

# THE “SPIRIT” THAT RETURNS TO GOD IN ECCLESIASTES 12:7

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Ecclesiastes 12:7:

Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and **the spirit** shall return unto God who gave it. (King James Version, hereafter cited as KJV)

and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and **the breath** returns to God who gave it. (New Revised Standard Version, hereafter cited as NRSV)

and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and **the life's breath** returns to God who gave it. (New English Translation, hereafter cited as NET)<sup>1</sup>

Influenced by the Restoration doctrine of premortality, some Latter-day Saints have employed the KJV translation “the spirit” in Ecclesiastes 12:7 to support the doctrine that spirit personages leave their mortal bodies at death. Furthermore, Latter-day Saints have sometimes asserted, again citing Ecclesiastes 12:7, that a premortal spirit being can only “return” to God because it previously came from him. This verse has thus become one

of several in the Old Testament that some Latter-day Saints have employed as support for premortal existence, a doctrine that is so important in the broader plan of salvation.<sup>2</sup>

Although the doctrine itself is not in question, this paper does question whether “the spirit” in Ecclesiastes 12:7 refers to individual spirit personages and considers the validity of employing this verse as biblical support of premortal existence. In order to determine whether Ecclesiastes 12:7 can bear the interpretation placed on it by many Latter-day Saints, I will (1) review what Latter-day Saints have claimed about the content of this verse, (2) consider 12:7 in the context of Ecclesiastes, especially chapter 12, and (3) analyze the language and meaning of 12:7 in its biblical context.

## LATTER-DAY SAINT VIEWS ON ECCLESIASTES 12:7

Latter-day Saint Church leaders and authors have often employed Ecclesiastes 12:7, without making a specific connection to premortality, to emphasize that our individual “spirits” return to God at death. For example, in the past decade, Apostles James E. Faust and Russell M. Nelson each employed this verse in the notes of a general conference address for such support.<sup>3</sup> And commentators D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner have claimed that “the Preacher’s comment that ‘the spirit shall return unto God who gave it’ parallels the teaching in Alma 40:11 that ‘the spirits of all men . . . are taken home to that God who gave them life.’”<sup>4</sup> When so employed, the “spirit” mentioned in Ecclesiastes 12:7 is regularly assumed by Latter-day Saints to be an individual spirit personage that was created by God in premortality and that inhabits every human’s mortal body.<sup>5</sup>

Using Ecclesiastes 12:7 to emphasize a different doctrinal dimension, a number of Latter-day Saint church leaders have taught something similar to President Harold B. Lee, who, when referring to the premortal existence of our spirits, quoted Ecclesiastes 12:7 and stated, “Obviously we could not return to a place where we had never been, so we are talking about death as a process as miraculous as birth, by which we return to ‘our Father who art in heaven.’”<sup>6</sup> Elder Orson Pratt seems

to have been among the first Latter-day Saint authorities to employ this logic to provide biblical support for the doctrine of premortality. In 1852 he taught: “We have ascertained that we have had a previous existence. We find that Solomon, that wise man [and traditionally viewed as the author of Ecclesiastes], says that when the body returns to the dust the spirit returns to God who gave it [Ecclesiastes 12:7]. Now all of this congregation very well know, that if we never existed *there* we could not *return* there. I could not return to California. Why? Because I never have been there. . . . But if we have once been there [premortally in God’s presence], then we can see the force of the saying of the wise man, that the spirit returns to God who gave it—it goes back where it once was.”<sup>7</sup> In more recent times, Elder Hugh B. Brown stated, “At a time far antedating Eden, the spirits of all men had a primeval existence and were intelligences with spirit bodies of which God was universal Father. In the Bible we read, ‘Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto the God who gave it’ (Eccl. 12:7).”<sup>8</sup> And Elder Boyd K. Packer taught, “Before we came into mortal life, we lived as spirit children of our Father in Heaven,” for which he cited Ecclesiastes 12:7 as support.<sup>9</sup>

