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The Tradition of Qoheleth: A Study of the Background to the Book of Ecclesiastes

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THE TRADITION OF QOHELETH: A STUDY OF THE BACKGROUND TO THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

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OF THE BACKGROUND TO THE BOOK
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The book of Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes) is perhaps the most intriguing book in the Old Testament. Readers of every age can appreciate its theme, dealing with the futility of seeking to uncover life's mystery. Yet Qoheleth has been interpreted in many different ways. The interpretations have ranged from tragic pessimism to a triumph of piety over skepticism. It is the contention of this thesis that a proper perspective on Qoheleth's intention can best be gained in terms of the author's use of tradition.

Qoheleth displays an awareness of such Hebrew traditions as Wisdom, the Pentateuch, Israelite history and the prophets. Though Qoheleth does not refer specifically to the Law or to Yahweh, the God of Israel, he does not deny them. Moreover, he seems familiar with both the Pentateuch (e.g. the creation account) and the historical writings in the prophets (e.g. the account of Solomon). Qoheleth is also consistent with Old Testament theology in holding that God's ways cannot be comprehended by man, and that it is good for man to enjoy the life that God has given him.

It is also likely that Qoheleth was familiar with the traditions of Greece and the Near East. There are many parallels between Qoheleth and these cultures, but all that these seem to represent is parallel development. For Qoheleth does not reveal any dependence on the traditions of these cultures. Rather Qoheleth differs sharply in that he refutes both the Hellenistic belief in an after life (3:21) and the tragic pessimism of Ancient Near Eastern documents.

When Qoheleth is understood in terms of the author's use of tradition, this book is found to be true to Hebrew tradition. In this way readers are afforded a proper perspective as to how Qoheleth is best interpreted. The book is found to be practical, advising the reader to enjoy life rather than dispair of it.

CHAPTER I

A BRIEF SURVEY OF QOHELETH

There are few books which are as fascinating and at the same time as puzzling as the book of Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes). This book has attracted the attention of countless educated readers for centuries. Qoheleth, through his complaints dealing with the ephemerality and cruelty of life, conveys a theme which has special relevance for every generation. Most every reader can readily identify with the theme of Qoheleth; yet this book remains puzzling because of the style in which it was written. It is also strange to find this book, that mentions nothing specifically of the God of Israel (yahweh), in the canon of Holy Scripture, which testifies to Yahweh's acts throughout history.

Theme

The basic theme of Qoheleth deals with the vanity of life and the futility of striving to uncover life's mystery. Qoheleth's observations on life lead him to conclude that the best thing in life is for man to enjoy the fruits of his labor. A thorough study of Qoheleth is especially difficult because of the text's apparent contradictions and its puzzling structure. There are, therefore,

many interpretations of Qoheleth which range from viewing it as cynical and skeptical to emphasizing his advice to enjoy life. In truth, any reader may find whatever theme he wishes within the pages of Qoheleth.

Those who would interpret Qoheleth as cynical or skeptical seem to be justified, for there are abundant references to the evils which abound in the world. A predominant theme with which Qoheleth deals is the vanity of man's labor in life and the insatiable appetite of mankind. The poem which opens the book demonstrates the vanity and redundance of life (1:3-11). Qoheleth here notes that even nature itself bears witness to the vanity of life for "there is nothing new under the sun." The author again emphasizes the vanity of life by recounting his great achievements, which he must leave to the man who will come after him (2:18). This is thus a major theme with which Qoheleth deals; and it is a theme that every reader must take to heart.

The problem of evil weighed heavily upon the author. Even the continuous labor of man is an evil that depresses Qoheleth (1:13). Qoheleth deals with evil in all of its ramifications: moral evil; chance; divine inscrutability; and death. It is because of these problems, as Qoheleth notes, that man cannot find any satisfying profit in all of his toil.

