי תורה דכתיב (יב:ג) "סוף דבר הכל נשמע את האלקים ירא ואת מצותיו שמור כי זה כל האדם." מאי "כי זה כל האדם"? אמר רבי אלעזר כל העולם כולו לא נברא אלא בשביל זה. רבי אבא בר כהנא אמר שקול זה כנגד כל העולם כולו. שמעון בן עזאי אומר ואמרי לה שמעון בן זומא אומר לא נברא כל העולם כולו אלא לצוות לזה. ומאי "דבריו סותרין זה את זה"? כתיב "טוב כעס משחוק" וכתיב "לשחוק אמרתי מהולל." כתיב "ושבחתני אני את השמחה" וכתיב "ולשמחה מה זה עשה." לא קשיא: "טוב כעס משחוק" טוב כעס שכועס הקב"ה על הצדיקים בעולם הזה משחוק שמשחק הקב"ה על הרשעים בעולם הזה...

And why didn't they put it away? Because it begins with Torah and ends with Torah. It begins with Torah as is written, "What is the benefit for a person in all of his struggle, which he struggles beneath the sun" – beneath the sun there is none for him, but before the sun there is for him. It ends with Torah as it says, "In the end of the matter, all has been heard, revere Gd and guard His commandments, for this is the entire person." What is "this is the entire person"? Rabbi Elazar said: The entire world was created exclusively for such a person. Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: This person is equal to the entire world. Shimon ben Azzai or Shimon ben Zoma said: The world was created exclusively to join with this person.

And what is "its words contradict each other"? Kohelet 7 says "Anger is better than laughter" and Kohelet 2 says "Of laughter I saw it is to be praised." Kohelet 8 says "And I have praised joy" and Kohelet 2 says "And of joy, what does it do?" This is not a problem: "Anger is better than laughter" means the anger of Gd upon the righteous in this world is better than the laughter of Gd upon the wicked in this world...

2. Midrash, Vayikra Rabbah 28

כיון שאמר (שם יא) "ידע כי על כל אלה יביאך האלקים במשפט" אמרו יפה אמר שלמה. אמר ר' שמואל בר נחמני בקשו לגנוזו ספר קהלת שמצאו בו דברים שהם נוטים לצד מינות, אמרו כך היה שלמה צריך לומר "מה יתרון לאדם"? יכול אף בעמלה של תורה במשמע? חזרו ואמרו אילו אמר "בכל עמל" ושתק היינו אומרים אף בעמלה של תורה במשמע הוא, הא אינו אומר אלא "בכל עמלו", בעמלו הוא שאינו מועיל אבל בעמלו של תורה מועיל. אמר ר' יודן "תחת השמש" אין לו, למעלה מן השמש יש לו.

Once he said, "And know that for all of these Gd will bring you to judgment," they said: Solomon spoke well.

Rabbi Shemuel bar Nachmeni said: They wanted to put away the book of Kohelet, for they found in it things that are inclined toward heresy. They said: Did Solomon need to say, "What benefit is there for a person"? It sounds like this even includes struggle in Torah? They then went back and said: Had he said "in all struggle" and stopped, we would have said that included struggle in Torah. But he only said "in all of his struggle." His personal struggle is not beneficial, but struggle of Torah is beneficial. Rabbi Yudan said: "Under the sun" he has no [benefit], above the sun he does have.

3. Rabbi Menachem Meiri (13th century Provence), Chibbur haTeshuvah – Shever Gaon 2:6

שלמה היה מאנשי הדת ונודע בחכמות וייראו מהכשל בני אדם בדבריו, שהסבה בבקשם לגניזתו לא היתה להיות חכמי ישראל חושבין עליו שיאמין דבר סותר פנת אמונה או יסוד דת, חלילה, שאלו כן היו ממחרים לגנוזו או לשורפו באש, אבל חששו להכשל בו בני אדם בלתי מטיבין בעיון. והסבה שנמנעו לגנוזו דעתם זה, עם ראותם שהדבר שעליו חששו להכשל בו בני אדם כבר ביאר בדבריו בהפך הדעת ההוא בעצמו, והתנצל במה שיבא בענין ההוא בעצמו הפך דבריו באמצע הספר. והוא שבראש הספר לא שלל יתרון האדם רק מעמלו אשר תחת השמש... והתם ספרו בהזוהר על יראת אלקים ושמירת מצותיו... ואין עוד לחוש להכשל בני אדם בזה בדבריו. ואחר זה יפורש כל מה שימצא סותר זאת האמונה על אי זה צד שיסבול הביאור...