Church-produced materials, when they specifically mention this verse, have regularly followed this interpretive approach. For example, the Topical Guide cites Ecclesiastes 12:7 among other scriptures under the entry “Man, a Spirit Child of Heavenly Father.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise, 12:7 is cited under the entry “Premortal Life” in Guide to the Scriptures.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, the Church’s Sunday School, seminary, and institute manuals provide little comment on this verse and thus do not connect it with the doctrine of premortality.<sup>12</sup>

Notwithstanding periodic mention by Church leaders and references in Church materials, Latter-day Saint commentators have not generally given much attention to Ecclesiastes 12:7. If they note the verse at all, they understand “the spirit” to be a spirit personage. For example, Daniel H. Ludlow quoted President Harold B. Lee (cited above) in support of his own similar view of this verse.<sup>13</sup> Ellis Rasmussen merely commented, “The ‘spirit’ lives on and does return to God when the mortal body returns to its constituent ‘dust’ (Eccl 12:7).”<sup>14</sup> In their brief overviews

of Ecclesiastes, neither Victor L. Ludlow, David R. Seely, nor Kerry Muhlestein commented on 12:7.<sup>15</sup> As noted above, Ogden and Skinner provided a relatively extended comment on Ecclesiastes 12:7, seeing in it support for “a duality to the human soul, . . . the concept of an ongoing, living spirit of man after the body’s death.”<sup>16</sup>

## ECCLESIASTES 12:7 IN ITS BROADER CONTEXT

Before analyzing the verse in question, it is important to understand its context. The Hebrew name of Ecclesiastes is Qohelet, which is the title of the person who is speaking, as found in 1:1, 2, 12, and elsewhere in the book. The KJV and some other English translations render this Hebrew term (*qōhelet*) as “Preacher,” but other possibilities include “Assembler” and “Teacher.” The English title “Ecclesiastes” derives from the Greek rendition of *qōhelet* in the Septuagint (*Ekklesiastēs*). Authorship of Ecclesiastes is traditionally ascribed to Solomon, and certain phrases in the early chapters of the book are intended to imply such a connection (for example, 1:1, 12, 16; 2:7, 9). However, his name is never actually mentioned in Ecclesiastes, some passages argue against Solomonic authorship, and the style and language of the book are generally seen as deriving from later in Israelite history. Thus biblical scholars tend to attribute the authorship of Ecclesiastes to some unknown individual living five to seven centuries after Solomon.<sup>17</sup>

Ecclesiastes belongs, along with Job and Proverbs, to the genre of “wisdom literature” found in the Bible and other ancient Near Eastern texts.<sup>18</sup> Wisdom literature generally presents life lessons learned through experience and observation, with the view that “wise” and principled living brings happiness, contentment, and prosperity. Ecclesiastes, however, more than other biblical literature, rather pessimistically emphasizes the challenge and frustration of finding meaning in mortal life, which seems somewhat futile to the Teacher (for example, 2:17–23; 6:7–12; 8:7; 9:12; 10:14). The one certainty, so it is claimed, is death, which will impact everyone and everything (for example, 3:19–20; 12:7). So, while Ecclesiastes does indicate that God is in control (for example, 3:9–18; 7:13–14), the inscrutability of God and his ways in this difficult world is repeatedly underscored.

After ranging through a variety of topics in the first eleven chapters of the book, including the encouragement to enjoy life, especially in one's youth (11:9–10), the closing words from the Teacher, in Ecclesiastes 12:1–7, emphasize the long, dark days of misery encountered in old age and the inevitability of the grave. Ultimately, for the Teacher, “all is vanity”—unsubstantial, transitory, meaningless—in this fallen world (12:8). Although scholars disagree on whether this pericope ends with verse 8 or whether verse 8 begins the epilogue that follows, verse 7 highlights the inevitable conclusion to mortal life: “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.” The finality of this termination comes after the lamentable burdens of those who live to older age, in which there is “no pleasure” (12:1). Thus life comes to an end, and “man goeth to his long home [the grave], and the mourners go about the streets” (12:5), and “the spirit shall return unto God who gave it” (12:7).

