The book of Ecclesiastes famously closes in 12:13–14 with an exhortation to “Fear God and keep his commandments” (אַתָּה אלִילֵי נָא אַתָּה מִצְוָתָיו שמִורה). This is justified by a slightly obscure remark that “this is every human,” or “this is everything for a human” (כְּזֶה כָּל האדם), and backed by a warning that God will “bring every achievement to judgment, over everything out of sight, whether good or bad” (כְּזֶה כָּל מְעָשָׁה האלהים). Indeed, that exhortation, phrased in the language of traditional piety, has often been seen as crucial to the very survival of the book: it brings an awkward and challenging work to an acceptably conventional conclusion, and Jerome reports a Jewish view of Ecclesiastes, that “on the basis of this single section it merits the authority to be placed among the number of the divine scriptures.”1 The Talmud also seems to assert the importance of the verse: Ecclesiastes was not set aside, because “Its beginning is words of Torah, and its end is words of Torah” (b. Šabb. 30b). We should probably not take such claims too seriously, and it is clear both that the book was widely read amongst pre-rabbinic Jews, and that its controversial aspects were recognized: Ben Sira, the Epistle of Enoch, and the Wisdom of Solomon all seem to engage critically with its ideas, and it is ironic, perhaps, that it came to enjoy a measure of acceptance and respectability which none of those works subsequently possessed in mainstream Judaism. For all the concerns which it provoked, such a popular and influential work was probably destined for such acceptance long before the canon was an issue, and the rabbinic ways of incorporating even its most difficult verses suggest that it would have survived even without its epilogue.

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1 “Aiunt Habraei…hic liber oblitterandus uideretur…ex hoc uno capitulo meruisse auctoritatem ut in diuinorum uolumnum numero poneretur” (Marc Adriaen, “S. Hieronymi Presbyteri Commentarius in Ecclesiasten,” in S. Hieronymi presbyteri opera. Pars I: Opera exegetica 1; Hebraicae quaestiones in libro Geneseos; Liber interpretationis hebraicorum nominum; Commentarioli in Psalmos; Commentarius in Ecclesiasten [ed. Paul de Lagarde, Germain Morin, and idem; CCSL 72; Turnhout: Brepols, 1959], 245–361, at 360).
All the same, there seems to be a recognition implicit in the early evaluations of these closing verses that they are different in character from the rest of the book, and that they are acceptably conventional in a way that the book as a whole may not have been to some later readers. Indeed, the book itself isolates them from the bulk of its content, and it is not Qohelet who speaks them, but some anonymous epilogist. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, almost all modern commentators have seen 12:13–14, therefore, as a secondary addition, most probably designed precisely to impute a certain orthodoxy to the book: if not wholly incompatible with the speech by Qohelet that has gone before, these verses are, at least, usually viewed as seriously out of step with it. Even Michael Fox, who has argued persuasively for the epilogue to be considered as part of the original composition, sees the last two verses, attributed to the editorial voice of the epilogist, as an attempt to make the book “more easily tolerated.” Describing them as a “postscript,” he notes how “the familiar piety of the conclusion could outweigh the uncomfortable observations of the preceding twelve chapters.” In short, it is common to view these verses not as a real attempt to summarize the message of Qohelet, but as a way of over-riding and packaging that message for orthodox consumption, which draws on language characteristic of Deuteronomy and subsequent piety rooted in the Torah.

That view is lent weight by the apparent absence of any other explicit references to the Torah in Ecclesiastes. It is probable, to be sure, that Qohelet’s advice in 5:3 (et 5:4), “When you have vowed a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it,” is an allusion to Deut 23:22 (et 23:21), but even there Qohelet omits the Deuteronomic reference to “YHWH your God,” and the basis of his advice lies in a direct appeal to self-interest, not to obligation under the Law. Until the closing verses, indeed, neither the book as a whole, nor Qohelet as its protagonist show any other obvious

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3 Michael V. Fox, A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up. A Rereading of Ecclesiastes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 373–74.
4 In view of the apparent absence of specifically Jewish references elsewhere in the monologue, beyond its references to Jerusalem, it is interesting to note that Qohelet picks one of very few offences that might have been considered likely to provoke divine anger by almost everybody in the ancient world, even in those cultures where the gods were not perceived to concern themselves closely with human morality; see, e.g., John H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, Continuity and Change in Roman Religion (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 40–42; Jon D. Mikalson, Athenian Popular Religion (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 31–38. Gods intervene to punish the breaking of oaths to or by themselves