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CHAPTER 12

The Eastern king in the Hebrew Bible
Novelistic motifs in early Jewish literature

Jennie Barbour

Among the characters from Greek literature who may have ventured the less-travelled way across the Mediterranean and wandered into Hebrew texts, one prominent figure is the Greek stereotype of the Persian king, the cartoonish sybarite first made popular by Aeschylus’ *Persians* and with a long afterlife that goes all the way to T. S. Eliot’s journeying magus remembering his native court with ‘The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces, and the silken girls bringing sherbet’. This exotic creature, with an existence more literary than real, has left an imprint on those Jewish sources which loosely group themselves together as prose fictions, emerging late in the biblical period; the *Gestalt* of the Eastern king in the Hebrew Bible therefore offers a window into the ease with which prose fiction participates in the mechanisms of intercultural transfer.¹

Tracing the presence of the Greek character in the Jewish texts is easily liable to short-circuit. A people as much conquered and ruled as the inhabitants of Jerusalem in the late biblical period must have had a complex and multi-layered idea of what a king looked like; any written rendition of a foreign ruler within the Bible is already a tissue of different influences. One of these influences is the real experience of Persian and earlier Near Eastern dominion, before any mediated Greek reflexes of it: we see such representations of Persian rule within the Hebrew Bible in Isaiah’s Cyrus, or the Jewish-Persian diplomatic relations in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Teasing apart the traces of a specifically Greek version of the Persian king from these directly sourced Persian elements is already a delicate operation. The tendentious Greek character of the Persian king is also itself a product of cultural appropriation and transformation within the Greek tradition;²


² This has been the burden of the scholarship of Amélie Kuhrt and the Achaemenid History Workshop: see the seven volumes in the series *Achaemenid History*, esp. Sancisi-Weerdenburg and Kuhrt 1987 and Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1987. See too for deconstruction of the Greek stereotype Wiesehöfer 2007.

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and this orientalising is of course not the only Greek way of looking at the Persian king – there are strands of Greek perception which are very far from hostile to Persian royalty, even within sources which also attest to the more luxury-loving stereotype (one thinks of Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia* alongside his *Agesilaus*; or Herodotus’ *Cyrus* alongside his *Xerxes*). Nevertheless the dissipated pleasure-seeker was one widely public way that the Greek sources represented the Persian king, and the comic or rabble-rousing usefulness of that representation must have relied on its ready currency as an established cliché. Identifying stereotyped items within this Greek delineation of the Persian king can provide indicators that some of the Persian kings we meet in Jewish writings belong to a topos rather than to naïve real-world reflection; by their participation in the same clichés, they draw on a common pool of popular ideas more than on the unmediated reality of the Persian court at first hand.

**The uses of satire: the Eastern king in Jewish imagining**

Conventionalised portraits of Eastern kings in and around the Hebrew Bible tend to inhabit those texts often called Jewish novels or novellas. The chief proponent of the category of Jewish novel is Lawrence Wills, whose 1995 monograph took Greek Daniel, Greek Esther, Judith, Tobit and *Joseph and Aseneth* as Jewish novels. As Wills’s critics point out, these prose fictions are too generically diverse to call them a class of novels proper, but a set of shared characteristics makes it at least possible to point to a constellation of Second-Temple Jewish prose fiction writings with some commonly held novelistic tendencies, and Wills’s group of texts is a useful starting point.

The pantomime character of the Oriental king appears throughout this class of texts. Commentators have identified Greek-style Eastern kings in a number of Jewish writings with novelistic features, including Esther, Daniel 1–6, Ezra, the Greek 4 Ezra, Song of Songs, and the *Letter of Aristeas*; we even meet the devil disguised as a Persian king in the *Testament of Job* (17:2). The Hebrew text of the book of Esther clearly registers this trope even before the Greek additions carry Esther in an altogether novelistic direction: at the opening of the book, in what Michael Fox has called the ‘frilly burlesque’ of the first chapter, we meet an autocratic Xerxes sunk in ‘a world of crude but cheerful ostentation’ suggestive of Greek

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The Eastern king in the Hebrew Bible

parallels. Fox draws comparisons between the treatment of the Persian court in Esther and the same in Herodotus and occasionally Thucydides, and also, as part of the same literary tradition, the treatment of the Assyrians in the book of Judith. Granted that the Esther-tale quite likely has Persian folkloristic origins, this literary treatment nevertheless bears the impression of the Greek image of the Persian court. Bickermann recognises its double heritage: "We have here a typical tale of palace intrigue that could as well find a place in the Persian histories of Herodotus and Ctesias, or in the Arabian Nights."