What follows in 12:8–14 is not presented as the Teacher's words.<sup>19</sup> Scholars regularly suggest this epilogue was added by a later author or editor whose tone seems more positive than that of the text attributed to the Teacher. Verses 9–10 describe the Teacher as a sage, while verses 11–14 provide summary instruction and encouragement from the later author or editor.<sup>20</sup>

Remains of only two copies of Ecclesiastes were discovered at Qumran, part of the cache of documents called the Dead Sea Scrolls. Both were found in cave 4, but nothing beyond chapter 7 survives.<sup>21</sup> The Greek text of 12:7 in the Septuagint is similar to the Hebrew in the Masoretic Text.<sup>22</sup> We are thus dependent upon the traditional Masoretic Text when analyzing this verse. However, this is not problematic, since there are no unusual features attested in the verse. The comments that follow, therefore, utilize the traditional Hebrew text of the Bible.

## ANALYZING ECCLESIASTES 12:7

As is evident from reviewing the three translations of the Bible quoted above, translating the first portion of Ecclesiastes 12:7 is a straightforward matter; most English versions render the Hebrew quite similarly (“Then

shall the dust return to the earth as it was”). The second half of the verse, however, is another matter, and it is this latter portion to which attention is now given. According to 12:7, when a person dies, something—“the *rûah*”—returns to God “who gave it.”

The real challenge to understanding this verse is determining to what the Hebrew noun *rûah* refers. The broad semantic range of *rûah* in biblical Hebrew is evident by the fact that it can be translated as “breeze, wind, breath, life breath, or spirit.” And “spirit” can designate a person’s life force and internal power, as well as the “spirit of the Lord,” the “spirit of God,” the “holy Spirit,” an evil spirit, and a heavenly spirit personage. This latter use is rare in the Hebrew Bible and is perhaps best illustrated in 1 Kings 22, in a passage in which the prophet Micaiah proclaimed to an Israelite king: “Hear thou therefore the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing by him on his right hand and on his left. And the LORD said, Who shall persuade [King] Ahab, that he may go up and fall [in battle] at Ramoth-gilead? . . . And there came forth a spirit [*hârûah*, literally “the spirit”] and stood before the LORD, and said, I will persuade him” (1 Kings 22:19–21; see also 2 Chronicles 18:20).<sup>23</sup>

Ezekiel 37:9–10 illustrates well the challenge translators face when rendering the noun *rûah* into English. In this passage the Lord taught Ezekiel about the future gathering of Israel using the imagery of a great army of dead soldiers coming back to life.

KJV: Then said he unto me [Ezekiel], Prophesy unto the **wind** [*rûah*], prophesy, son of man [a title used for Ezekiel meaning “human”], and say to the **wind** [*rûah*], Thus saith the LORD GOD; Come from the four winds [*rûhôt*], O breath [*rûah*] and breathe [*pěhî*] upon these slain, that they may live. So I prophesied . . . and the breath [*rûah*] came into them, and they lived.

NRSV: Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the **breath** [*rûah*], prophesy, mortal, and say to the **breath** [*rûah*]: Thus says the LORD GOD: Come from the four winds [*rûhôt*], O breath [*rûah*], and breathe [*pěhî*] upon these slain, that they may live.” I prophesied . . . and the breath [*rûah*] came into them.

According to translators of both the KJV and the NRSV, the divinely commanded “breath” (*rûah*) arrived to bring life to the collective dead.

Another passage pertinent to this discussion is Ecclesiastes 3:19–21, which contains three of the several attestations of *rûah* in Ecclesiastes.