Solomon was a person of the religion, and he was known for wisdom, and they were afraid that people might stumble in his words. The reason they sought to put it away was not that the Sages of Israel thought that he believed something which contradicted a pillar of faith or a fundamental of religion, Gd forbid! If that were so, they would have hastened to put it away, or to incinerate it. But they were concerned that people who do not examine well might stumble in it. And the reason they refrained from putting it away was this view [that Solomon did believe?], and seeing that regarding the concern they had for people's stumbling, he already explained the opposite of that view in his words, and he apologized for that which he would enter into himself, the opposite of his words, in the middle of the book. And this is that in the beginning of the book he did not deny the benefit for a person, only from his own struggle under the sun... And he closed his book warning about awe of Gd and guarding His commandments... And there would no longer be

a concern lest people stumble in his words. And then all that would be found to contradict this belief could be explained, with any explanation it could bear...

4. Talmud, Megillah 9a

אמר רבי יהודה אף כשהתירו רבותינו יונית לא התירו אלא בספר תורה ומשום מעשה דתלמי המלך דתניא מעשה בתלמי המלך שכינס שבעים ושנים זקנים והכניסן בשבעים ושנים בתים ולא גילה להם על מה כינסן ונכנס אצל כל אחד ואחד ואמר להם כתבו לי תורת משה רבכם נתן הקב"ה בלב כל אחד ואחד עצה והסכימו כולן לדעת אחת וכתבו לו +בראשית א'+ אלקים ברא בראשית

Rabbi Yehudah said: Even when our sages permitted Greek, it was only for a Sefer Torah [and not the Prophets], because of the event with King Ptolemy, as we have learned in a braita: King Ptolemy once gathered 72 elders and brought them into 72 houses without revealing why he was gathering them. He went to each one and told him, "Write the Torah of Moshe, your master, for me." Gd placed counsel into each one's heart, and all of them came to the same idea, writing, "Elokim created in the beginning"...

5. Midrash, Bereishit Rabbah 8:8

ר' שמואל בר נחמן בשם ר' יונתן אמר בשעה שהיה משה כותב את התורה היה כותב מעשה כל יום ויום כיון שהגיע לפסוק הזה שנא' ויאמר אלקים נעשה אדם בצלמנו כדמותנו אמר לפניו רבון העולם מה אתה נותן פתחון פה למינים, אתמהא, אמר לו כתוב והרוצה לטעות יטעה

Rabbi Shemuel bar Nachman cited Rabbi Yonatan: When Moshe wrote the Torah he recorded the deeds of each day; When he arrived at "And Gd said: Let Us make Man etc." he said, "Master of the Universe! Why do You give heretics room to challenge?!" Gd replied, "Write it; those who wish to err will err."

6. Rabbi Hayyim Angel, *Introduction to Kohelet: Sanctifying the Human Perspective*, YU Sukkot To-Go 5770

Hazal recognized two major hazards inherent to learning. First, nobody can truly be objective, and some have agendas foreign to our sacred texts. Take the "plural" form of "Let *Us* make man" in the creation narrative (Gen. 1:26) [*He brings Bereishit Rabbah 8:8 here*]

In this extreme example, some derived support for their theology of multiple deities from the Torah! This Midrash places a premium on the integrity of the Torah. Gd would not compromise Truth because some people are misguided. It also teaches that people can find pretty much anything to support their agendas under the guise of scholarship. Whoever wishes to err will err.

However, a second hazard exists, even for those sincerely seeking the word of Gd: [*He brings Megillah 9a here*]

This narrative reflects the concern that by popularizing the Torah through translation, less learned people may inadvertently derive the wrong meaning from the "plural" form of "Let *Us* make man." For this anticipated audience, Gd inspired the elders to deviate from Truth and translate with the singular form so that unwitting people would not err.

How do they judge favourably?

7. Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, Commentary to Kohelet 7:3

וענין "טוב אשר יפה לאכול ולשתות" כנגד הכסיל העמל לקבץ ממון ולא יתענג ממנו. "טוב ללכת אל בית אבל" הוא האמת.

And the meaning of "It is good, it is better to eat and drink (5:17)" refers to the fool, who struggles to collect wealth and does not enjoy it. "It is better to go to a house of mourning (7:2)" is truth.

8. Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, Commentary to Kohelet 7:3

וענין "וטוב לא יהיה לרשע ולא יאריך ימים כצל" על הרוב ידבר, וענין "יש רשע" הוא הנמצא לפרקים מעטים. וכבר הזכרתי בתחלת הספר כי בעבור רע מעט אין בחכמה העליונה למנוע טוב רב. וכמו זה בספר משלי שיאמר "וקובץ על יד ירבה" והוא האמת, ו"יש מפזר ונוסף עוד" והוא המעט.

And the meaning of "And there will be no good for the wicked, and he will not last long, like a shadow (8:13)" is that it speaks of most cases, and the meaning of "There is a wicked person [who endures in his wickedness] (7:15)" is that which is found on few occasions. And I already mentioned at the start of the book that because of a little bad, the Higher Wisdom will not withhold great good [even though it yields a little bad as well]. And so Mishlei says, "And one who gathers with his hands will receive a lot (13:11)," and this is truth. And "there is one who scatters [his wealth], and gains more (11:24)" happens a little.

9. Talmud, Horiyot 10b

דרש רב נחמן בר רב חסדא: מאי דכתיב "יש הבל אשר נעשה על הארץ וגו'"? אשריהם לצדיקים שמגיע אליהם כמעשה הרשעים של עולם הבא בעולם הזה, או להם לרשעים שמגיע אליהם כמעשה הצדיקים של עולם הבא בעולם הזה. אמר רבא: אטו צדיקי אי אכלי תרי עלמי מי סני להו? אלא אמר רבא: אשריהם לצדיקים שמגיע אליהם כמעשה הרשעים של עולם הזה בעולם הזה, או להם לרשעים שמגיע אליהם כמעשה הצדיקים של עולם הזה בעולם הזה.

Rav Nachman bar Rav Chisda taught: What is the meaning of "There is *hevel*/performed upon the land, etc. (8:14)?" Fortunate are the righteous who receive like the deeds of the wicked in the next world, in this world. Woe to the wicked who receive like the deeds of the righteous in the next world, in this world. Rav said: Would the righteous be upset if they received two worlds? Rather, Rava said: Fortunate are the righteous who receive like the deeds of the wicked in this world, in this world. Woe to the wicked who receive like the deeds of the righteous in this world, in this world.

10. Midrash, Kohelet Rabbah 5:17

"הנה אשר ראיתי אני טוב אשר יפה לאכול ולשתות," ר' תנחומא אומר כל אכילה ושתייה שנאמרה במגילה הזאת, בתורה ובמע"ט נאמרה. "Behold, that which I saw. It is good, it is better to eat and drink." Rabbi Tanchuma said: All eating and drinking mentioned in this megillah is stated regarding Torah and good deeds.

11. Rabbi Hayyim Angel, *Introduction to Kohelet: Sanctifying the Human Perspective*, YU Sukkot To-Go 5770

At the level of *derash*, many of Hazal's comments on Kohelet appear to be speaking about an entirely different book, one that is about Torah. The word "Torah" never appears in Kohelet. Such Midrashim appear to be radically reinterpreting Kohelet to make it consistent with the rest of Tanakh. Similarly, many later commentators, including those generally committed to *peshat*, sometimes follow this midrashic lead of radical reinterpretation of verses they find troubling.

This approach is rooted in the dual responsibility of our commentators. As scholars, they attempt to ascertain the original intent of the biblical text. However, they also are students and teachers of Jewish tradition. Their educational sensitivities often enter the interpretive arena, particularly when the surface reading of Kohelet appears to threaten traditional values. For example, Kohelet opens by challenging the enduring value of the two leading manifestations of human success: wealth and wisdom. That Kohelet focuses on the ephemerality of wealth and physical enjoyment is not surprising, but his focus on the limitations and vulnerability of wisdom is stunning: (Kohelet 1:18)

Seforno is so uncomfortable with this indictment of wisdom that he reinterprets the verse as referring to the ostensible wisdom of heretics. I often wonder if the *parshan* himself believes that a suggestion of this nature is *peshat*, that is, does he assume that Kohelet cannot possibly intend what he appears to be saying; or is he reinterpreting primarily to deflect such teachings from a less learned readership, as did the authors of the Septuagint in the talmudic passage cited above.

12. Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, Commentary to Kohelet 7:3

...אשר תמצא בספר הזה דבר ופעם שנית יראה שיאמר הפך הדבר. גם כי תמצא בספר משלי כמו "אל תען כסיל" "ענה כסיל." גם כן בדברי הנביאים, ובתורת אלקינו שהוא העיקר כמו "אפס כי לא יהיה בך אביון" "כי לא יחדל אביון" וכלם אמת:

...You will find in this book a statement, and on a second occasion you will see that it says the opposite of that statement. You will also find [this] in Mishlei, like "Do not respond to a fool" "Answer a fool." Also in the prophets, and in Gd's Torah, which is the essence, as in, "But there will be no pauper among you," "Paupers will never cease." And all of them are true.

