

## Who Indeed ?: A Reconsideration of מִי יוֹדֵעַ in the Hebrew Bible\*

Brent A. Strawn\*\*

**Abstract:** The present article takes up the question “Who knows?” (מִי יוֹדֵעַ) in the Hebrew Bible, where it appears no less than ten times. Instead of categorizing the instances according to their perspective on the future, whether open or closed (per the important study published by James L. Crenshaw in 1986), the current investigation posits that מִי יוֹדֵעַ connotes a lack of human knowledge while at the same time implicating God and God’s full knowledge. “Who knows?” is thus an anthropocentric question that admits of a theological exception. The theological aspects of מִי יוֹדֵעַ have gone understudied, however. The current essay seeks to rectify this, pursuing each of the ten occurrences with an eye on the neglected theological subject of this rhetorical question, categorizing each into certain and less certain examples.

**Key Words:** מִי יוֹדֵעַ, Crenshaw, Divine knowledge, Human knowledge

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\*\* Brent A. Strawn, Duke University.

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For the Most High knows all that may be known; he sees from of old the things that are to come. (Sir 42: 18b; NRSV)<sup>①</sup>

[T]he implication, as in other passages beginning with this phrase... is that *God* knows what is good.<sup>②</sup>

God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. (1 John 3: 20b; NRSV)

*For Choon-Leong Seow*

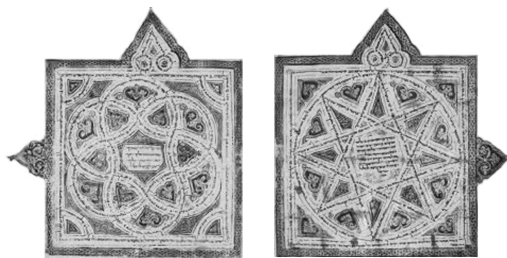
The question “who knows?” (מִי יוֹדֵעַ)—by most accounts a rhetorical question expecting a negative response<sup>③</sup>—occurs ten times in the Hebrew Bible and was the subject of an important essay by James L. Crenshaw published in 1986.<sup>④</sup> Crenshaw divided the ten instances into two equal parts according to his determination of their *telos*: five passages leave “a door open to possible

① Translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

② R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 111 (his emphasis).

③ So, e.g., Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (WBC 23A; Dallas: Word, 1992), 31: “implies a negation.” Elsewhere, Murphy defines a rhetorical question as: “A question asked for its...effect, which does not require a reply. It is found frequently in argument and persuasion, and occurs as a subgenre in all parts of the OT. The supposition is that the answer is clear, usually the only one possible and a deeper impression is made upon the hearer by the question form than by a statement.” (*Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther*, FOTL 13 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981], 181) For more on questions, see Moshe Held, “Rhetorical Questions in Ugaritic and Biblical Hebrew,” *EI* 9 (1969): 71-79; Benjamin Kedar, “The Interpretation of Rhetorical Questions in the Bible,” in “*Sha‘arei Talmon*”: *Studies in the Bible, Qumran, and the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon*, eds. Michael Fishbane, Emanuel Tov, and Weston W. Fields (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 145-152; Walter Brueggemann, “Jeremiah’s Use of Rhetorical Questions,” *JBL* 92 (1973): 358-374; Philippe Guillaume, “Caution: Rhetorical Questions!” *BN* 103 (2000): 11-16; Adina Moshavi, “Two Types of Argumentation Involving Rhetorical Questions in Biblical Hebrew Dialogue,” *Bib* 90 (2009): 32-46; Adina Moshavi, “Can a Positive Rhetorical Question Have a Positive Answer in the Bible?” *JSS* 56 (2011): 253-273; Adina Moshavi, “What Can I Say? Implications and Communicative Functions of Rhetorical ‘WH’ Questions in Classical Hebrew Prose,” *VT* 64 (2014): 93-108; Adina Moshavi, “Between Dialectic and Rhetoric: Rhetorical Questions Expressing Premises in Biblical Prose Argumentation,” *VT* 65 (2015): 136-151; and, more generally, Kenneth M. Craig, Jr., *Asking for Rhetoric: The Hebrew Bible’s Protean Interrogative*, BIS 75 (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

④ 2 Sam 12: 22; Joel 2: 14; Jonah 3: 9; Esth 4: 14; Ps 90: 11; 14; Prov 24: 22; Qoh 2: 19; 3: 21; 6: 12; 8: 1; note also מִי יִדְעֵנוּ in Jer 17: 9 and מִי יוֹדֵעֵנוּ in Isa 29: 15. James L. Crenshaw, “The Expression *mī yōdēa’* in the Hebrew Bible,” *VT* 36 (1986): 274-288; reprinted in James L. Crenshaw, *Urgent Advice and Probing Questions: Collected Writings on Old Testament Wisdom* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), 279-291 (citations follow the 1986 version).



response that will change the situation for human good” (2 Sam 12: 22; Joel 2: 14; Jonah 3: 9; Esth 4: 14; Ps 90: 11) while the other five “seem to assume a closed door to any redeeming action,” and so, in his judgment, represent a type of skepticism (Prov 24: 22 and all instances in Qoheleth).<sup>①</sup>

Since Crenshaw’s study, **מִי יוֹדֵעַ** has been left mostly unstudied, testimony to the cogency of his analysis. Indeed, Crenshaw’s essay contains a number of important insights into each of these ten passages. Even so, an important factor that surfaces repeatedly in the course of these texts, and in Crenshaw’s study thereof, but one that he neglects to comment on extensively, is how **מִי יוֹדֵעַ** seems to implicate God. “Who knows?” that is, is an *anthropocentric* question—it is one addressed to the human community of (non-) knowers; it is *not* a theological question that implies any *lack* in divine knowledge. As Sir 42: 18b, used as one of the epigraphs above, puts it: “the Most High knows all that may be known,” or, as Ezekiel puts it—apparently emphatically: “O Lord YHWH, (only) *you* know” (אֲדַנִּי יְהוָה אַתָּה יוֹדֵעַ; Ezek 37: 3). Said differently, therefore, and perhaps better, **מִי יוֹדֵעַ** is an *anthropocentric question that admits of a theological exception*. While human beings may *not* know, there is one who most certainly does: the Deity. It is only partially correct, then, to say, as Crenshaw does in another place, that “[t] he rhetorical question, ‘who knows?’ contains an implicit negative response: ‘nobody knows’”<sup>②</sup> because, in point of fact, *God does know*—as the second

① Crenshaw, “The Expression,” 274-275; also 278 for the question functioning “overwhelmingly as an expression of skepticism.” Many follow Crenshaw on his judgment about skepticism. See, inter alia, Antoon Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, HCOT (Leuven; Peeters, 2013), 193. Cf. Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos: A Commentary on the Books of the Prophets Joel and Amos*, trans. W. Janzen et al., ed. S. Dean McBride, Jr. (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 50 n. 82, who calls the phrase “[a]n interrogative form of skeptical wisdom,” but curiously cites only Joel 2: 14; Eccl 2: 19; 6: 12; and Jer 17: 9. John Goldingay, *Ecclesiastes* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021), 148-149, differs from Crenshaw by thinking **מִי יוֹדֵעַ** in Qoh 3:21 “might nevertheless express openness.”

② James L. Crenshaw, *Joel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, (New Haven; Yale University Press, 1995), 138; cf. James L. Crenshaw, “The Expression,” 278, 285. Similar sentiments are widespread—e.g., Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 308, 491, 594; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 80; Stuart Weeks, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ecclesiastes, Vol. 1: Introduction and Commentary on Ecclesiastes 1.1-5.6*, ICC (London: T & T Clark, 2020), 449, 454. It is made explicit in some of the Versional evidence as well, as, e.g., in the Vulgate’s translation in Qoh 2:19 (*ignoro*) and 6: 12 (*cum ignoret*).

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epigraph from Norman Whybray rightly asserts.<sup>①</sup> The purpose of the present essay, therefore, is to update Crenshaw's helpful analysis so as to include the Neglected Theological Subject who lurks in the background of **מי יודע**. This updating reveals that more is going on in **מי יודע** than simply whether the future is open or closed, though those categories, too, may still be operative, at least in some cases. Instead, the “more” that is at work in this question is that God remains the knower (and knowing agent) that looms above the limits of human knowledge; the “who knows?” question acknowledges human epistemological finitude, therefore, while also subtly evoking the presence of one who knows better (cf. 1 John 3: 3). I will first review the ten **מי יודע** texts, arranging them from clearer ( I ) to less clear instances ( II ) when it comes to the presence of God at work in **מי יודע**. Various inferences will be drawn along the way, but the final section draws some larger conclusions ( III ) which demonstrate why the present investigation is called for and why it is important to recognize the Deity behind, or perhaps better above, all instances of “Who knows?”

## I . “Who Knows?” Part I: Clearer Examples of **מי יודע**

That the question “Who knows?” always implies divine knowing is admittedly clearer in some texts than others. I move, therefore, from the clearest examples in this section to the less clear in the following section ( II ).

(1) Joel 2: 14

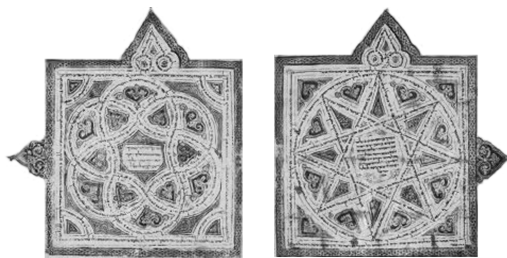
מי יודע ישוב ונחם והשאיר אחריו ברכה מנחה ונסך ליהוה אלהיכם

Who knows? He may turn and repent and leave behind him a blessing—a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God.