KJV: For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath [*rûah*]; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knoweth the spirit [*rûah*] of man that goeth upward, and the spirit [*rûah*] of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?

NRSV: translated similarly where *rûah* occurs.

After observing the lack of justice in mortal life (3:16) but finding some consolation in God’s eventual just judgment (3:17), the Teacher turns to the resolute nature of death (3:18). People, like animals, will die. Ecclesiastes 3:19–21 is fairly analogous to 12:7, teaching that when people, and in this case animals as well, die, their bodies decay and turn to dust (see similarly, Psalm 49:12 [Heb., 49:13]). And the spirit [*rûah*] of people (Heb., *benēy-hă’ādām*) goes “upward,” presumably meaning to God. However, 3:21 also claims that people and animals “all have one breath [*rûah*].”

Significantly, the *rûah* of animals and of people is represented in this passage with a singular term, not a plural one (not “spirits of,” as occurs in Numbers 16:22 and 27:16).<sup>24</sup> Thus the KJV and most modern English translations render the occurrence of *rûah* in Ecclesiastes 3:19 with “breath.” The rendering of the additional occurrences of *rûah* in 3:21 with “spirit” is intended to parallel “breath,” with *rûah* in all three instances designating the life breath or animating essence that all humans and animals have until death—“they all have one *rûah*.”<sup>25</sup> Although it is not always possible to confidently know what translators and commentators intend when they use the word “spirit,” it is clear that in this passage *rûah* was not used to indicate spirit personages.

In fact, in none of the 23 occurrences of *rûah* in Ecclesiastes, not counting 12:7, does *rûah* convincingly have the meaning of spirit personage. Sometimes it clearly refers to the wind (for example, 1:6; 11:4). And it

occurs (nine times) in the expression “vexation of spirit” (KJV; *rē’ût rūah*; for example, 1:14, 17; 4:4), which is now often rendered as “striving after wind” (NET and the English Standard Version; the NRSV has “chasing after wind”).

In addition to 3:19–21, another passage in Ecclesiastes that deserves attention in discussing 12:7 is 11:5. Again, context provides a helpful guide. Ecclesiastes 11:3 mentions what appear to be matter-of-fact outcomes in the natural world such as, “If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth.” And verse 4 counsels against letting the forces of nature unduly impact what needs to be accomplished in life: “He that observeth the wind [*rūah*] shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.” Verse 5 further highlights the uncertain nature of life: “As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit [*rūah*], nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all.” The Teacher concludes this concept in verse 6 by counseling us to proceed with what needs to be done, despite life’s uncertainties.

The expression “the way of the spirit [*derek hārūah*]” (KJV) in 11:5 has provoked two main interpretations, as exhibited in ancient and modern translations of the Hebrew text: (1) *rūah* refers to the wind, which makes sense, given the reference to clouds and wind (*rūah*) in the previous verse; and (2) *rūah* refers to the spirit or breath that gives life, which makes sense given the reference to the growth of a fetus in a mother’s womb in the latter part of verse 5.<sup>26</sup> Given the historical uncertainty of how to render the phrase “the way of the spirit/*rūah*” in 11:5, it is problematic to use it as support for interpreting the occurrence of *rūah* in 12:7. And given the theological orientation of those involved in producing the ancient and the modern translations of the Hebrew text, Latter-day Saints can be certain that those who rendered *rūah* as “spirit” were thinking of the divinely given animating spirit in all creatures (see the above discussion of Ezekiel 37:9–10 and Ecclesiastes 3:19–21), not spirit personages created by God.