As Qoheleth looks at the problem of moral evil in the world, it is interesting to note that he holds the

paradoxical views that man is evil because of his own free will (7:29), and yet all things are ordained by God (9:1). Those evils which Qoheleth considers are social injustice (3:16; 4:1; 5:8; 6:2; 7:29; 8:9; 10:5-6); the problem of chance (2:15; 3:19; 6:12; 7:15; 8:7,14; 9:11-12; 11:2-3); divine inscrutability (3:11,14; 7:14; 8:16-17; 9:1; 11:5); and death (2:15; 3:19-22; 5:15-16; 8:8; 9:2-6). It is clear that the world is full of such evils and that the problem of evil exerts a profound influence upon Qoheleth. In his search for the meaning of life, Qoheleth continuously returns to a common theme, which exhorts the reader to enjoy life as the gift of God (2:10,24; 3:12-13,22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:8-10). The enjoyment of life is the only good thing that Qoheleth can find in his quest for meaning. It is important to realize that he sees this as a gift to be enjoyed if and when one is able to do so.

Though Qoheleth discloses himself as being skeptical about finding any ultimate meaning in life, he seems to have no doubts as to the existence of God. It is perhaps because of his background in the law and the prophets that his belief in God seems so natural.[1] For there seems to have been no question in his mind about the existence of God. The striking characteristic of Qoheleth is that he sees God as the cause of all events and the one who

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[1]Robert Gordis, Koheleth-The Man and His World, 3rd ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), p. 122.

renders man's life vain. It is in this respect that Gerhard von Rad holds that Qoheleth is different from the older wisdom teachers.[2] His concept of God also possesses a universalism in that he makes no mention of the nationalistic God (yahweh); rather he uses the generic title (elohim).

One may note two views of God which Qoheleth holds. First, it is God who renders vain man and all of his activities (1:2f.; 2:11,17; 4:4; 6:9). The second view sees God as the one who summons man to happiness and enables him to enjoy life (3:12f.; 2:24f.; 5:18-20; 9:7-10).[3] Even though Qoheleth is certain that God produces all events, the problem of finding meaning in life arises because of divine inscrutability. Qoheleth notes that God has set times for every event, but no man knows the activity of God (3:11). Qoheleth is thus left with the point of view that man must accept life as it comes to him (7:14). For this reason, one might, and many do, interpret Qoheleth as being fatalistic. Von Rad sums up Qoheleth very nicely when he notes the three basic insights common to Qoheleth: A thorough examination of life will not yield any satisfactory meaning; God determines every event; and man is unable to discern these decrees

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[2]Gerhard von Rad, Wisdom In Israel, trans. J. D. Martin (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1972), p. 232.

[3]F. N. Jasper, "Ecclesiastes: A Note for Our Time," Interpretation 21 (July 1967):262-64.

of God in the world.[4] The only real flaw with this summation is that it does not consider the exhortation to enjoy life. Yet, it remains clear that many of the problems of life, for Qoheleth, revolve around divine inscrutability.

Qoheleth is not disposed to making any speculations about either God or life after death. Qoheleth's approach to life is strictly empirical; he comments only on observable events. Thus Qoheleth seems skeptical concerning divine retribution or life after death; for concerning such speculation he says "who knows?" (3:21). It is important to understand that in the ancient Israelite religion there was no concept of life after death. Thus in this respect Qoheleth could be described as a conservative scholar.[5]

One may describe Qoheleth's view of God as submissive, for he says "and it is known what man is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he." (6:10b). Perhaps then Qoheleth's conclusion to enjoy life is the only realistic conclusion that was open to him. As he concluded that one should enjoy life, he made it clear that this is a gift from God and that the one who enjoys life is fulfilling the divine will (5:18).[6]

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[4]Von Rad, Wisdom in Israel, pp. 227-28.

[5]Roland E. Murphy, "The Pensees of Coheleth," The Catholic Biblical Quarterly 17 (April 1955):311-312.