13. Rabbi Menachem Meiri, Sefer Mishlei, Introduction

...נראה לי שאמר בספר הראשון לשון "דברי" ... כי לשון "דברי" יורה על דברים פשוטים מקובלים נאספים מפה ומפה והוא לשון "קהלת", ר"ל מאסף כל הדעות ובורר מהן כל הדעות התוריים והמקובלים, וזהו ענין קהלת, שעקר הכוונה בו אינו רק לקבוע אמונת הדברים התוריים אשר לא יוכרעו מצד ההקש והעיון רק מצד התורה...

...It appears to me that it said in the first book [=Kohelet] the expression, "The statements"... Because the expression "the statements" indicates simple, accepted statements, gathered from here and there, as in the term "Kohelet," meaning the one who gathered all of the views and selected from them all of the views that are of Torah and are accepted. This is "Kohelet"; its essential intent is only to establish faith in the Torah's statements which cannot be decided by logic and analysis, but only from Torah...

14. Prof. Robert Gordis, *Koheleth: the man and his world*, pg. 96

The term "quotations," as used here refers to *words which do not reflect the present sentiments of the author of the literary composition in which they are found but have been introduced by the author to convey the standpoint of another person or situation*. These quotations include, but are not limited to, citations of previously existing literature, whether written or oral. In sum, the term refers to passages that cite the speech or thought of a subject, actual or hypothetical, past or present, which is distinct from the context in which it is embodied.

15. Prof. Robert Gordis, *Koheleth: the man and his world*, pg. 97

As a point of departure for this usage, (Ecclesiastes 4:8) may be cited. It is obvious that the words *את ומחסר* and *אני עמל ומחוסר* are not the words of the author, but rather a citation of a hypothetical speech and thought, an idea that *might or should have* occurred to the subject.

16. Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, *Commentary to Ibn Ezra 3:19*

כי מקרה - זה הפסוק על מחשבות בני אדם שלא חכמו והשכילו, כי בראות שמקרה אחד לראשית ולבהמה בחיים ובמות, חשבו כי רוח אחד לכל ואין לאדם מותר מן הבהמה.

"Because the fate" – This verse is about the thoughts of people who have not become wise and gained insight, for when they saw that there was one fate for man and beast in life and death, they thought that there was one spirit for all, man is no greater than animal.

17. Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, *Commentary to Ibn Ezra 9:4*

כי מי - זו מחשבת בני האדם שיאמרו כי כל מי שהוא מחובר אל החיים יש לו בטחון... וכתוב יבחר וענינו כי המת לא יוכל לבחור:
"For who" – This is the thought of people who say that all who are joined with life have faith... And it is written as *yivchar* ["will choose"], meaning that the dead cannot choose.

18. Prof. Mordechai Zer-Kavod, *Daat Mikra to Kohelet* pg. 34

אמנם, יש לפעמים אשר 'צדיק אבד בצדקו ויש רשע מאריך (ימים) ברעתו' (ז:טו)... כל זה לא נעלם מהחכם קהלת, אף על פי כן אין הוא מפקפק בצדקת אלוקים. בדברי קהלת נמצאות שלוש תשובות לשאלה זו:
א. 'כי אדם אין צדיק בארץ אשר יעשה טוב ולא יחטא' (ז כ), לפיכך גם זה המוחזק צדיק אינו צדיק גמור יש בידו חטאים, ייתכן שהם נעלמים מעושים, אך הוא נענש עליהם. על כל פנים כך מובן מתוך החתימה של ספר קהלת (יב יד);
ב. יש 'אשר חטא עשה רע מאת (פעמים) ומאריך לו (אלוהים)', כי קל ארך אפים הוא (ח יב);
ג. אין שכלו של אדם מסוגל להבין ולתפוס את מעשה האלקים - על כך חוזר קהלת כמה פעמים, ומסקנתו היא: 'כבר נקרא שמו ונודע: אשר הוא אדם - ולא יוכל לדין עם (אלקים) שהתקיף ממנו' (ו י), כלומר: בשל המרחק העצום בין גדולת אלקים לבין האדם החלש, אין טעם לגולל את הדיון בנושא זה, כדוגמת איוב.