For the book of Daniel, Bickerman called the Nebuchadnezzar of Chapter 2 'a standardised king of the Oriental popular stories . . . indistinguishable from Sennacherib in the story of Achiqar or Darius in the same Daniel cycle', or in fact the feasting Belshazzar. When we see Nebuchadnezzar overcome with rage (2:12, 3:13, 3:19), feared for his punishments (1:10), issuing peremptory orders (2:2), petulant threats (2:5) or lavish gifts (2:6), these are standards of the Greek character. Fits of rage are a typical feature of the literary oriental despot, and the characteristic vice of the Persian monarchs in Herodotus; this specific trope also seems to be known in Esther, where Tessa Rajak identifies it as the literary context for Ahasuerus' wrath against Vashti and Haman, and for Esther's fear of him which generates much of the narrative tension in the book (2:1, 4:11, 7:7). We might compare also the angry Cyrus in Greek Daniel 14:8, 21–2, or the description of a tyrant in the speech of the second page at the court of the Persian king in 1 Esdras 4:3–12; Tessa Rajak adds the further Jewish-Greek examples of Judith's Nebuchadnezzar (1:12, 5:2), Antiochus in 2 Maccabees (7:39) and 4 Maccabees (8:2ff), and Ptolemy Philopator in 3 Maccabees (1:9–12 and throughout) There is, then, a recognisable, repeatable stereotyped character of the oriental king in novelistic Jewish texts of the Second Temple period.

Scholarship on this type of Hellenistic Jewish text finds various ideological forces at work in the way these Eastern kings are used in them, and the court setting in the diaspora is often a way of negotiating Jewish self-understanding in the post-exilic period. The work of Erich Gruen and also that of John J. Collins has to different extents stressed the optimism

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14 Seen in the sudden violence of his Darius (in the incident of Oeobazus's sons at 4.84, or that of Intaphrenes' family at 3.18) and Cambyses.
of the court stories and the self-confidence of the Jewish identity that is constructed in them.\textsuperscript{16} Gruen has discerned the comedy and playfulness in the portraits of pantomime kings like Esther's Ahasuerus or Daniel's Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar, and he shows that all this works in the service of refashioning the Jewish self-image at the expense of foreign rulers, as when, for example, in 4 Ezra the three clever pages at the court of the Persian king get away with describing him to his face in their speeches in the stock terms of abuse for the oriental tyrant, as a drunkard, a despot, and a piece of putty in the hands of his concubine; or the gullible Cyrus in \textit{Bel and the Dragon} is shown up by wise Daniel. Collins draws out from the Near Eastern court tales a Jewish ethnic pride in the outsider who rises, and underlying this is a basically optimistic view of the world: the world is a place where foolish kings will eventually see their folly, as even Nebuchadnezzar does in Daniel or Ptolemy in 3 Maccabees, so there can be confidence in the ultimate benevolence of kings; and the world is a place where a high value is set on wisdom, as wise courtiers will succeed even at the court of an alien king. For these prose fictions, a motif which was for the Greeks a way of demonising the barbarian 'Other' becomes a mode of wry resistance to an occupying power, a means of surviving and thriving by wits and humour.