In Joel 2: 13 the prophet exhorts the people to return to Yhwh your God (**ושׁוב אל־יהוה אלהיכם**) because he is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and

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<sup>①</sup> For Whybray, this point is true, even if it is also true that God “has withheld...knowledge” from humankind (*Ecclesiastes*, 111).



abounding in steadfast love” (the *Gnadenformel*).<sup>①</sup> Then comes the question in 2: 14, which obviously continues to play with the notion of turning (שוב), only this time it is YHWH’s turn to turn. Ultimately, the prophetic call to return stems from YHWH who urges the people to “return [imperative] to me with all your heart!” (שבו עדי בכל־לבבכם) in 2: 12.

Given the divine origin of the call to return, not to mention the divine predicates expressed in the *Gnadenformel*, it is obvious that YHWH—and perhaps YHWH alone—has the knowledge that is expressed by the prophet in the מי יודע formula. That is to say that the prophet urges action because the human community does not (yet) know what YHWH will do—their turning *may* eventuate in YHWH’s turning, the threatened disaster “may yet be averted,”<sup>②</sup> but they do not yet know this with certainty (even if the prophet hopes as much). YHWH remains the actant, and, as a result, is the agent who knows what he will do and/or who determines how he will respond. This is true, even if in this instance מי יודע “does not express perplexity but tentative confidence,”<sup>③</sup> or, at least, hope amidst uncertainty, which is to say that, even if the prophet (and his audience) are not confident of God’s response, they *are* certain that something must be done; namely, their (re)turning to YHWH which *may* lead to YHWH’s (re)turning to them. Once again, the origin of the human (re)turn, which is rooted in the Lord’s command (2: 12; note also נאם־יהוה there), and its possible efficacy, rooted in the Lord’s graciousness (2:

① See Exod 34: 6b-7 and its various reflexes elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. For a study, with prior literature, see Brent A. Strawn, “YHWH’s Poesie: The *Gnadenformel* (Exodus 34: 6b-7), the Book of Exodus, and Beyond,” in *Biblical Poetry and the Art of Close Reading*, eds. J. Blake Couey and Elaine T. James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 237-256; reprinted in Brent A. Strawn, *The Incomparable God: Readings in Biblical Theology*, eds. Collin Cornell and Justin Walker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023), 26-44.

② John Barton, *Joel and Obadiah: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 81. Crenshaw, *Joel*, 138 compares אולי in Amos 5: 15b and 2 Kgs 19: 4 at this point, and, citing Wolff, associates both מי יודע and אולי with the “‘perhaps’ of hope.” Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, 50, states that this hopeful “perhaps” is “appropriate to the humility of one who prays,” adding that אולי “always designates God’s freedom over against those who turn to him.” For more on “perhaps” (אולי and its congeners), see David J. Reimer, “An Overlooked Term in Old Testament Theology—Perhaps,” in *Covenant as Context: Essays in Honour of E. W. Nicholson*, eds. A. D. H. Mayes and R. B. Salters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 325-346.

③ Barton, *Joel and Obadiah*, 81; cf. Crenshaw, “The Expression,” 275-276.

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13), ought not be missed.

(2) Jonah 3: 9

מִי־יֹדֵעַ יָשׁוּב וְנָחַם הָאֱלֹהִים וְשָׁב מִחֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ וְלֹא נֶאֱבַד

Who knows? The Deity may turn and repent, turning from the heat of his wrath so that we do not perish.

In this passage, *מי יודע* appears on the lips of the king of Nineveh, who has divested himself of royal attire, covered himself with sackcloth, sat down in ashes (Jonah 3:6), and proclaimed a fast, ordering that all be covered in sackcloth, “pray mightily to God” (וּיִקְרָא בְחֹזֶקָה אֱלֹהִים), and turn from their wicked ways (3:7-8). The king’s question in 3:9 bears notable similarities to Joel 2:14 and with similar force: the human characters do not (yet) know what “the Deity” (הָאֱלֹהִים) will do—how their actions will affect God—but God presumably, and obviously, *does* since God is the agent of what follows. The human community and the readers of Jonah must wait, but not for long, before that information is revealed in the very next verse. There, in language that once again recalls Joel 2, the text indicates that after “the Deity” (הָאֱלֹהִים) sees what the Ninevites had done, turning (*שוב*) from their wicked ways, “the Deity” (הָאֱלֹהִים), too, repented (*נחם*) of the disaster he had planned and didn’t do it (3:10).<sup>①</sup>

(3) Psalm 90: 11

מִי־יֹדֵעַ עַז אַפְךָ וְכִירְאֲתְךָ עֲבֵרְתְךָ

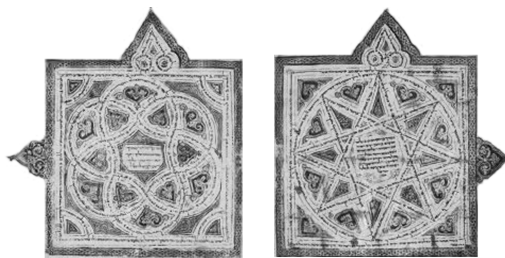
Who knows the intensity of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you?<sup>②</sup>

There are some textual problems in this verse, but this translation is acceptable for the MT as it presently stands.<sup>③</sup> The most important point for present purposes is that the question is addressed directly to God, who is

① For more on Jonah and the playfulness of *מי יודע*, see Timothy C. McNinch, “‘Who Knows?’: A Bakhtinian Reading of Carnavalesque Motifs in Jonah,” *VT* 72 (2022): 699-715.

② The translation is from Crenshaw, “The Expression,” 277. Contrast NRSV: “Who considers the power of your anger? /Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.” See next note.

③ LXX appears to reflect *מִן* rather than *כִּי* (ἀπὸ τοῦ φόβου σου). See NETS: “Who knows the might of your wrath, and your anger from your fear?” Cf. the previous note.



identified as “my Lord” (אדני) in Ps 90:1, “God” (אל) in 90:3,<sup>①</sup> and YHWH in 90:13. The latter verse is important insofar as it echoes themes familiar from Joel 2 and Jonah 3. The psalmist implores YHWH to “turn” (שובה יהוה) and “show compassion” (והנחם) on “your servants” (על־עבדיך) (Ps 90:13). In this instance, too, therefore, what the psalmist does *not* know, God most certainly does. Hence, despite the difference in emotional valence between text (3) and texts (1) and (2) in terms of *wrath and anger vs. mercy and forgiveness*, respectively, the positions on the game board, as it were, are identical: humans cannot “comprehend” what God does.

(4) 2 Samuel 12: 22

ויאמר בעוד הילד חי צמתי ואבכה כי אמרת כי יודע יהונני  
יהוה וחי הילד

And he (David) said, “While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept because I thought: ‘Who knows? YHWH may be gracious to me and the child survive.’”

This verse constitutes David’s response to those who ask him why he has ended his fasting and praying upon learning of the death of his son with Bathsheba. While the child lived, David reports, he wasn’t fully sure what YHWH might do, though obviously YHWH did and had announced it via the prophet Nathan in 2 Sam 12:14—a point confirmed by the narrator in v. 15b. David’s “fasting and self-humiliation” is thus a case of “imploping Yahweh to spare the child.”<sup>③</sup> Once the child is dead, but only then, David knows with full clarity—or at least accepts—what YHWH had known beforehand, even before Nathan’s divine pronouncement of YHWH’s intentions in v. 14.<sup>④</sup> Crenshaw thinks that *מי יודע* here functions like the prophetic *אולי* (see, e.g., Amos 5:

① LXX took this as a negative particle and associated it with the verb in v. 3.

② Reading with the Kethib here; Qere: *יהונני*.

③ P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, AB 9 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1984), 301. David’s actions are clearly an attempt to influence YHWH and may be seen, especially after the fact, as a way of knowing YHWH’s will. Within the narrative, David knows that will ahead of time because of the divine utterance of judgment through Nathan.

④ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interp (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 283.

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15). In his opinion, the emphasis thus “falls on the sovereignty of God.”<sup>①</sup> Other interpreters concur, some going so far as to translate **מִי יוֹדַע** with “perhaps.”<sup>②</sup> Such a dynamic equivalent translation may capture something of the sentiment here, but without further explanation such a rendering seems to underestimate the theological element—not least vis-à-vis those **מִי יוֹדַע** passages where the Deity is not explicitly mentioned (see further below).

(5) Proverbs 24: 22

כִּי־פֶתְאֵם יָקוּם אִדָּם וּפִיד שְׁנֵיהֶם מִי יוֹדַע

Because suddenly disaster comes from them; and who knows the destruction from both of them?

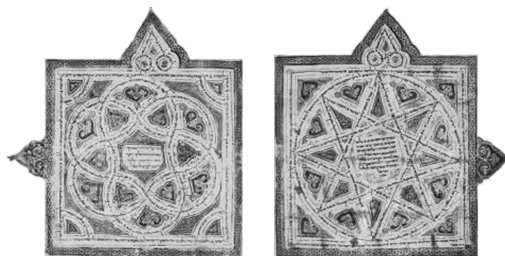
This verse is not without its difficulties.<sup>③</sup> What is important to note is that the 3mp suffixes on **אִדָּם** and **שְׁנֵיהֶם** go back to Prov 24:21 which admonishes the student (**בְּנִי**: “my son”) to “fear YHWH and the king” (**יִרְאֵת יְהוָה...וּמֶלֶךְ**). God and the monarch, therefore, are the “two/both of them” who are the possible origin(s) of “disaster” (**אִדָּם**) and “destruction” (**פִּיד**).<sup>④</sup> Proper conduct is thus warranted before these powerful entities, but it is also without question that these commanding parties know full well what they are capable of even if

① Crenshaw, “The Expression,” 275.