The traditional *non*-Latter-day Saint understanding of Ecclesiastes 12:7—“Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it” (KJV)—and particularly of *rūah* as “spirit”/life breath/life force, as opposed to spirit personage (a use rarely attested in

the Old Testament), correlates terminologically and conceptually with passages in the biblical accounts of creation and the Flood, at least as understood traditionally by non-Latter-day Saints. Genesis 2:7 reads, “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”<sup>27</sup> The phrase “breath [*nišmat*] of life” here employs *něšāmâ*, “breath, life force,” rather than *rûah*. But *něšāmâ* and *rûah* are sometimes used in conjunction with each other, and can function synonymously (such as in Genesis 7:22; Job 33:4; and Isaiah 42:5).

As an aside, the correlated occurrence of *rûah* and *něšāmâ* in Job 27:3 is instructive for this study. Amidst his heartbreaking challenges, Job exclaims that although God has vexed his soul, “All the while my breath [*nišmâtî*] is in me, and the spirit [*rûah*] of God is in my nostrils.” These two phrases convey essentially the same meaning: despite his difficulties Job still lives. Since the “*rûah* of God” was still in his “nostrils,” this use of *rûah* cannot easily refer to Job’s premortal spirit being but must be understood as the life breath in all living creatures, the traditional understanding of the “breath of life” mentioned in Genesis 2:7 and elsewhere. The “*rûah* of God,” not Job’s own spirit, was still in his body.<sup>28</sup>

After Genesis 2:7, the phrase “breath of life” next occurs in Genesis 6:17, where God indicated to Noah, “I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh [in this context, human and animal flesh], wherein is the breath [*rûah*] of life, from under heaven; and every thing that is in the earth shall die.” Here *rûah* is used instead of *něšāmâ* (as found in Genesis 2:7), although the translation and meaning of the phrase is clearly the same. The divinely originating animating force or life breath is withdrawn at the end of mortality, from animals as well as from people; this is what is taken back by God (figuratively or literally) at death. The expression “breath of life” only occurs two more times in the Old Testament, Genesis 7:15 and 7:22, and *rûah* occurs in both instances.

As already emphasized above in relation to Ezekiel 37:9–10 and Ecclesiastes 3:19–21, *rûah* is also singular in the verses just reviewed. The “*rûah* of God” was in Job’s nostrils (Job 27:3), and the “the *rûah* of life” was found “in all flesh” (Genesis 6:17; 7:22). These biblical passages emphasize

a spirit or life breath in all living creatures, not individual spirits housed in each creature. There is thus a marked distinction between the use of this biblical language and imagery, which is first found in Genesis 2 and which occurs multiple times in the Hebrew Bible, and between the plural form “spirits” in Alma 40:11 (“the spirits of all men . . . are taken home to that God who gave them life”).<sup>29</sup>

Summarizing this analysis, the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) uses the term *rûah* in a variety of related meanings. It rarely occurs therein to designate a spirit being or personage. The occurrence of *rûah* in Ecclesiastes 3:21 and 12:7, in the context of addressing what happens to the physical body and the *rûah* at death, appears in harmony with statements in Genesis 2:7 (with *něšāmā*) and 6:17; 7:15, 22. Such usage is traditionally understood as referring to the animating “breath” God has given to all humans and animals (again, see Ezekiel 37:9–10; Job 27:3).

Although Latter-day Saints have not consistently dealt with the meaning of the phrase “the breath of life,” a review of that topic is too large an undertaking for inclusion in this study.<sup>30</sup> Suffice it to say, a study of Latter-day Saint approaches to the meaning of “the breath of life” does not change *my* view of the meaning of *rûah* in Ecclesiastes 12:7 as presented in this study.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As the above review of Latter-day Saint approaches to Ecclesiastes 12:7 illustrates, some Church leaders and commentators have employed the KJV rendering “the spirit” to refer to a spirit personage; additionally, some have utilized the verse as support for the doctrine of premortal life.

Given the nonacceptance of premortal life in what became traditional Jewish and Christian theology, it is not surprising that non–Latter-day Saint scholars and theologians do not connect that doctrine with Ecclesiastes 12:7. Furthermore, given the uses and semantic range of the Hebrew term *rûah* and given the whole of the evidence in the Hebrew Bible *as it has come down to us*, there is no biblical support for claiming that “the spirit” that returns to God in 12:7 is a reference to our individual spirit personages.