\textbf{Self-satire: the Eastern king in Qohelet}

A maverick cousin of the canonical 'Jewish novels' reveals a further flexibility in the ways in which prose fiction puts the Eastern king to work. The book of Qohelet (Ecclesiastes, in its Greek translation) is another of the late biblical sketches of a larger-than-life king who wears his fictionality on his sleeve; but if this text trades in the same cultural currency as the other biblical users of the Greek Eastern-king motif, it does so in the service of very different ideological ends. Of course, the book of Qohelet is not in any sense a novel, and no scholar includes Qohelet in this category – Wills in fact never mentions Qohelet in his treatment;\textsuperscript{17} but it is certainly prose fiction, with its wisdom material animated by a biographical structure.\textsuperscript{18} Some of the novella-style features of the other Jewish prose fictions do in fact find a particular echo in Qohelet, and especially in the narrative frame


\textsuperscript{17} Smith 1987: 121–2 is almost the only scholar to place Qohelet in a category together with these works, as 'essentially belletristic' and as such sharply distinguished from earlier Hebrew writings.

\textsuperscript{18} For narrativity as a guiding principle in Qohelet, see Christianson 1998; Fox 1999: 151.
of the book: a standard novelistic trick is deliberate historical anachro-
nism, practised in Qohelet's royal title of a 'son of David, king of Israel
in Jerusalem' who can nevertheless speak of many predecessors;19 and the
setting in a far-distant time and legendary place, like Solomon's Jerusalem,
is equally romance-like. The book's singular emphasis on the inner world
of the narrator reflects the development which Wills called 'the twin tech-
niques that are the stock-in-trade of novelists: internalising psychology and
discursive description';20 Qohelet's reflexive self-awareness and attention
to the process and locus of thought and feeling are without parallel in the
Hebrew Bible.21 The proper generic identification of Qohelet as a wisdom
book anyway does not divide it absolutely from the novelistic tradition:
Richard I. Pervo suggests that wisdom affiliations are a feature of ancient
novels, putting Ahiqar alongside Tobit in an older Aramaic category of
'sapiential novels', the continuation of which he finds in Aristeas and per-
haps in Joseph and Aseneth, with Apuleius, Longus and Chion of Heraclea
for comparison.22

The book of Qohelet is placed by most scholars in the third century BCE,
and probably written in Jerusalem; it could perhaps be a century earlier
but not much later, as the earliest fragments found at Qumran date to the
mid-to-late second century.23 While the most obvious presence behind the
fictional speaker is Solomon, there are shades here of the whole history of
the kings of Israel and Judah: this king is a composite, a sort of 'Everyking'.
He is presented most fully in the 'royal boast' of the book's first narrative
section (1:12–2:10 (JPS)):

I, Qohelet, was king in Jerusalem over Israel. I set my mind to study and
to probe with wisdom all that happens under the sun. – An unhappy
business, that, which God gave men to be concerned with! I observed all
the happenings beneath the sun, and I found that all is futile and pursuit
of wind: a twisted thing that cannot be made straight, a lack that cannot be
made good.

I said to myself: 'Here I have grown richer and wiser than any that ruled
before me over Jerusalem, and my mind has zealously absorbed wisdom and
learning'. And so I set my mind to appraise wisdom and to appraise madness

19 See, e.g., Wills 1995: 3, 51 and Gruen 2002: 163 for the impossible figures 'Darius the Mede' in
Daniel and 'Nebuchadnezzar the Assyrian' in Judith.
20 Wills 1995: 9, 10. He also observes that Georg Lukács found the concentration on the interior life
to be a hallmark of the novel.
and folly, And I learned – that this too was pursuit of wind: for as wisdom grows, vexation grows; to increase learning is to increase heartache.

I said to myself: ‘Come, I will treat you to merriment. Taste mirth!’ That too, I found, was futile. Of revelry I said: ‘It’s mad!’ Of merriment: ‘What good is that?’ I ventured to tempt my flesh with wine, and to grasp folly, while letting my mind direct with wisdom, to the end that I might learn which of the two was better for men to practice in their few days of life under heaven. I multiplied my possessions. I built myself houses and I planted vineyards. I laid out gardens and groves, in which I planted every kind of fruit tree. I constructed pools of water, enough to irrigate a forest shooting up with trees. I bought male and female slaves, and I acquired stewards. I also acquired more cattle, both herds and flocks, than all who were before me in Jerusalem. I further amassed silver and gold and treasures of kings and provinces; and I got myself male and female singers, as well as the luxuries of commoners – coffers and coffers of them. Thus, I gained more wealth than anyone before me in Jerusalem. In addition, my wisdom remained with me: I withheld from my eyes nothing they asked for, and denied myself no enjoyment; rather, I got enjoyment out of all my wealth. And that was all I got out of my wealth.