② A. Graeme Auld, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 470. So also, in the case of Joel 2: 14, Crenshaw, *Joel*, 132; Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, 39; for Esth 4: 14, cf. Lewis Bayles Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1908), 224: **מִי יוֹדַע**, “followed immediately by an impf., is equivalent to *perhaps*.” Cf. the early study by Hinckley G. Mitchell, “Final Constructions of Biblical Hebrew,” *JBL* 34 (1915): 83-161, esp. 100-101, who concludes that “[i]t is difficult to see any difference in effect between **אִדָּם** and **מִי יוֹדַע**. If there is any, it is, that, while the former represents the result desired as barely possible, the latter suggests that it is not absolutely impossible.”

③ See, e.g., Crawford H. Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, ICC (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1902), 449-451; Crenshaw, “The Expression,” 278-279, for some of the issues and different translational possibilities. Note that LXX adds five additional couplets about the king following 24: 22. See further Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs: An Eclectic Edition with Introduction and Textual Commentary*, HBCE 1 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 327; Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 18B (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 751-753.

④ Assuming the pronouns are subjective, rather than objective. Cf. Toy, *Proverbs*, 450; Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 280 n. 47, 287-288.



their subjects don't. In this text, then, there *is* a human being who knows the answer to the question **מִי יוֹדֵעַ**, but it is an atypical and non-representative one: the human king at the very top of the socio-political hierarchy. This point granted, the distributive function at work in the grammar—"them... the two of them"—means that the single question, "Who knows?" is actually bipartite. The monarch knows the destruction that can come from him, but such knowledge does not obtain for the Deity's part of the question (and answer): humans do not know that. So, despite the somewhat atypical situation involving this rather unique individual (the king), it remains true that YHWH clearly knows what human beings—including the king, per David in 2 Sam 12: 22!—do not.<sup>①</sup>

(6) Qoheleth 3: 21

מִי יוֹדֵעַ רוּחַ בְּנֵי הָאָדָם הַעֹלָה הִיא לְמַעְלָה וְרוּחַ הַבְּהֵמָה הַיֹּרֶדֶת הִיא לְמַטָּה לְאָרֶץ

Who knows if the spirit of humans goes up and the spirit of animals goes down to the earth?

Here, as so often in Ecclesiastes, God lurks very near the surface of the discourse. God is the subject of several verbs in Qoh 3: 17-18, with the latter verse particularly instructive for v. 21 since it introduces the relationship between humankind and animals: "I said in my heart regarding human beings that the Deity [הַאֱלֹהִים] is testing them to show that they are but animals."<sup>②</sup> Qoheleth then indicates that the fate of humans and animals is one (מִקְרָה אֶחָד), as is their spirit (רוּחַ אֶחָד), and that they both go to the same place (מְקוֹם אֶחָד; 3:19-20a). The sage's conclusion is that "everything comes from the dust and everything returns to the dust" (3: 20b), which is followed by the "who

<sup>①</sup> Crenshaw, "The Expression," 279, notes that LXX Prov 30: 1-14 immediately follows LXX Prov 24: 22, and that MT Prov 30: 4 ends with "surely you know" (**כִּי תֹדַע**) addressed to God. See Fox, *Proverbs*, 381, for a discussion.

<sup>②</sup> Qoh 3: 18 is complicated; the translation above follows the NRSV fairly closely. See Y. A. P. Goldman, "Qoheleth," in *General Introduction and Megillot*, BHQ 18 (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2004), 77\* -78\*.

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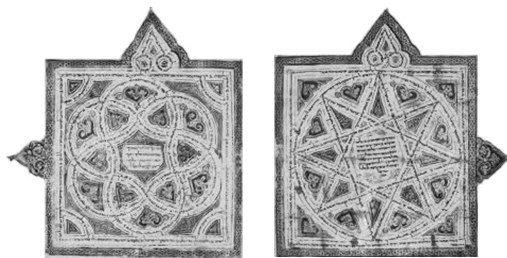
knows?” question in 3: 21.<sup>①</sup>

There are two good reasons for suggesting that Qoheleth’s question does not exclude God from knowing the matters at hand and so, in fact, assumes and implies divine knowledge.<sup>②</sup> The first has already been mentioned: the presence and actions of “the Deity” (האלהים) in 3: 17 and, especially, 3: 18. The second is how Qoheleth returns to the larger issue of death at the end of the book, in 12: 7, which states that, at the end of things (or of *all*

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① Qoh 3: 22 should also be noted: “Who can bring them to see what will be after them in the future?” (מי יביאנו לראות במה שיהיה אחריו). The Hiphil stem of בוא is noteworthy here, especially in the larger context, and it seems quite likely that this question, too, somehow invokes the Deity, especially given various intertextual references with the Psalms and the power of God over and beyond death which is expressed there. I hope to return to this matter in a subsequent essay. See further under text (7) below.

② See Goldman, “Qoheleth,” 79\* who thinks LXX and Syr, which read ומי יודע are to be preferred over MT, Vulg, and Targ ממי יודע. Goldman thinks “[t]he omission of the cj. in proto-M creates a separation between v. 20 and v. 21. One may suspect this is a theological revision...” but Goldman’s argument here seems overly fine (cf. Weeks, *Ecclesiastes* 1-5, 560). The same holds true, in my judgment, for Goldman’s position regarding the pointing of הַעֲלֵה and הַיִּרְדֵת [depending on GKC § 100m: “the article is a correction due to doctrinal considerations,” without further argument; though cf. similarly Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary*, trans. O. C. Dean Jr., ed. Klaus Baltzer, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 82 n. 21a; Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 216]. For discussion of this latter matter, see Crenshaw, “The Expression,” 280 n. 18, who thinks the inclusion of הִיא requires the interrogative sense; Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 168: “the forms [in MT] are not impossible as interrogatives”; George Aaron Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, ICC (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1909), 111 (who apparently thinks the pointing in MT is simply a mistake); Robert Gordis, *Koheleth—The Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes*, 3rd ed. (New York: Schocken, 1968), 238; Christian D. Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth (Commonly Called the Book of Ecclesiastes): Translated from the Original Hebrew, with a Commentary, Historical and Critical*, repr. ed. (New York: Ktav, 1970), 319-320; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 307-308; Weeks, *Ecclesiastes* 1-5, 561; and Robert D. Holmstedt, John A. Cook, and Phillip S. Marshall, *Qoheleth: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*, BHHB (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 141. Holmstedt et al. state that, “[u]nlike most of Qoheleth’s questions, this one [in 3: 21] does not seem to be a rhetorical question, but an open-ended one” (ibid.), though they offer no further discussion and do not specify the difference. Daniel J. Treier, *Proverbs & Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011), 158, reading the forms as having the definite article, not interrogative *he*, takes the verse as another instance of “the back-and-forth uncertainty of the passage, hardly asserting an unorthodox or cynical conclusion.” Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 104, points out that, if 3: 21 has been tampered with, “the equally unorthodox teaching in 3: 19 was left unchanged.”



things!)<sup>①</sup>, “the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to the Deity [האלהים] who gave it.” Perhaps Qoheleth is agnostic to the last insofar as the return (שוב) in 12: 7 could (still) be upward or downward (למעלה or למטה; see 3: 21) for either (or both) humankind and beasts, but he is quite certain, in chapter 12, that the spirit in question (הרוח) returns to “the Deity.”<sup>②</sup> It seems quite safe to assume, regardless of Qoheleth’s imperfect apperception—precisely because he is human and not divine (see 3: 11; 8: 17)—that the Deity does know, even if Qoheleth does not, the answer to the question posed in 3: 21.<sup>③</sup>

① See C. L. Seow, “Qoheleth’s Eschatological Poem,” *JBL* 118 (1999): 209-234.

② Note Weeks, *Ecclesiastes* 1-5, 544: “Qoheleth does in fact believe there to be a difference, and this will much later be confirmed by his unequivocal suggestion in 12.7, that human breath does return to God.” Cf., e.g., Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 93, who thinks that 3: 21 “does not stand in contradiction to 12: 7... That is, if humans and animals have one and the same life spirit (v. 19), which comes from God (12: 7), we may assume that the life spirit of animals also returns to God at their death (cf. Ps 104: 29-30; Job 34: 14-15).” Even so, if Qoheleth is somehow engaged with the opening chapters of Genesis (see *ibid.*, 92; also 133 n. 4; etc.), then a contrast between human life and animal life may be operative (cf. *ibid.*, 93 n. 51; cf. Graham Ogden, *Qoheleth* [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987], 62: “some distinction is required, even though it presently lies beyond proof, beyond empirical testing. Qoheleth’s term *yitrôn* holds within it hope for some post-death resolution”). Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 105, also does not think 3: 19-21 contradict 12: 7: “Qoheleth remarks that both elements [dust and divine breath] return to their source, a fact from which he drew no comfort (cf. Eccl. 12: 8),” but it may be doubted that 12: 8 applies to 12: 7 at all. For his part, Ginsburg thinks that מִי יוֹדֵעַ in 3: 21 (and elsewhere) is an instance of “emphatic denial” (*Qoheleth*, 319; cf. 260; similarly Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 62; also Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 110). Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 309, thinks Qoheleth’s “view on this question is agnostic and even sceptic[al]... Qoh. does neither contest nor reject this view, but only suggests by his rhetorical question that nobody knows.” Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, is also cautious: “It is useless to try to determine from this denial his specific views on Sheol and the next life,” adding that 12:7 “is obviously not the same claim that he rejects” in 3: 21 (37). Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 110, however, thinks Qoheleth’s true view “is shown by 12<sup>7</sup>, though in his mood of despondent pessimism he seems here to deny it.” On the possibility of development within the course of the Book of Ecclesiastes (and/or within Qoheleth’s thought), see Eric S. Christianson, *A Time to Tell: Narrative Strategies in Ecclesiastes*, JSOTSup 280 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998). On the connections between 3: 21 and 12: 7, see also Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 18 (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1983), 87-88.