My understanding of Ecclesiastes 12:7 is that mortal bodies return to the dust, and, to use a poetic figure of speech, a divinely originating *rûah*, a life breath or life force, leaves the body. This animating power, perhaps the Light of Christ,<sup>31</sup> “returns to God” at mortal death. The three translations of 12:7 quoted at the beginning of this paper—KJV, NRSV, and NET—each intended to convey this perspective, whether *rûah* was rendered as “the spirit,” “the breath,” or “the life’s breath.” And the combined range of biblical evidence supports this understanding.

Thus, in my opinion, the desire to support with biblical passages the doctrine of all people’s premortality, perhaps coupled with an awareness of Alma 40:11 (“the spirits of all men . . . are taken home to that God who gave them life”), has led some Latter-days Saints to utilize “the spirit” in Ecclesiastes 12:7 (“the spirit returns to God”) to teach something about individual “spirits.” In a case of *application*, rather than interpretation, an uncritical use of the KJV language in 12:7 has been employed to support the true doctrine of spirit beings and their premortality. But the biblical verse itself (12:7) does not teach that doctrine.<sup>32</sup> This does not detract from the reality of spirit persons created by God and of the premortal existence of these spirits. It just means that support for such realities must be sought elsewhere.

## NOTES

It is a pleasure to contribute to this collection of essays dedicated to Bob Millet. Bob has been a friend and an informal mentor to me in Religious Education at BYU for more than two decades. I appreciate his support, his inquisitiveness, and his enthusiasm for teaching the gospel.

1. The King James Version was published in 1611, the New Revised Standard Version in 1989, and the New English Translation in 2005. Quotations from the Bible in this paper are from the KJV unless otherwise noted.
2. Other verses in the Old Testament employed by Latter-day Saints to support the doctrine of premortal life include Jeremiah 1:5 and Numbers 16:22. For comments on these, see Dana M. Pike, “Before Jeremiah Was: Divine Election in the Ancient Near East,” in *A Witness for the Restoration: Essays in Honor of Robert J.*

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- Matthews*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Andrew C. Skinner (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2007), 33–59, and Dana M. Pike, “Exploring the Biblical Phrase ‘God of the Spirits of All Flesh,’” in *Bountiful Harvest: Essays in Honor of S. Kent Brown*, ed. Andrew C. Skinner, D. Morgan Davis, and Carl Griffin (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2011), 313–27.
3. James E. Faust, “Where Do I Make My Stand?,” *Ensign*, November 2004, 19; Russell M. Nelson, “Thanks Be to God,” *Ensign*, May 2012, 80.
  4. D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner, *Verse by Verse: The Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 2:109.
  5. Ogden and Skinner quote statements that George Q. Cannon and Joseph Fielding Smith Jr. made in reference to Alma 40:11, explaining that we move into the spirit world at death, not literally into God the Father’s presence, as the phrase “taken home to that God” at death might imply. I will not discuss this question further in this paper. For the quotations, see Ogden and Skinner, *Verse by Verse*, 2:109. See also Brigham Young’s statement, “You read in the Bible that when the spirit leaves the body it goes to God who gave it [Ecclesiastes 12:7]. Now tell me where God is not, if you please; you cannot. . . . The Lord Almighty is here by His Spirit, by His influence, by His presence. . . . It reads that the spirit goes to God who gave it. Let me render this Scripture a little plainer; when the spirits leave their bodies they are in the presence of our Father and God, they are prepared then to see, hear and understand spiritual things. But where is the spirit world? . . . It is on this earth that was organized for the people that have lived and that do and will live upon it.” In *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 3:368, 372.
  6. Harold B. Lee, “Understanding Who We Are Brings Self-Respect,” *Ensign*, January 1974, 4. I presume President Lee was speaking loosely when he stated, just before quoting Ecclesiastes 12:7, “So the Old Testament prophets declared with respect to death. . . .”
  7. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 1:56a; emphasis in original. O. Pratt returned to Ecclesiastes 12:7 and this same line of reasoning in 1871 and 1872; see *Journal of Discourses*, 14:240–41 and 15:244, respectively. See similarly, John Morgan, “Restitution of All Things—Pre-Existence of Man—First Principles of the Gospel,” in *Journal of Discourses*, 20:279.
  8. Hugh B. Brown, in Conference Report, October 1963, 92.
  9. Boyd K. Packer, “The Standard of Truth Has Been Erected,” *Ensign*, November 2003, 24. He also cited Numbers 16:22 and Hebrews 12:9, two other biblical