The usual background given to this fictional autobiography is ancient Near Eastern, and we can certainly find wealth, wisdom, palaces, servants, gardens, waterworks and treasures abundantly in the annals of the Assyrian and neo-Babylonian kings, and in the small inscriptive record of the Achaemenids. For others, Qohelet’s king more closely resembles one of the Ptolemies in Alexandria or their ersatz Transjordanian imitators the Tobiads, rendering a royal reality rather than a literary tradition. These different settings need not cancel one another out and all probably reflect a genuine presence behind the text, however far in the background or transmuted through intervening cultures; but it may be more in keeping with the playfulness and second-order reflection of the book to read Qohelet’s king as more of a literary creature than a real one; the author perhaps writes under the influence of his age’s popular culture more than its inscriptive record. The widespread Greek stereotype of the foreign king, then, can be proposed as one further filter through which the idea of kingship has passed into this most Hellenised of biblical books.


26 Hengel 1974: 1:115–16. There have been a number of studies devoted to disproving Greek influence on Qohelet (e.g. Burkes 1999), but more fundamental than particular proposals for items of literary dependence is the fact of widespread Hellenistic cultural presence which Hengel and others have
In general, the Persian kings of the Greek writers share with Qohelet's king the royal motifs of wealth, self-fashioning and an eye to present incomparability and future posterity – Herodotus' Darius 'desired to leave such a memorial of himself as no king had ever wrought' (4.166) – but the comparison becomes most telling when at 2:1 Qohelet turns from the pursuit of wisdom to the pursuit of pleasure, under the luxurious summary rubric of 2:10, 'I withheld from my eyes nothing they asked for, and denied myself no enjoyment.' This is where the portrait of a king here seems to catch the reflection of those formulaic portraits in some of the Greek sources. Qohelet's self-aggrandising, accumulating, connoisseur king bears an immediate resemblance to a character like the splendid Xerxes of Herodotus, who adorns a plane-tree with gold, or to the Persian court of Callirhoe, which Philip Alexander and Loveday Alexander call 'Full-blooded Oriental splendour worthy of Cecil B. DeMille'. I suggest several particular points of contact:

**Wealth and works**

The Persian king of the Greek writers is super-wealthy, as when Xenophon in the *Encomium for Agesilaus* praises the Spartan king by means of several sharply drawn contrasts with the generic figure of the Persian king; those contrasts illuminate Qohelet's king. Xenophon writes, 'It was the belief of the Persian king that by possessing himself of colossal wealth, he would put all things in subjection to himself. In this belief he tried to engross all the gold, all the silver and all the most costly things in the world' (8.6). We might compare Qohelet's gathering of silver, gold and the treasure of kings and provinces, and his possessions of herds and flocks: it is this wealth which makes him surpass all who were before him in Jerusalem (2:7 and 2:9). This is the kind of wealth which Quintus Curtius called 'a barbarian luxury of opulence' (3.3.13, referring to Xerxes); similarly, Herodotus' Darius made pure gold coinage (4.166; see also 3.130 for gold and 7.28–29 for wealth, or 9.82 for the luxury of Darius' camp) and even his Cyrus' programme is luxury as opposed to labour when persuading the Persians to follow him in rebelling against the Medes (1.126). And like Qohelet's king who introduces...
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the catalogue of accomplishments in his royal boast with higdalti ma‘say, literally ‘I made my works great’ (2:4), generating a refrain which echoes throughout the royal fiction as he worries about the future of these ‘works’ (ma‘sim) after he is gone, the Eastern kings of Herodotus are characterised by their great works, their erga.29