③ Cf. Weeks, *Ecclesiastes* 1-5, 544; E. Podechard, *L’Ecclésiaste* (Paris: Gabalda, 1912), 312. Also pertinent here may be the possibility that לברם in 3: 18 should be read as (reflecting) לבראם, which would explicitly invoke God’s creative activity (see Goldman, “Qoheleth,” 77\*). For the divine referent of ברא, see W. Randall Garr, “God’s Creation: ברא in the Priestly Source,” *HTR* 97 (2004): 83-89.

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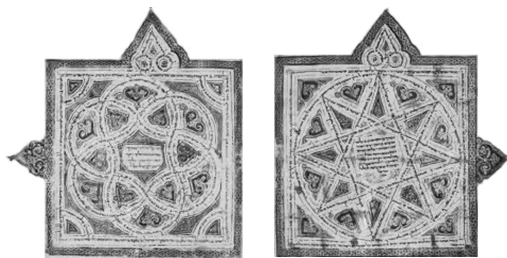
To summarize thus far; each of texts (1)-(6) use **מי יודע** in contexts that explicitly mention the Deity, variously identified. Indeed, text (3) uses **מי יודע** in direct address to the Lord/God/YHWH within a psalm, “a prayer of Moses.” Only text (5) seems to admit of another possible and non-divine knower—namely, the king. But this passage likely limits this exceptional human knower to knowing only those things wrought by this selfsame individual; hence this passage, too, does not disallow divine knowing from the question **מי יודע**. Instead, text (5) only allows for one, truly unique anomaly in a sea of human *non*-knowing (and divine *most-certainly*-knowing). Again, in this particular case, especially given the distributive use of **שניהם**, what the human king knows is likely *not* at all what God knows but is restricted to the disaster wrought by royal prerogative. In this way the king-as-knower is an outlier at best but equally in the dark (alongside the royal subjects) about what God may or will do. Indeed, the ignorance of another monarch—the king of Nineveh in Jonah 3—proves this point precisely, as does that of another ruler, this one Israel’s great king, David, in 2 Samuel 12. Finally, even “agnostic” Qoheleth admits in the end, even if only indirectly (and contextually), that God is knowledgeable about what the crabby sage is himself not aware of and can only guess at (text [6]). In brief, therefore, texts (1)-(6) repeatedly offer evidence that *what human subjects do not know, God most definitely does*. It is time now to move from these texts to others that seem, at least at first, to be less clear instances of the Divine Subject that somehow lurks amidst **מי יודע**.

## II. “Who Knows?” Part II: Less Clear Examples of **מי יודע**

(7) Qoheleth 6: 12

כי מי יודע מה טוב לאדם בחיים מספר ימי יחיי הבלו ויעשם כצל אשר מייגיד לאדם מה יהיה  
אחריו תחת השמש

Because who knows what is good for someone while living the few



days of their vain life which they pass in the shadow?<sup>①</sup> Who can declare to someone what will take place after them under the sun?

While text (7) is the first of four passages that seem less clear when it comes to God-as-ultimate-knower, the One who knows what all others do not, this text, too, is not far removed from texts (1)-(6) given the strongly deterministic overtones established in Qoh 6:10a: “Whatever happens—it has already been named; and what human beings are is known”; and even more due to the sentiment found in 6: 10b: “They are unable to contend with the one who is stronger than they” (עם שהתקיף ממנו).<sup>②</sup> Contrary to the NRSV (“those who are stronger”), the grammatically-singular form found in the MT here should be retained in translation; contrary to the NJPSV (“what is stronger than he”) the referent is unlikely to be impersonal. Instead, given Qoheleth’s use of a kind of double-register elsewhere, speaking at once about both God and death, it seems quite likely that God is present here as “the One stronger.” The Deity, therefore, is implied in 6: 10. As a result, after the brief aside in 6:11, it is not difficult to see that God, unlike human beings, is also the one who could answer the question “who knows?” in 6: 12. This gains even more credence when 6: 12 is compared to 3: 15, which uses very similar

① See Goldman, “Qoheleth,” 88\* -89\*, for בצל (LXX: ἐν σκιά) rather than כצל (MT, supported by Syriac *ʿyk illʿ*; and Vulgate *velut umbra*). Seow thinks MT is “sound and need not be emended” (*Ecclesiastes*, 234); an extensive discussion, ultimately reading with MT, may be found in Stuart Weeks, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, Vol. 2: *Commentary on Ecclesiastes 5.7-12.14* (ICC; London: T & T Clark, 2022), 136-138. Peter Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, THCOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 77, thinks the subject of ויעשהם is “certainly... God, who is, once again, responsible for what humanity must endure.” The mp object suffix, in turn, “could refer either to humanity... or to the days of one’s life... The theme is familiar by now: life is absurd, you die anyway, and God is to blame.” If Enns is correct [see, similarly, Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 239; Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 178], the verb ויעשהם is another instance where Qoheleth is speaking of God, but I think any such speech-about-the-divine here is covert at best and perhaps not present at all. Note that most scholars take עשה here to mean simply “spend time” (see, e. g., Fox, *Time*, 248; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 493; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 233).

② Cf. Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 491: “the rhetorical question suggests a negative answer, ‘nobody knows’, because of divine predestination.” He goes on to compare Prov 20: 24: “All our steps are ordered by the LORD; how then can we understand our own ways?” (NRSV). For the Kethib/Qere issue with שהתקיף, see Goldman, “Qoheleth,” 39, 88\*.

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language and where God is explicitly mentioned along with the implication that God knows those things that evade human comprehension:<sup>①</sup>

Whatever happens—it already did; and what will happen—it already has. And the Deity [והאלהים] seeks out what has passed by.

Finally, 6: 12 couples מי יודע with another rhetorical question: “who can declare?” (מי יגיד)<sup>②</sup> and locates the unknowable (to humans) future firmly “under the sun” (תחת השמש), a phrase that many interpreters have deemed an anthropological, not theological, locus.<sup>③</sup> That is to say that “under the sun” does *not* apply to the Deity who is *not* under the sun—not, at least, in the same way human beings are but is instead *above* the sun or *beyond* it in some way. “Under the sun” refers, therefore, to the *beneath-* or *non-God* realm. No human being, therefore, could tell another human being what will take place after them in the future, but God, who is not limited to life “under the sun” very well could and might.<sup>④</sup> God could declare this future (6:12b; cf. 3: 22)

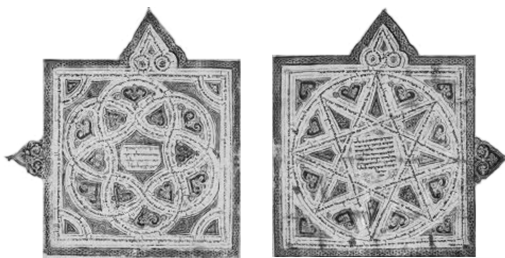
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① See Crenshaw, “The Expression,” 282.

② Cf. מי יביאנו in Qoh 3: 22; see above under text (6).

③ See, inter alia, J. Gerald Janzen, “Qohelet on Life ‘Under the Sun,’” *CBQ* 70 (2008): 465-483.

④ Cf. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 98: “Implicit in the rhetorical question is the belief that *nobody* knows, or that at least only God knows.” Divine knowledge is assumed, in my judgment, regardless of whether אחריו refers “to future events in one’s lifetime” (so Fox, *Time*, 248-249) or beyond that more generally (i.e., after one’s death). Schoors disputes any presence of the afterlife in this context, however, “because of the adjunct ‘under the sun’” [*Ecclesiastes*, 491; cf. 495-496; also found, earlier, in A. Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words: A Study of the Language of Qoheleth*, Part II: *Vocabulary*, OLA 143 (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 131-132]. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 59, is similar: Qoheleth has in mind “how things will turn out while one still lives on earth.” Once again, cf. Qoh 3: 22 and the discussion above under text (6).



and therefore God also knows what is good (6: 12a).<sup>①</sup> Perhaps one should observe at this point that, elsewhere in Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth has a decent sense of what is good (מה טוב) and is quite clear that it is *God's* gift (see 3: 12-13; 5: 17-19; cf. 3: 22).<sup>②</sup>

(8) Qoheleth 2: 19

ומי יודע החכם יהיה או סכל וישלט בכל-עמלי שעמלתי ושחכמתי תחת השמש גם-זה הבל  
 And who knows if he [i.e., the heir] will be wise or foolish? But he will have control over all my work that I toiled at and that I was wise about under the sun. This, also, is *hevel*.