But there are times when "the righteous person is ruined in his righteousness, and there is a wicked person who extends (life) in his wickedness (7:15)"... All of this was not lost on the sage Kohelet, and yet he did not challenge the righteousness of Gd. In the words of Kohelet are three answers to this question:

- 1) "For there is no righteous person in the land who will do good and not sin (7:20)", therefore even the one who is assumed to be righteous is not fully righteous, he has sinned; they may be hidden from their perpetrator, but he is punished for them. In any case, it is understood, such is understood from the close of Kohelet (12:14).
- 2) There is "one who sins, perpetrating wickedness 100 (times) and (Gd) extending for him (8:12)", for He is a patient Gd.
- 3) A person's mind is not capable of understanding and grasping the deeds of Gd – therefore Kohelet repeats multiple times, and it is his conclusion: "It is already named, and known: that he is a man – and he cannot argue with (Gd) who is stronger than him. (6:10)" Meaning, because of the great distance between the greatness of Gd and the weak person, there is no reason to debate this topic, as in the case of Iyov.

19. Rabbi Hayyim Angel, *Introduction to Kohelet: Sanctifying the Human Perspective*, YU Sukkot To-Go 5770

However, such attempts to escape difficult verses appear arbitrary. Nothing in the text signals a change in speaker (particularly if Kohelet wishes to reject that speaker's views), leaving decisions of attribution entirely in the hands of the commentator.

Approach #2: The internal and external contradictions are the point

20. Rabbi Hayyim Angel, *Introduction to Kohelet: Sanctifying the Human Perspective*, YU Sukkot To-Go 5770

In order to approach Kohelet, we must consider a few of its verifiable features. Kohelet is written about life and religious meaning in this world. The expression *tahat ha-shemesh* (beneath the sun) appears 29 times in Kohelet, and nowhere else in the rest of Tanakh. *Tahat ha-shamayim* (under heaven) appears three additional times, and Rashi and Rashbam maintain that this expression is synonymous with *tahat ha-shemesh*. People are even called *ro'ei hashemesh* (those who behold the sun) in 7:11. Similarly, the word *ani* (I) appears 29 times, and its appearance is not grammatically necessary.

21. Rabbi Hayyim Angel, *Introduction to Kohelet: Sanctifying the Human Perspective*, YU Sukkot To-Go 5770

Since Gd is so infinitely superior, there is no purpose (and much harm) in protesting against Gd (cf. 7:13-14). Contrast this approach with the venerable history of prophetic protests, beginning with Avraham and Moshe and proceeding through the entire Tanakh! Moreover, Kohelet never speaks directly to God; he speaks *about* God and the human condition in a sustained monologue to his audience...

While Kohelet is the Truth, and nothing but the Truth, it is but one aspect of Truth rather than the whole Truth. For example, Kohelet considers oppression an unchangeable reality (Kohelet 4:1-3)

Kohelet never calls on Gd to stop this oppression, nor does he exhort society to stop it. He simply laments that human history repeats itself in an endless cycle of oppression. Kohelet sets this tone in chapter 1 by analogizing human existence to the cyclical patterns in nature (Ibn Ezra, *Zer-Kavod*).

In contrast, prophecy is committed to changing society so that it ultimately matches the ideal messianic vision. Prophecy insists that all of human history is a line (and not a cycle) from the Garden of Eden to the messianic era, and we should be doing everything in our power to move that process along. While a human perspective sees only repetitions of errors in history; prophecy persistently reminds us that current reality need not mimic past history.

22. Rabbi Hayyim Angel, *Introduction to Kohelet: Sanctifying the Human Perspective*, YU Sukkot To-Go 5770

From a human perspective, life is filled with contradictions. Kohelet's contradictions reflect aspects of the multifaceted human condition. Significantly, Kohelet's inclusion in Tanakh elevates human perception into the realm of the sacred, joining revelation and received wisdom as aspects of religious Truth...

Kohelet maintains both sides of the classical conflict: Gd is just, but there are injustices. While Kohelet cannot solve this dilemma, he discovers a productive response absent a solution. Once we can accept that the world appears unfair, we can realize that everything is a gift from Gd rather than a necessary consequence for our righteousness (Ramban quoted in *Zer-Kavod* on 9:11; cf. Rashbam on 3:12-13). We ultimately cannot fathom how Gd governs this world, but we can fulfill our religious obligations and grow from all experiences. Wisdom always is preferred to folly, even though wisdom is limited and the wise cannot guarantee themselves a better life than fools, and everyone dies regardless.