Gardens

One work in particular stands out here: Qohelet’s description of his gardens and parks is the most obvious gesture to a stereotypically Persian cultural archetype in the list. This seems to be deliberately done: pardes itself is a Persian loan-word, occurring only three times in the Hebrew Bible, and Momigliano suggested that Qohelet’s use of it here borrows the sense of the Greek paradeisos rather than the slightly wider meaning of the Persian word.30 The writing here also has some particular emphases in common with the Greek writers’ style of fascination for the Persian kings’ gardens: Qohelet plants trees with every kind of fruit in 2:5, which is a detail shared with Xenophon, Anab. 1.4.10 and 2.4.14, where we read that the royal paradise of Belesys in Syria and one in Media have ‘all the products of the seasons’ and ‘all sorts of trees’; this recurring ‘every kind’ motif is the sort of shared stylistic feature which makes the relationship between Qohelet and the Greek sources seem more like a common fund of literary topoi than independent reporting of the same realia. And Qohelet’s gardens have cunningly constructed watering-pools for the trees built by the king, 2:6 (‘I constructed pools of water, enough to irrigate a forest shooting up with trees’); Pierre Briant notes that Persian gardens in the Greek sources are ‘groves artificially planted’, in the words of Quintus Curtius (7.2.22; cf. Xenophon, Oecon. 4.21).31

Collecting without moving

Another topos held in common is that of the king as the magnet at the centre of empire: the inbound direction of Qohelet’s repeated ‘I made for myself’ or ‘I gathered for myself’ is striking and not favourable in the

29 Drews 1973: 54 calls Herodotus’ Babylonian history ‘above all a history of the great erga of her monarchs’.

30 Momigliano 1975: 79. Bickerman 1967: 141 makes the same point, contrasting Qohelet’s Greek sense of the word (orchard) with the different sense (‘a royal or satrapal enclosed precinct’) which he finds in Nehemiah, Song of Songs and 1 Enoch.

31 Briant 2002: 201.
light of the public-service expectations for biblical kings. Qohelet's king is the spider sitting in the middle of the web, collecting without moving, in contrast to the raptor-like Assyrian kings who cross boundaries and scale mountains to seize tribute. Briant calls the Greeks' Persian king 'the gigantic magnet drawing the manpower and products of the conquered peoples toward the center' in 'the centripetal traffic of the products of the Empire', citing Cyropaedia 8.6.6, 23, where Cyrus describes the satraps' obligation 'to send back here what there is good and desirable in their several provinces', and the duty of 'those of every nation' to 'send to Cyrus the most valuable productions of their country, whether the fruits of the earth, or animals bred there, or manufactures of their own arts'. With Qohelet's centralising collection of silver, gold and treasures from the provinces we might compare the enthusiastic description by Theopompus of the Great King's accumulation of gifts from subject peoples of silver, gold, treasures, money and animals; Xenophon contrasts the simpler and easily satisfied tastes of Agesilaus with the Persian king, 'constrained to draw from the ends of the world the material for his enjoyment, if he would live without discomfort' (9.4).

The court

Another motif shared with Xenophon is the over-staffed court: the Persian king in that contrast requires an army of vintners, cooks and lackeys (Aeg. 9.3; cf. Cyr. 8.1.9; 8.20, Anab. 4.4.21), and we can find similar lists in Herodotus (9.82; 7.186–7) and Quintus Curtius (3.3.25). We might compare Qohelet's retinue of male and female slaves and slaves born in the house, male singers and female singers in 2:7 and 2:8, and we find the tradition of singing women at the Persian court passed on by Athenaeus (2.48f; 4.145c) and in Ctesias' 150 female harpists who sing throughout dinner (12.530d). It is hard to know what is meant by Qohelet's 'luxuries' alongside his singers in 2:8 (literally, 'delights of the sons of men'); but whether these delights are culinary or sexual, the general impression of luxury at court is clear, and easy to parallel in the Greek sources. Qohelet's experiments in cheering his body with wine — literally, 'I explored how to drug my flesh with wine' in 2:3 — strike a chord with the motif of the heavy-drinking Persian king seen in Herodotus' Cambyses (3.34), Ctesias's Xerxes II (Persica 45) and Plutarch's Cyrus the Younger and Artaxerxes (Art. 6.1).
Those kinds of Persian kings also, like Qohelet's king, never fight. In his strange peaceableness, this king is unlike the stereotypical ancient Near Eastern ruler boasting of his martial prowess: in its formal likeness to the first-person inscriptions of Assyrian kings, this royal boast presents a striking silence where we expect a list of peoples subdued and cities razed, and the same difference separates this from the martial self-presentation of the Hellenistic kings. While this may in the first instance reflect Solomon the 'man of peace', it also resonates with the note of suspected cowardice heard in the Greeks' descriptions of the Persian kings – certainly some are mighty warriors, like Herodotus' Cyrus, but the plan of his panic-stricken Xerxes to flee from the battle of Salamis (8. 97, 103) plays on the ideas of oriental effeminacy which come to fullest expression in the spurious final chapter of Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*. Briant finds here that 'The judgment of the Classical authors is obviously shaped by a Greek polemical current that resulted in a presentation of the barbarians in general and the Great Kings in particular as weak and worthless men.' He shows how 'the Greeks highlight the reluctance of the kings to place themselves at the head of their armies, such as Artaxerxes III in Diodorus: “He, himself unwarlike, remained inactive... Though regarded with contempt by the Egyptians, he was compelled to be patient because of his own inertia and peace-loving nature”' (citing 16.40.4–5). And again, this topos has a literary rather than a real existence: the Persian kings were conquerors and did present themselves in martial terms, as their own inscriptions attest.