Generally-speaking, text (8) seems little different in terms of tone or substance as texts (6) and (7), which were deemed more and less clear, respectively, with regard to divine knowing. In text (8), which precedes texts (6) and (7) in the book, Qoheleth (also) laments lack of knowledge about<sup>③</sup> or perhaps better, lack of control over, the future—in this specific case, the indeterminate quality of his heir(s) and how that heir(s) will deploy that which Qoheleth has accomplished through his “wise toil.”<sup>④</sup> Qoheleth’s frustration over this situation is captured by how he begins with *מי יודע*, equivalent

① See, similarly, Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 133 n. 4, who thinks that, while v. 12a “does not have to be read from the start as a ‘rhetorical’ question,” even so, “[w]ith the background of [the] primeval history...the question could be answered with ‘God’ (cf. Gen 2: 18)... what is ‘good’ cannot be determined by human beings themselves...it is given to them in advance by God through God’s creative activity.” Krüger goes on to argue that God is also the one “who could declare” (יגיד; *ibid.*, 133 n. 5) and points to the divine limitation of human knowledge in 3: 11 (also 3: 14). Cf. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 111: “It is Qoheleth’s view (v. 10) that each person’s destiny is known—to God. So in saying that we cannot know what is good for man he is not contradicting earlier statements such as 5: 18 [17], but rather confirming them”; and Treier, *Proverbs & Ecclesiastes*, 182: the question “has a positive as well as negative answer: not humans, but God. God knows what is good for mortals.” Treier notably entitles the second half of the book, 7: 1-12: 7, “Who Knows?” in his commentary. Cf. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 58: “The rhetorical question (‘who knows?’) expresses an issue that crisscrosses through the book (2: 3; cf. the ‘nothing better’ sayings of 2: 24; 3: 12, 22; etc.). It is also an introduction to the futile attempt to find out what is good (chaps. 7-8) or to know what lies ahead (chaps. 9-10).”

② As a result, Michael V. Fox detects some “self-directed irony” in 6:12 [*Ecclesiastes* (JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 42]. For the  $\sqrt{t-w-b}$  word group in Qoheleth, see Schoors, *Preacher*, 27-44.

③ Cf. Vulgate, which makes Qoheleth the explicit subject: *ignoro* (“I do not know”).

④ See Gordis, *Koheleth*, 223, who takes שעמלתי ושחכמתי as a hendiadys: “I toiled wisely.”

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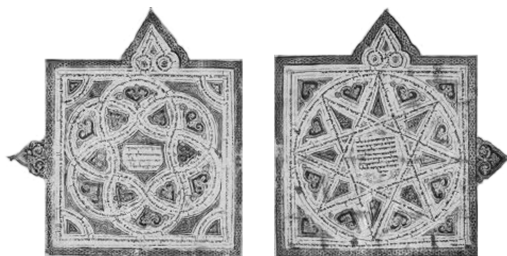
here to “no one knows,”<sup>①</sup> at the start of this verse, and how Qoheleth ends with his judgment that “this, too, is הבל.” On the one hand, Ogden is right that מי יודע here is “actually an affirmation that nobody knows, least of all Qoheleth himself.”<sup>②</sup> On the other hand, this judgment is wrong because time itself will tell. Neither Qoheleth—nor any one else *at the moment*—can determine the quality of his heir(s) and the fate of his fortune...at least under the sun [see text (7) above]. But there is nothing preventing God from knowing this information, especially God as envisioned by Qoheleth. [Others, too, will know, but only after the fact; cf. text (4) above.] This is, after all, the Deity who “does all” or “makes everything” (האלהים אשר יעשה את־הכל; 11: 6), and who has “long ago approved what you do” (כי כבר רצה האלהים את־מעשיך; 9: 7). More immediate in the literary context of text (8) is how Qoheleth’s frustration in 2: 18-23 moves to his first “joy-passage” (2: 24-26), which explicitly invokes God; *God’s* hand, *God’s* role in eating and enjoyment, *God’s* giving of wisdom, knowledge, and joy along with the hard work of gathering and heaping. This, too, is *hevel* and a pursuit of wind (גם־זוה הבל ורעות רוח; 9: 26b), *but it is thoroughly God-implicated*. The judgment that מי יודע in 2: 19 “expresses utter skepticism,” therefore, needs some important nuancing<sup>③</sup>: God transcends the human subject rather definitively in Qoheleth’s thought and in the book named after him.<sup>④</sup> If some things are unclear, worthy of skepticism in Ecclesiastes, this point about the Deity is most certainly not under debate. Qoheleth seems abundantly clear about that much at least! And so, again, while he rails against the limits of (his own and) human knowing, God’s transcendence is not similarly limited. Indeed, it is the existence of the

① Ginsburg, *Cohleth*, 295, translates “no one knoweth...” (as also for 3: 21; see also *ibid.*, 318, 296) and argues that the formula “is used for *no one knows*.” Similarly, Podechard, *L’Ecclésiaste*, 276: “*Et qui sait, c’est-à-dire ‘on ne sait pas.*”

② Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 45.

③ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 87. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 60, who thinks Crenshaw “overstates its [the question’s] significance.”

④ Cf., memorably, Elias Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible: Jonah/Daniel/Koheleth/Esther* (New York: Schocken, 1967), 149: “for Koheleth the traditional precept to ‘fear God’ means to be on guard against *Elohim*.” More generally, see Schoors, *Preacher*, 93-111; Klaas Smelik, “God in the Book of Qoheleth,” in *The Language of Qohelet in Its Context: Essays in Honor of Prof. A. Schoorson on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, eds. A. Berlejung and P. Van Hecke, OLA 164 (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 177-181.



latter, God’s lack of limitations—or, said differently, the Deity’s *non-finitude*—that seems to cause and exacerbate Qoheleth’s struggles with his own (and human) finitude.

(9) Qoheleth 8: 1

מי כהחכם ומי יודע פֶּשֶׁר דְּבַר חִכְמַת אָדָם תֵּאִיר פְּנֵיו וְעַז פְּנֵיו יִשְׁנָא

Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a matter/word? A person’s wisdom brightens their face and the hardness of their face is changed.

Right from the start, the Hebrew of text (9) is vexed, with scholarly opinions diverging widely over how to understand the opening question, מי כהחכם. Despite Aquila, Vulgate, and perhaps Symmachus, all of whom suggest a different division of characters from MT: “who is so wise?” (מי כה חכם)<sup>①</sup>, Goldman thinks the non-elided definite article after the preposition should be retained as a feature of Late Biblical Hebrew.<sup>②</sup> The latter part of Qoh 8: 1, about the shining of one’s face and the like—if not the entire verse—is usually taken as a kind of proverbial statement, perhaps cited by Qoheleth if not actually created by him. Whatever the case, several factors argue that in this verse, too, God is implied as one who knows that which is

① So also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 277; Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 53; also idem, *Time*, 272: “since v. 1aβ can only mean that no one knows the meaning of a matter, we require a negative evaluation in v. 1aα, too, in other words, a statement that *even* the wise man has a limited capacity for understanding...[W]e may paraphrase v. 1a as: No one is so wise as to understand the meaning of anything.” I disagree with Schoors, who thinks that the reading in Aquila et al. “undoubtedly offers a *lectio facilisans*” (*Ecclesiastes*, 593). See also the next note.

② Goldman, “Qoheleth,” 97\*, citing GKC § 35n. Similarly Gordis, *Koheleth*, 286; Holmstedt, Cook, and Marshall, *Qoheleth*, 226. Eaton’s perspective, that the כ here is an example of *kaph veritatis*, would make the (mis) division issue moot (*Ecclesiastes*, 117). See also Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 594; Treier, *Proverbs & Ecclesiastes*, 197; and cf. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 128. Ginsburg, *Cohleth*, 390, somewhat oddly, thinks כִּי should be supplied before יודע in Qoh 8: 1. If he is correct, Qoh 8: 1 would no longer be an instance of מי יודע, but Ginsburg offers no substantive support for his emendation and it should be rejected. Once again, Weeks, *Ecclesiastes* 5-12, 312-314, offers an extended discussion. He retains MT and translates “Who is like the wise man?” (312).

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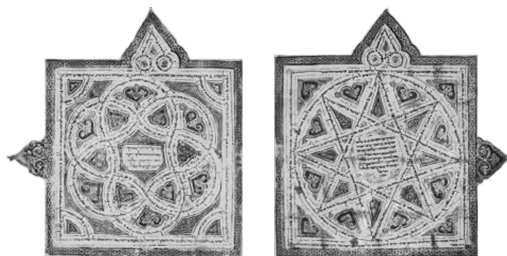
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unknown to humans.<sup>①</sup> The first of these factors may well be the general force of the other **מִי יוֹדֵעַ** passages previously examined, especially texts (1)-(6), coupled with the general depiction of God in Qoheleth [see above on text (8)]. Another, more specific consideration would be the use of **פֶּשֶׁר** elsewhere, particularly in Daniel.<sup>②</sup> **פֶּשֶׁר** occurs with great frequency in Daniel since “interpretation” is of great concern throughout that book. Many different individuals are said to offer **פֶּשֶׁרִין**, with human **פֶּשֶׁרִין** in great demand (see chaps. 2, 4-5; also 7:16). Daniel, of course, is the master interpreter par excellence. One might say, therefore, that one possible response to the question: “Who knows the interpretation of a matter/word?” would be: “Daniel and others like him.” While this is no doubt true, it must be quickly added that, for his part, Daniel gives credit where credit is due: his skills in interpretation are due *not* to his own wisdom; rather, “this mystery has been revealed to me” (**רָזָא דְנָה גְלִי לִי**; Dan 2: 30). Even more salient is Daniel’s testimony that it is “the Great God who has revealed to the king what is to come after” (**אֱלֹהֵי רַב הוֹדַע לְמַלְכָא מַה דִּי לְהוּא אַחֲרֵי**; 2: 45). In Daniel 4, Nebuchadnezzar is the one who recognizes the ultimately divine origin of Daniel’s gifts, even if the king conceives of that origin in polytheistic terms: “you are able [to interpret the dream] because the spirit of the *holy gods* is in you” (**וְאִנְתָּה כְּהֵל דִּי רוּחֵ-אֱלֹהִין קִדִּישִׁין בְּךָ**; 4: 15). Daniel makes sure to set the king straight: “This is the interpretation, O King, and it is a decree of *the Most High* that has come upon my lord the king” (**הִיא דִּי מַטְתַּ עַל־מְרָאֵי מַלְכָא**) (4:21). Still further, in 7:16, Daniel must approach one of the divine attendants (**חַד מִן־קְאָמִיא**) in order to obtain the interpretation of the visions that terrified him. What all of this makes abundantly clear, therefore, is that, if a special human being like Daniel does know the interpretation of a (divine) matter/word—and even the best sometimes do not

① Cf. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 82, who, citing Alonso Schökel, notes that “God may provide the context” for 8: 1. Contrast Goldingay, *Ecclesiastes*, 214-215, who relates the two parts of the verse to each other: “The obvious answers to the double rhetorical questions would be respectively ‘no one’ and ‘the smart person does.’ In other words, the second half of the line restates the first, elaborating on what it means to be smart.” See further below.