- passages that are often cited by Latter-day Saints, in addition to Jeremiah 1:5 and Ecclesiastes 12:7, in support of premortality. See similarly, N. Eldon Tanner, in Conference Report, October 1969, 50.
10. See Topical Guide, “Man, a Spirit Child of Heavenly Father,” at <https://www.lds.org/scriptures/tg/man-a-spirit-child-of-heavenly-father?lang=eng>. Ecclesiastes 12:7 is also listed in the Topical Guide under the entry “Man, Antemortal Existence of.”
  11. See Topical Guide, “Premortal Life,” at <https://www.lds.org/scriptures/gs/premortal-life?lang=eng&letter=p>. See also Gayle Oblad Brown, “Premortal Life,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 3:1123, who cited Ecclesiastes 12:7 and Jeremiah 1:5 as biblical support for the doctrine of premortal existence.
  12. See the pertinent manuals at <https://www.lds.org/manual?lang=eng>.
  13. Daniel H. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 279–80.
  14. Ellis T. Rasmussen, *A Latter-day Saint Commentary on the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 494. Rasmussen further noted that “life endures in the spirit” (495) and seems to suggest Ecclesiastes 12 presents legitimate revelation when he claims, “it was revealed to the Preacher that . . .” (494). This is a position few if any other commentators have taken. This is not to say that Ecclesiastes 12 does not contain true doctrine, just that neither the book itself nor commentators claim it is revelation in the same sense that prophetic books make that claim about their content.
  15. Victor L. Ludlow, *Unlocking the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 140–41. See also David Rolph Seely, “Ecclesiastes,” in *Studies in Scripture*, vol. 4: *1 Kings to Malachi*, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 4:463–66; Kerry Muhlestein, *The Essential Old Testament Companion* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2013).
  16. Ogden and Skinner, *Verse by Verse*, 2:109.
  17. For introductory comments on Ecclesiastes, see, for example, Antoon Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament (Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2013), 1–25; Stephen Garfinkel, “Ecclesiastes,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford, 2011), 1:215–23; Augustinus Gianto, “Ecclesiastes, Book of,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 2:178–85; Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids,