Diodorus also provides an interesting parallel with the book of Qohelet for similar philosophical themes found in a context of royal narrative: his Sardanapalus, last king of the Assyrians and wrecker of the empire, who 'outdid all his predecessors in luxury and sluggishness' (2.23.1) is given a funeral epitaph which bears close comparison with the thought of Qohelet at a number of points, and with Qohelet's rhetorical stance too, since it is addressed to the king's royal successors (2.23.3):

Knowing full well that you were mortal born, lift up your heart, take your delight in feasts; when dead no more pleasure is yours. Thus I, who once

ruled over mighty Ninus, am nothing but dust. Yet these are mine which
gave me joy in life – the food I ate, my wantonness, and love's delights. But
all those other things men call felicities are left behind.

Here the fleeting joys of life – food, pleasure and love – are those of the
enjoyment sayings in Qohelet, where the shortness of the time to enjoy
them is likewise accentuated (2:24; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7–9); in Qohelet too it is
death which puts an end to such pleasures (3:22; 9:10), similarly returning
man to dust (3:20; 12:7), and there too profit is left behind (2:18–21; 5:13–16;
6:2). Thus in his particular strain of melancholy as well as his particular
style of luxury, the Persian king of the Greek stereotype bears comparison
with King Qohelet.39

What is singular about the book of Qohelet in its context is the uses to
which this book puts that common literary currency. Other Hebrew prose
fiction co-opted the Eastern-king topos to prick oppressors' bubbles and
to showcase the urbane survival skills of Jews at foreign courts. The effect
of the Eastern king tradition in the book of Qohelet, however, is almost a
mirror image, a complete reverse of those emphases: instead of an optimistic
view of the world and a positive construction of Jewish identity, we have
instead pessimism and a deeply critical look at national tradition. The great
difference is that the king in Qohelet is a king of Israel, and the setting is
not the diaspora but Jerusalem. We could say that all the ‘othering’ goes in
the opposite direction: everything critical and satirical which is elsewhere
implied about a foreign king by the use of this motif is here being foisted
onto a king over all Israel in Jerusalem who at the least represents Israel’s
greatest king and probably has something of every Israeliite and Judean
king in him. Instead of refashioning the Jewish self-image at the expense of
foreign rulers as his biblical contemporaries do, Qohelet is using the same
motif for a pessimistic refashioning of the Jewish self-image at the expense
of the nation’s own past rulers.