② The other place where the notion (Heb **פֶּתְרוֹן/פֶּתֵר**) is found is in the Joseph cycle (Genesis 40-41); see Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 151-152 and n. 7 and further below.



(so Dan 7: 16!)—they know this *only because of divine disclosure*.<sup>①</sup> This is just another way to say, once again, that even if human beings do not know, God does. That is why, if and when human beings *do* know, it is *only because God so allows*.<sup>②</sup>

A final, smaller consideration that adds still further weight to this interpretation of מִי יוֹדֵעַ in text (9) is the reading of the Targum at Qoh 8: 1: “Who is the wise who can stand against the wisdom of the Lord?” (מֵאֵן אֵיִת חֲכִימָא דִּיכּוּל לְמַקָּם כְּלִי־קַבֵּל חוֹכְמַתָּא דִּיִּי). Goldman posits that this phrasing might “be an interpretation of that particular use of the article of M[ T], i.e., ‘the Wise’ *par excellence* is the Lord.”<sup>③</sup> Even if Goldman isn’t right about the Targum here, or, even if he is and the Targum is not entirely germane to MT Qoh 8: 1, it remains the case that scholars have often found in text (9) and its larger context another instance of Qoheleth’s double-speak because what follows in chapter 8, which is putatively about the king (מֶלֶךְ; 8: 2), seems equally if not more applicable to God, especially by means of the phrases “he

① Daniel 5 is no real exception. True, Daniel does not explicitly credit God for the interpretation but the judgment discussed stems from offenses made against “the Most High God” (אֱלֹהֵא עֲלִיא; 5: 18), because Nebuchadnezzar needed to learn the sovereignty of the Most High God (אֱלֹהֵא עֲלִיא; 5: 21), and because Belshazzar has not honored “the God in whose hand is your breath and who owns all your ways” (וּלְאֱלֹהֵא דִּי־נִשְׁמַתְךָ בִּידֵהּ וְכָל־אַרְחַתְךָ לֵהּ; 5: 23). Finally, it is from this God’s presence (מְנִי־קְדֻמוֹהִי; 5: 24) that the hand writing was sent, and God (אֱלֹהֵא) is the first mentioned subject after the introductory formula “this is the interpretation of the matter” (דְּנִנָּה פֶשֶׁר־מִלְתָּא; 5: 26). One might compare the extensive use of פֶּשֶׁר at Qumran, where it is typically used of divinely revealed interpretation, especially that given to the Righteous Teacher, “to whom God [אֱל] revealed all the mysteries of the words of his servants the prophets” (1QpHab 7.4-5).

② Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 151-152: “With Joseph as well as with Daniel...the text states emphatically that the ‘interpretations’ conveyed by them *go back to God*,” and so, as a result, “Qoh 8: 1a can also be read as a statement about the *incomparable wisdom of God* that is not at human disposal” (emphases added). Under this general rubric of divine knowledge revealed to human beings belong texts like Amos 3: 3-8; Deuteronomy 5; Ezek 37: 3.

③ Goldman, “Qoheleth,” 97\* .

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does whatever he pleases” (כל־אשר יחפץ יעשה; 8: 3)<sup>①</sup> and “who can say to him, ‘What are you doing?’” (ומי יאמר־לו מה־תעשה; 8: 4). Of course, anyone who has read text (5), Prov 24: 22, is not at all surprised to see the two ancient Near Eastern superpowers, the divine and human rulers, linked once again in text (9) if not also elsewhere in Ecclesiastes. Last, but certainly not least, it should be noted that some ancient interpreters, too, read the questions in text (9) as referring to God.<sup>②</sup>

(10) Esther 4: 14

כי אִם־הִרְשָׁה תַחֲרִישִׁי בַעַת הַזֹּאת רוּחַ וְהַצִּלָּה יַעֲמוּד לַיהוּדִים מִמְּקוֹם אַחֵר וְאֵת וּבֵית־אֲבִיךָ תֵּאבְדוּ וְמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־לֵעֵת כְּזֹאת הִגַּעַת לַמַּלְכוּת

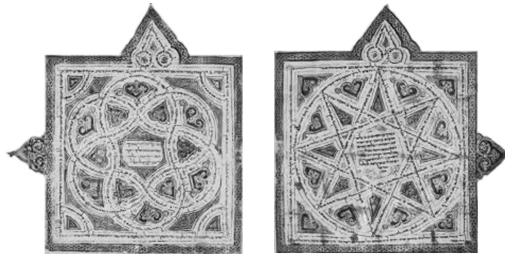
If you keep completely silent at this moment, relief and deliverance may arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your ancestral house will perish. But who knows if you have not come to the kingdom for a moment precisely like this one?

This is a famous verse if only because, according to most interpreters, “another place” is the closest MT Esther gets to anything even remotely

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① The close similarity between Qoh 8: 4b and Job 9: 12b, where the referent is God, has long been observed. Cf. also Isa 45: 9 and Dan 4: 35. For the phrase כל אשר חפץ עשה, see A. Hurvitz, “The History of a Legal Formula; *kol ‘ašer-ḥāpēṣ āšāh* (Psalms cxv 3, cxxxv 6),” *VT* 32 (1982): 257-267. It occurs in Pss 115: 3 and 135: 6, which state that it is *God* who does whatever he pleases. A slightly modified form is found in Isa 46: 10 (God speaking); Jonah 1: 14 (the sailors’ prayer to God); and here in Qoh 8: 3 (Hurvitz thinks Dan 4: 32 is an adaptation of the same phrase). The fact that God is the acting subject in these texts is noteworthy; it would be odd for Qoheleth to use the same phrasing with different meaning.

② E.g., *Pesiqta de Rab Kahana VI: II* which states that the question, “Who is wise enough?” (note the possible implications for the *Vorlage*) pertains to the Holy One [see Jacob Neusner, *Symbol and Theology in Early Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 90].



mentioning God.<sup>①</sup> It is the climax of Mordecai’s speech to Esther urging her to act on behalf of her people by interceding with the king. Though God is never mentioned by name in MT Esther (LXX Esther, of course, is a very different story, as is the Alpha Text), many scholars find evidence of divine providence in this verse, as elsewhere in the Hebrew form of the book.<sup>②</sup> The rabbis, too, had no qualms with identifying “(the) Place” (מקום [ה]) as an epithet for God.<sup>③</sup> The cumulative evidence of various details—including hardly subtle ones like fasting, wearing (or laying in) sackcloth and ashes, “wailing with a loud and bitter cry,” great mourning, weeping, and lamenting (4: 1-3);<sup>④</sup> or the allusions to sacral war practices later in the book (chaps. 8-9)<sup>⑤</sup>—coupled with

① See the discussion in Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 81, who notes that “if ‘another quarter’ is God, then we have in this verse the strongest approximation in the Masoretic Esther to an explicit theological affirmation.” Adele Berlin, *Esther*, JPS Bible Commentary Philadelphia (Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 44: deems it “hard to imagine that salvation could come ‘from another place’ without seeing this as a veiled reference to God.” Carey A. Moore, *Esther: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AB 7B (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), 50, thinks that the explicit mention of the deity in the Alpha Text, in Josephus, and in the Targums at this point “are certainly correct to see in the Hebrew a veiled allusion to God.” Moore goes on to compare the use of “mercy” in 1 Macc 16:3 and “kingdom of Heaven” in the Gospel of Matthew. He concludes: “That same phrase [‘another quarter’], as well as ‘It’s possible that...’ [which is how he translates מִי יוֹדֵעַ], seems to affirm the author’s faith in God’s providential care” (52).

② See Crenshaw, “The Expression,” 277, who also refers to the work of Sandra Beth Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes, and Structure* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), 177-179. See also, inter alia, Moore, *Esther*, 52. Cf. Levenson, *Esther*, 18-21, esp. 19: “That [God] is unnamed need not entail that he is uninvolved.” For larger treatments, see Brittany N. Melton, *Where is God in the Megilloth? A Dialogue on the Ambiguity of Divine Presence and Absence*, OTS 73 (Leiden: Brill, 2018); and Chloe T. Sun, *Conspicuous in His Absence: Studies in the Song of Songs and Esther* (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2021).