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- MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 1–40, but especially 1–15; and M. V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999). Among Latter-day Saint commentators, Seely (“Ecclesiastes,” 463–64) and Ludlow (*Unlocking*, 140–41) imply it is unlikely that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes.
18. For general comments on this genre, with examples, see Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Dana M. Pike, and David Rolph Seely, *Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), 238–40.
  19. Commentators differ somewhat on how these final verses should be divided, with some grouping 12:8 with the previous seven verses, and others (including me) seeing verse 8 as the beginning of the epilogue (1:12–12:7 are presented as the first person musings of the Teacher). Also, different commentators attribute this epilogue to one or to two different authors or editors. Those interested in such details are encouraged to consult the works on Ecclesiastes cited in previous notes of this paper.
  20. The secondary nature of 12:8–14, and the consequent impact this has on the interpretation of Ecclesiastes as a whole is rarely addressed by Latter-day Saint commentators on this book.
  21. See Eugene C. Ulrich, *The Biblical Qumran Scrolls: Transcriptions and Textual Variants* (Boston: Brill, 2010), 746–48; Martin G. Abegg, Peter W. Flint, and Eugene C. Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible: The Oldest Known Bible* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 619–21.
  22. See Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (New York: Oxford, 2007), 656, which renders Ecclesiastes 12:7, “and the dust returns to the earth as it was and the spirit returns to the God who gave it.”
  23. The spirit in question here is part of the heavenly host. There is nothing in this passage that suggests this or any other spirit personage in that category would inhabit mortal flesh. The focus of the passage is on Israel’s God, surrounded by his heavenly host, and his intent to overthrow Ahab, a king of Israel who had departed from the faith as taught by Israelite prophets. This is not to say that the spirit in 1 Kings 22:21 is not a premortal spirit child of God the Father, just that such a doctrine is not evident in the biblical passage itself.
  24. For a study of these two verses, see Pike, “Exploring the Biblical Phrase ‘God of the Spirits of All Flesh,’” 313–27.

25. See further the comments on this passage in Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 130; see also his comments on 6:10, on pages 176–77.
26. For further details, see for example, *The NET Bible Notes* (Biblical Studies Press, 2005; www.netbible.com, version 5.830), Translator’s Note 11, s.v., Ecclesiastes 11:5: “There is debate whether [the Hebrew *mah-derek hārūah*] refers to the wind (‘the path of the wind’) or the human spirit of a child in the mother’s womb (‘how the spirit comes’). The LXX [Greek Septuagint] understood it as the wind: ‘the way of the wind’ (. . . *hē hodos tou pneumatos*); however, the Targum [Aramaic] and Vulgate [Latin] take it as the human spirit. The English versions are divided: (1) spirit: ‘the way of the spirit’ (KJV, YLT, Douay); ‘the breath of life’ (NAB); ‘how a pregnant woman comes to have . . . a living spirit in her womb’ (NEB); ‘how the lifebreath passes into the limbs within the womb of the pregnant woman’ (NJPS); ‘how the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child’ (RSV); ‘how the breath comes to the bones in the mother’s womb’ (NRSV); and (2) wind: ‘the way of the wind’ (ASV, RSV margin); ‘the path of the wind’ (NASB, NIV [and NET]); and ‘how the wind blows’ (MLB, Moffatt).”
27. The teaching that human flesh will return to the dust at death was first announced by God to Adam in Genesis 3:19 (“for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return”), but that passage says nothing about spirit/breath. The first portion of Ecclesiastes 12:7 obviously employs this concept—“the dust returns to the earth as it was.”
28. See similarly, Job 32:8, “But there is a spirit [*rūah*] in man: and the inspiration [*nišmat*] of the Almighty giveth them understanding” (KJV). Most modern English translations render *rūah* here as “breath,” in harmony with the sense of Genesis 2:7. This passage deserves its own treatment some other time.
29. I here disagree with Ogden and Skinner, cited in note 5, above, who claim that the content of Ecclesiastes 12:7 “parallels the teaching in Alma 40:11.”
30. I originally intended to provide in this study an excursus on Latter-day Saint approaches to the meaning of “the breath of life.” It became apparent, however, that such a treatment would be too long and too distracting from the main point of this study to profitably include herein. I plan to publish a separate study of “the breath of life” elsewhere in the future.
31. After having originally considered this connection, I was interested to find it suggested in Draper, Brown, and Rhodes, *The Pearl of Great Price, A Verse-by-Verse*

## THE “SPIRIT” THAT RETURNS TO GOD IN ECCLESIASTES 12:7

*Commentary*, 223, with a link to D&C 88:13: “the light which is in all things, which giveth life to all things.”

32. In light of this assessment, I obviously support the excision of Ecclesiastes 12:7 from Latter-day Saint publications dealing with premortal life.