We see elements of internal criticism creep into the use of the king
motif elsewhere in the Jewish prose fictions: for Gruen reading Judith,
the Assyrians are lampooned with the Eastern-king stereotypes when Neb­
uchadnezzar has a 120-day banquet, or Holofernes an elaborate Persian
tent, but they are foils for the sharper shafts aimed at the feeble and incom­
petent Israeliite leadership. Thus humour in Hellenistic Jewish historical
fiction, in Gruen’s words, both ‘cuts foreign princes and generals down to
size and holds Jewish follies up to scorn’, though this is still a mark of

39 Cf. too Hengel’s comparison of Phylarchus’ Rolemy II with Qohelet’s Solomon for the same
self-confidence in the varied and versatile intellectual circles of Hellenistic Judaism.\textsuperscript{40} Philip Alexander and Loveday Alexander see the process going a step further in 3 Maccabees: they say that the stereotype of the oriental monarch gave the Jews a stick with which to beat their own rulers – that is, Hasmonean or Herodian rulers – if they were behaving in an unacceptably absolutist and arbitrary way, and they call this a tradition of political protest that continues the prophetic criticism of the luxurious courts of Solomon and some of his successors.\textsuperscript{41}

Perhaps we could propose for Qohelet an analogous use of the same stereotype, for his different ideological stance: in distinction from the contemporary political engagement of the author of 3 Maccabees, Qohelet too is using the stereotype of the oriental monarch as a stick to beat the nation’s own rulers, but those of the past rather than of the present: his critical questioning is directed against the kings of Israel’s history, and he poses that searching question by painting the king of Israel in Jerusalem as an oriental despot. Qohelet too is continuing the prophetic criticism of the luxurious courts of Solomon and his successors, but in his case without the shift to a contemporary target: his prophetic ire is still reserved for Solomon and his successors. The particular resource this author draws on is Greek, but it has become a part of the literary vocabulary of Hellenised Palestinian Judaism, where its critical function is exploited in the service of Jewish distinctiveness. So Qohelet takes his place among the specifically Jewish fictions of his time; but his satirical intentions are very different to those we find in the more patriotic Esther, Daniel, Ezra and 3 Maccabees. In Qohelet’s hands their polemical tool does more radically critical work: rather shockingly, he is making Solomon another Nebuchadnezzar or another Xerxes. In a work so dark and philosophically pessimistic as Qohelet’s, the orientalising in his royal fiction is not turned into comedy by a farcical plot or by a great escape and a national holiday at the end; his remains a satire of protest.

By repeatedly repurposing a borrowed motif, then, Jewish prose fiction is able to turn its hand not only to resistance to empire, but also to internal historical soul-searching. Hellenistic Jewish authors could use this medium and its motifs to move freely within the literary culture of their day without defining themselves solely by opposition; rather than being trapped within fiction-as-resistance, Qohelet is able to self-scrutinise and to probe the question of what royal follies could have reduced the kingdom of David and Solomon to a tiny province of the Ptolemies. Qohelet’s difference from

the writers of those other Jewish royal fictions is that he is more antiquarian, more steeped in biblical tradition; he apportions the blame for the nation’s subjection internally and historically rather than laying it at the door of the ruling Persians or Greeks or even present native authorities. In this, his thought belongs within the penitential stream of post-exilic expression, represented by Nehemiah 9 (‘Our kings . . . have not kept your law’, v. 34) and Daniel 9 (‘Open shame falls upon us, our kings . . .’, v. 8), though without its piety; this writer, then, for all his changes in mindset, is in his view of history a distant heir of the deuteronomistic school, showing what it is to get that ‘king like the other nations’ for whom the forefathers pleaded. The politics of the author of Qohelet are the same as those of one Saadiah Ben Joseph, author of an eighteenth-century Yemenite folktale text which retells a well-known story from the popular medieval collection of Hebrew wisdom and fables, the Stories of Ben Sira: in this tale the Queen of Sheba, insulted by Solomon, becomes pregnant as a result of her visit, and gives birth (four hundred years notwithstanding) to none other than Nebuchadnezzar. Saadiah’s comment on this outworking of retributive justice is to apply Isaiah 49:17, ‘Those who laid you waste go away from you’ – or literally, go out from you, as Nebuchadnezzar goes out from the loins of Solomon to lay waste to Solomon’s kingdom; thus the troubles of Jerusalem are ultimately laid at the door of Solomon, for his folly. In Qohelet, the Greek-style satirical portrait of the Solomonic king is the first note of a critical voice in the book which will protest at individual and national troubles, and at the follies of the kings who brought them about.

42 As told in Lassner 1995.