③ See, e.g., Gen. Rab. § 68; Pesik. R. § 21; Ab. Zar. 40b; Nidd. 49b; Ber. 16b; Lev. Rab. § 5. See Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, repr. ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2005), 2: 830; and A. Spanier, “Die Gottesbezeichnungen *hammāqôm* und *haqqādōs bārūk hū’* in der frühalmudischen Literatur,” *Mitteilungen der Vorderasiatische-Ägyptischen Gesellschaft* 66 (1922): 309-314.

④ See Berlin, *Esther*, 44; Paton, *Esther*, 95. It is hard to agree with Moore, *Esther*, xxxii, who deems fasting “comparatively unimportant.”

⑤ See Brent A. Strawn, “Commentary on Esther 7: 1-6, 9-10; 9: 20-22,” <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-26-2/commentary-on-esther-71-6-9-10-920-22-2> (accessed 2/1/2024). Paton, *Esther*, 95, includes the “mention of proselytes” in Esth 8: 17; 9: 27.

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the divine entanglements of *עַלְמֵי יְיָ* evident in the other texts explored above, seems to support the view that Esth 4:14 does get very close indeed to naming God without actually doing so.<sup>①</sup> Even if this is so, it does not solve the riddle of why the book as a whole seems to studiously avoid explicit mention of the Deity<sup>②</sup>, though the immediate literary context of chapter 4 offers a perfectly reasonable idea for why Mordecai may have used a circumlocution: the messages between him and Esther are being relayed through third-party intermediaries (see 4: 5-10, 12-13). Perhaps communication through Persian messengers required extra discretion.

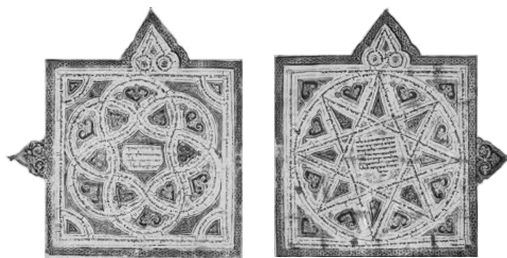
Despite these not inconsiderable factors, text (10) is placed last among the “less clear” *עַלְמֵי יְיָ* passages, and as the final, climactic example therein, because of the strong tendency to see Esther as decidedly *non*-theological.<sup>③</sup> And yet, if what has been presented above is correct, not only about Esth 4:

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① So Angel Manuel Rodriguez, *Esther: A Theological Approach* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1995), 18. Note also Paton, *Esther*, 95: “belief in God is at least implied...in the circumlocution of 4<sup>14</sup>,” though he goes on to say that “the author goes out of his way to avoid mentioning God” (222; similarly Rodriguez, *Esther*, 18; see also 25). Both points are important. Contrast Frederic Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, WBC 9 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 396, who thinks “another place” with reference to God would have to mean “from another God,” which strikes me as quite unnecessarily mechanistic with reference to *אֲחֵרָה* (so also Crenshaw, “The Expression,” 276-277 and n. 8). Similarly overwrought is Bush’s second concern that a “stark contrast” would be “set up thereby between the divine deliverance and the deliverance that Esther might achieve by her appeal to the king” (*Ruth, Esther*, 396). By way of response, note Paton (*Esther*, 223), for example, who thinks that even help from another nation “might have [been] regarded as providential” by the author. Bush goes on to argue that Esth 4:14b “is a positive rhetorical question, expressing a strong negation... Consequently, the ‘who knows?’ of the question does not express doubt or skepticism about the providential purpose of her position as queen, or mere possibility. On the contrary, it expresses a confident hope” (*Ruth, Esther*, 397). Bush deems Esther’s subsequent words “If I perish, I perish” as similarly expressing “courageous determination” (400).

② See Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 2d ed. (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 237-247; Levenson, *Esther*, 17, also 32-34, on the possibility that MT represents a purposefully *de*-theologized version of the book. Cf. Berlin, *Esther*, 44, on Esther 4: “God is most present and most absent in this chapter. Religious practice and the mention of God’s name come closest to the surface here, and are most obviously suppressed...In this sad scene, the author is hard pressed to write God out of the story.”

③ A major interpreter in this vein has been Marvin A. Sweeney. See, e.g., his “Absence of G-d and Human Responsibility in the Book of Esther,” in idem, *Visions of the Holy: Studies in Biblical Theology and Literature*, RBL 105 (Atlanta: SBL, 2023), 701-712.



14 but about the **מִי יוֹדֵעַ** texts more generally (especially the clearer ones), much needs to be reevaluated. One sees, at the very least, that Day isn't quite right when she says that Mordecai "tosses things to destiny, suggesting that it is fate that brought Esther to queenship to answer the present need," because, as Day herself notes, "[o]ther biblical figures who use similar language, asking 'who knows?' about future events, *do so explicitly within a consideration of God's role in those events.*"<sup>①</sup> In fact, precisely because of that larger contextual pressure brought to bear by the use of "similar language," I deem it *not at all* "highly significant that Mordecai does not use this [explicit] language," since *only some* of the **מִי יוֹדֵעַ** passages do so—in part, evidently, because **מִי יוֹדֵעַ** *by itself* involves (even if only as an intellectual exception) the Deity. Furthermore, the climax in Esther's reply to Mordecai, "if I perish, I perish" (וּכְאֲשֶׁר אֲבַדְתִּי אֲבַדְתִּי; 4: 16), is also not "throw[ing] things to the fates" (per Day) because of the highly similar situation in Dan 3:17-18. Contrary, then, to Day's interpretation (and a great many others that are very much like it), life and death hang *not* on some amorphous notion of "fate(s)" in Esther but hang precisely on the Deity insofar as and exactly because *God* is the one who knows and the question **מִי יוֹדֵעַ** knows this.<sup>②</sup> In the end, this is not an ambiguous question at all; quite to the contrary!

To summarize: texts (7)-(10) are admittedly somewhat less clear than texts (1)-(6), but texts (1)-(6) surely impinge—and *should* impinge—on the proper understanding of texts (7)-(10). Indeed, even the "less clear" texts are not entirely nor equally opaque. Text (7), in context, is perhaps more clear than not. The close affinities between text (7) and text (8) suggest that the latter, too, is not entirely vague on the matter at hand. This leaves only texts

① Linda M. Day, *Esther*, AOTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 92 (emphasis added).

② This is not to say that God isn't operative through chance occurrences, which is what many believe is the case in Esther (see above). For a recent discussion of fate and God in the Hebrew Bible, see Stephen B. Chapman, "Miqreh and YHWH: Fate, Chance, Simultaneity, and Providence," in *Divine Doppelgängers: YHWH's Ancient Look-Alikes*, ed. Collin Cornell (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2020), 181-200, which notes overlap between God and the Israelite concept of fate (מִקְרָה). Note that מִקְרָה is never plural ("fates") in the Hebrew Bible. For another study on *miqreh*, see Peter Machinist, "Fate, Miqreh, and Reason: Some Reflections on Qohelet and Biblical Thought," in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield*, eds. Ziony Zevit, Seymour Gitin, and Michael Sokoloff (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 159-175.

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(9) and (10) as belonging more solidly to the “less clear” category when it comes to the theological character of **מִי יוֹדֵעַ**. In light of the larger literary context, however, as well as comparable texts in Daniel along with Qoheleth’s penchant for speaking in a kind of double-register about the Deity, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that text (9), too, allows for the possibility that God knows **כִּשְׂרָה דָּבָר** even if other, wise individuals—people like Qoheleth himself—simply don’t (cf. 8: 17). Similarly, while MT Esther is famous for its *non*-theological presentation, the subsurface presence of the divine is often noted by interpreters, whether that is via the various religious rituals that are mentioned, the high frequency of (divine?) coincidences,<sup>①</sup> or the possible double-referent of **מְקוֹם אַחֵר**.<sup>②</sup> While all of those points are quite significant, the “Who knows?” texts discussed above suggest that if one wishes to “find” God in MT Esther, **מִי יוֹדֵעַ** may be every bit as good a “place” to start as **מְקוֹם אַחֵר**.<sup>③</sup>

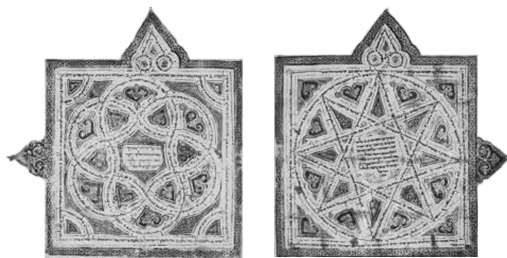
### III. Conclusions

If the presentation above is cogent, the results are striking. In at least 6 of the 10 instances of **מִי יוֹדֵעַ** in the Hebrew Bible, God is clearly present or heavily implicated in the question “Who knows?” In two others, texts (7) and (8), it is not hard to see the same. Interpretive details at work in several of these eight instances indicate that the same judgment likely also holds true for

① See Berlin, *Esther*, 49; Levenson, *Esther*, 18-19; Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 323.

② Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 326, citing David J. A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, JSOTSup 30 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1984), 155-156, approvingly: “the storyteller is no theological sophisticate promoting a ‘religionless Judaism’, but an Old Believer whose ultimate act of faith is to take the protective providence of God for granted”; hence, “there is nothing *hidden* or *veiled* about the causality of the events of the Esther story: it is indeed *unexpressed* but it is unmistakable, given the context within which the story is set” (ibid., 156; cited in Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 326). See further, once again, the discussions in Melton, *Where Is God?*; and Sun, *Conspicuous in His Absence*.

