In our time, we seem to have reached the point where we may well ask ourselves whether the incessant production of books might not be too much of a good thing. The more books we throw away (actually or figuratively), the more there are to take their place. It is no longer unjustified to hope against hope that book production could be limited, even if, on the face of it, it clearly involves an uphill battle comparable to the limitation of population growth. Of course, those in the book business, whether out in front or in the rear echelons, do not welcome the prospect of reduced production and consider the idea as anything from eccentric to scurrilous to outright dangerous.

Books have been valuable and cherished possessions all through history. For the first time, their devaluation as material objects could possibly have occurred in medieval Islam, what with the introduction of a rather cheap, yet durable, writing material and the feverish and almost global activity in science and scholarship.¹ This could conceivably have happened, but it did not. Before the Muslim era, no realistic opportunity existed for the feeling to arise that just too many books might be around. The famous verse of Ecclesiastes 12:12: "Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of flesh," at the most expresses a tentative apprehension as to theoretically uncontrollable quantities of books, and so do other putative complaints about the vastness of existing knowledge.² The biblical verse presents many difficulties for the

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¹ A good brief survey of contemporary scholarship on all aspects of bookmaking is by G. Endress, in *Grundriss der arabischen Philologie*, ed. by Wolfdietrich Fischer (Wiesbaden, 1983), 1:271 ff.

² While I was working on this paper, the Book Review section of the *New York Times* of 20 March 1989 published an essay by Arthur Krystal, “On Writing: Let There Be Less,” dealing interestingly with our subject as reflected through the ages. Krystal mentions the Ancient Egyptian statement of Khakheperre-sonbe, which reads in the translation of W.K. Simpson: “He said: Would that I had unknown speeches, erudite phrases in new language which has not yet been used, free from the usual repetitions, not the phrases of past speech which (our) forefathers spoke.” See W.K. Simpson (ed.), *The Literature of Ancient Egypt* (New Haven and London, 1972, 1973), pp. 230–233. This should not be understood as a complaint about
understanding and lends itself to various interpretations. To the best of my—admittedly very limited—knowledge, no unanimity has as yet been reached as to what it really meant in its historical context. Whatever it did mean originally, it does not contain evidence that already in ancient times, people complained about too many books as physical objects being around. There were not, and could not have been.

The fact that Eccl. 12:12 is widely considered a later addition poses a further problem,3 but this is a minor matter. Among the principal difficulties is, for one, the great variety of meanings of the Hebrew verb “to make” and, in the second colon, the meaning of the hapax legomenon lahag. Recent translations include a conservative “book learning” for “to make = to use,”4 or “a thing of no purpose” for “no end,”5 as well as more radical suggestions such as assuming that lahag is in fact parallel to “no end”6 or re-interpreting the entire passage as “Und lass dich, mein Sohn, von ihnen gut belehren, viele Bücher ohne Unterlass zu benutzen und viel zu meditieren bis zur Körpermüdigkeit.”7 The question of the applicability of “to make” to “books” appears to have been settled by the existence of an equivalent idiom in Aramaic meaning “producing … a document (spr znh zy ‘nh ‘bdt)” and the Akkadian usage of ennešu as a stage in the bookmaking process.8 The possibility that “making” here might mean “collecting” (with reference to Eccl. 2:8 “I got me singers”)9 must be put on hold for the time being, although it would go well with the Arabic idiom of ikthār min al-kutub for collecting many books.10 However, the production or overproduction

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3 An exception is Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions* (Sheffield, 1989. Bible and Literature Series 18), p. 311. I am grateful to Robert R. Wilson for bibliographical guidance through the vast ocean of biblical studies.
4 Cf. R.B.Y. Scott’s commentary on Ecclesiastes in the Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY, 1963).
5 Fox, op. cit., 237.
9 The presence of a possessive pronoun, which strengthens the meaning of collecting, would hardly be needed or fit into the syntax of Eccles. 12:12.
10 It seems as yet undecided whether harbeh (= Aram. Saggi) is used here as an adjective or as an adverb (cf. J. Goldin, “The end of Ecclesiastes,” in A. Altmann, ed., *Biblical Motifs* [Cambridge, 1966], pp. 135–158.) The adverbial combination, lit., “the much making of