③ Cf. Levenson, *Esther*, 81: “In support of this more theological reading [of ‘another quarter’], the expression ‘who knows’ (*mī yōdēa’*) is suggestive,” though he connects the phrase, not to God’s knowledge (or being) but to its use in texts related to penitential practice that may lead to a change in God’s judgment. So, “[i]f this is the background to the usage in Esth. 4: 14, then we have here another echo of the rites of lamentation with which the chapter began.” Levenson’s final comment on 4: 12-17 is delightful: “Who knows? Perhaps the rites have had an effect, and larger forces are at work that will rescue the Jews after all.”



text (9). This leaves only one passage, text (10), Esth 4: 14, as less clear or obvious—but even this text, per the discussion above, seems to evoke God, and in more ways than just **מי יודע**.

In sum, therefore, it seems not only possible but quite probable that God is somehow *present in each and every instance* of **מי יודע**. The answer to the question “Who knows?” is thus clearly two-edged: on the one hand, the question signals that *no human being knows*; on the other hand, that *only God does* (cf. Prov 30: 4; as well as the pointed questions and comments from God to Job about the latter’s lack of knowledge [ $\sqrt{y-d-}$ ] in Job 38: 4-5, 18, 21). If **מי יודע** is an anthropocentric question, it nevertheless has a theologically fraught side. The calculus of these data leads to at least three conclusions:

(1) First, Crenshaw’s analytic of “open”- vs. “closed”-door scenarios, while helpful, is not the only, and perhaps also not the best metric for understanding the force and meaning of **מי יודע**.<sup>①</sup> There is more to say about these texts, especially more to say about them *theologically*. Indeed, in my judgment, the theological trace within **מי יודע** is operative whether these texts are “open” to the future or “shut” to the same. Either way, God knows; either way, God is an agent.<sup>②</sup> Unfortunately, the implicature of the Deity in the “Who knows?” texts has gone underappreciated with negative effects for the interpretation of these passages. Put differently and slightly more pointedly: the “skeptical” texts no less than the “open” ones are fraught with the presence of God.

(2) If **מי יודע** is a theologically “involved” query, it is possible that God

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① Note, e.g., how Crenshaw, “The Expression,” 277 seems to be overly concerned with divine change in Est 4: 14. But the point of **מי יודע** is not divine change but divine *knowledge*. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 144, continues to use Crenshaw’s metaphor: “*Mī yōdēa* ‘does indeed occur in passages in Ecclesiastes in which Qohelet is in the grip of his struggle with the enigma of life, but this very struggle indicates that the door of hope remains ajar, however marginally.’”

② If accurate, this judgment has various ramifications for other topics, including the larger question of what God knows in the Hebrew Bible. I cannot engage that large topic here, but wish to underscore that this is a very large question that must include a large range of texts about epistemology—divine and human—in the Old Testament. For a start, see Annette Schellenberg, “Reflections on the Limitations of Cognition in the Book of Job,” *HeBAI* 12 (2023): 295-308, with literature (note that this whole issue of *HeBAI* is devoted to epistemology in Job). Alongside *divine knowledge* the large topic of *divine freedom/agency* is also to be considered.

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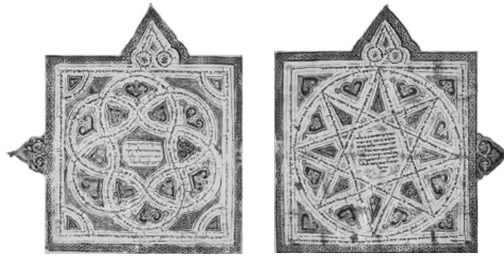
might be entangled in other rhetorical questions, particularly in Ecclesiastes. If so, the present study of **מִי יוֹדֵעַ** has bearing on Qoheleth's ways of talking about the Deity elsewhere in the book that bears his name. This finding would contribute to the double-register found elsewhere in Qoheleth but perhaps also (and relatedly) to the issue of parapraxes in the Book of Ecclesiastes.<sup>①</sup> The same may hold true for other questions, some perhaps less rhetorical, both within Ecclesiastes<sup>②</sup> and well beyond it.<sup>③</sup>

① I hope to investigate the issue of parapraxis in Qoheleth in a subsequent study. The concept, famous since Freud, connotes a “slip of the tongue” or “a slip of memory” where someone reveals something more or something beyond what they meant to communicate.

② Fox, *Time*, 272, notes that the interrogative **מִי** “occurs seventeen times in the book, sixteen in rhetorical questions tantamount to ‘no one.’” See, e.g., **מִי יִבְיֵאֵנוּ** in 3: 22; **מִי יִגִּיד** in 8: 7; 10: 14; etc. Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 494-95, deems the latter references negative “parallels”: “no one knows.” In fact, elsewhere Schoors deems **כִּי מִי יִגִּיד לֹא יֵדַע** in 8: 7 “the equivalent of” **אֲשֶׁר מִי־יִגִּיד לְאָדָם** in 6: 12 (*Preacher*, 132), saying that “Qoh calls this ignorance of the future **רַעָה**, ‘a misfortune’ (8, 6).” Schoors also compares 11: 5 (**לֹא תֵדַע... לֹא תֵדַע**) and 11: 6, as well as 9: 12; and other texts on the “theme of human ignorance” (131-34). Cf. also Qoh 8: 1 with 6: 12, 8: 5, 7, 12, etc. Fox, *Time*, 247, has pointed out the close relationship between 3: 11a and 8: 6a; and 3: 11b and 8: 7. For the interpretation that only God knows the future, see also Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 133; and Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 151. Note also Crenshaw, “The Expression,” 283, who delineates no less than seven variants of **מִי יוֹדֵעַ** in Ecclesiastes.

③ E.g., and most closely, **מִי יִדְעֵנוּ** in Jer 17: 9, but also, and more expansively, the questions raised about death in the Psalms (see, e.g., Ps 88: 11-13). Note also the following important passages from the Qumran texts: (1)1Q27 (1QMysteries) frg. 1 i 3-4 and 8: “but they did not know (**וְלֹא יָדְעוּ**) the secret of the way things are nor did they understand the things of old and they did not know (**וְלֹא יָדְעוּ**) what would come upon them... This is all ready to happen, it is a true oracle, and by this it shall be known to you (**וְזֶה יוֹדֵעַ לְכַמָּה**) that it cannot be averted.” (2)1QH<sup>a</sup> ix 10: “And [without you no] thing is done, and nothing is known without your will (**וְלֹא יוֹדֵעַ בְּלֹא רְצוֹנְכָה**).” (3)1QH<sup>a</sup> xviii 11: “Apart from you nothing is done; nothing is known without your will (**וְלֹא יוֹדֵעַ בְּלֹא רְצוֹנְכָה**); and except for you, there is nothing.” (4)11Q5 (11QPs<sup>a</sup>) xxviii 7-8: “Ah, but who can proclaim (**כִּי מִי יִגִּיד**), who declare (**וְמִי יִדְבֵר**) the deeds of the Lord? God has seen all, heard and attended to everything.” (5)4Q511 (4QShir<sup>b</sup> = Songs of the Sage<sup>b</sup>) frg. 2 ii 6-8: “[the mysterie]s of God, who knows (**מִיָּא יָדַע**) [...] the God of strengths has appointed them for [...] like them, and the unclean according to their impurity [... Who] knows (**מִי יוֹדֵעַ**) the uprightness of the upright in Is[rael (?)]...”. (6)4Q185 (4QSapiential Work) frgs. 1-2 iii 11-13: “Did not [Go]d make the hearts, and does he kno[w] (**וְיָדַע**) their thoughts? God sees all the inmost being, and puts its kidneys to the test. [God made] the tongue, and knows (**יּוֹדֵעַ**) its word. God made hands, [and knows (**יּוֹדֵעַ**) their deeds.]”

Translations follow *The Dead Sea Scrolls Reader*, 2nd ed., 2 vols., eds. Donald W. Parry, Emanuel Tov, and Geraldine I. Clements (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 2:181, 285, 321; 457, 887; and *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*, 2 vols., eds. Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1:381.



(3) Finally and most importantly, if **מִי יוֹדֵעַ** does in fact refer to God, whether implicitly or explicitly (the latter given associated text and context), then this question makes an important predication about God—specifically about God’s *knowledge*—as well as about all others who are *not* God, especially about their *lack of knowledge*. Qoheleth was quite keen on the last-mentioned point (see, above all, Qoh 8: 17).<sup>①</sup> While the joy passages in Ecclesiastes strike a chord with a statement attributed to Irenaeus, that “the glory of God is the human being fully alive,”<sup>②</sup> the **מִי יוֹדֵעַ** passages evoke something less bright and cheery—something far more apophatic it would seem. But the resonance need not be only *via negativa*. John Calvin (1509-1564) began his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* famously:

Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern. (I i.1)<sup>③</sup>

**מִי יוֹדֵעַ** may not help with discerning which type of knowledge comes first—knowledge of God or knowledge of self—not least because “Who knows?” is aware that there is so much human beings do *not* know, specifically about things theological. But this, too, per Calvin, constitutes a crucial piece of knowledge of God (or, apophatically, its *lack*), if not also knowledge of the human self. And so, in this case, no less than many others, it would seem that one of these may not precede the other but, rather, that both must proceed together, hand-in-hand (cf. Qoh 7: 18).

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① Crenshaw, “The Expression,” 285, is memorable: “the sages in Qoheleth’s day made extravagant claims about knowledge that gave birth to an unwanted child whose infant wail was *mī yōdēa’*.” See further, 286-288.

② The Latin text may be slightly less inspiring: *Gloria Dei est vivens homo*, “the glory of God is the living human” (*Against Heresies*, 4, 20, 5-7).

③ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, LCC 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1: 35.