[6]Robert Gordis, Poets, Prophets and Sages: Essays

Qoheleth possesses a richness unique to himself which seems to be a result of his background. He uses traditional Hebrew wisdom and rhetorical questions which seem to reflect Hellenistic as well as Hebrew influence.[7] He goes beyond the traditional wisdom of Israel, with its matter of fact style, and personally engages in critical and independent thought, which allows him those insights which are unique to himself.[8] Qoheleth wrestles with life and all of its problems and leaves no area of life untouched. His profound reflections on life lead him to his recurrent conclusion, "vanity of vanities," which W. E. Staples holds is best translated as "mystery of mysteries."[9]

Text

The text of Qoheleth is especially difficult to deal with because the Hebrew language is not suited to the type of philosophical discourse that Qoheleth pursued. The type of Hebrew used by Qoheleth is also different from that which is commonly found in the Old Testament. Robert Gordis holds that Qoheleth's style reflects

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in Biblical Interpretation (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1971.), p. 344.

[7]James G. Williams, "What Does it Profit a Man?: The Wisdom of Koheleth," Judaism 20 (Spring 1971):179.

[8]Martin Hengel, Judaism and Hellenism, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 1:116.

[9]W. E. Staples, "Vanity of Vanities," Canadian Journal of Theology 1 (October 1955):143.

classical Hebrew, Mishnaic language and Aramaic, which he holds was a late development of the Hebrew language.[10] Another characteristic of Qoheleth is his confessional style of speaking in the first person. Qoheleth's style also consists of prose which may revert to metric line and then back into prose. Such style as this is also common to the Hebrew prophets and adds to the richness of this classic work.

A characteristic of Qoheleth that has presented a problem to scholars throughout history is the presence of contradictions. As was noted, Qoheleth's main conclusion is that one should enjoy life; yet this too he calls vanity (2:11). Qoheleth notes that God will judge the righteous and the wicked (3:17); yet he notes that there is no apparent divine retribution (8:14). How then does one deal with such apparent contradictions? William Johnstone has rightly pointed out that what the apparent contradictions in Qoheleth mean is that there is an extreme need to be cautious in assessing this work.[11] It is characteristic of Qoheleth that he weighs sayings from different points of view and balances sayings against each other. This characteristic should explain any apparent contradictions. It also seems that

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[10] Robert Gordis, "Was Koheleth a Phoenician?", Journal of Biblical Literature 74 (January 1955):104.

[11] William Johnstone, "The Preacher as Scientist," Scottish Journal of Theology 20 (June 1967):211.

Qoheleth may have written his book as he reflected on the meaning of life, thus producing a book of reflections. Such an idea seems likely in light of the difficult structure of Qoheleth. Roland Murphy, who holds Qoheleth has no structure, believes that it fits into the genre of Pascal's Pensees[12], i.e., it is simply a book of reflections on life.

As noted above the structure of Qoheleth adds to the difficulty in seeking a proper understanding of this book. There have been many suggested outlines, yet few have been satisfactory. Addison Wright has pointed out that in the past there have been two approaches to the structure of Qoheleth.[13] The first position holds that there is no planned structure. This approach views Qoheleth as a collection of proverbs and sayings and holds that there was no structure intended. Many of those who hold to this view also believe that there are several authors involved in writing Qoheleth.[14] The several author theory also explains portions that are believed to be contradictions. The second view is that there is a structure to Qoheleth. But as Wright notes these attempts have yielded disparate results; and the

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[12]Murphy, "The Pensees of Coheleth," p. 305.

[13]Addison G. Wright, "The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth," Catholic Biblical Quarterly 30 (July 1968):314.

[14]Ibid.

lack of agreement on the structure lends credence to the view that there is no planned structure.[15]

Professor Wright, in his analysis of Qoheleth, uses what he calls the "objective method," which studies the work to gain insights from the author's language, recurrent phrases and general idiosyncresies.[16] Through his study of Qoheleth's recurring phrases and ideas he has developed the following outline:

"TITLE (1:1)

"POEM ON TOIL (1:2-11)

"I. Qoheleth's Investigation of Life (1:12-6:9)

"Double Introduction	(1:12-15) (1:16-18)
"Study of Pleasure Seeking	(2:1-11)
"Study of Wisdom and Folly	(2:12-17)
"Study of the Fruits of Toil One has to Leave Them to Another	(2:18-26)
"One Cannot Hit on The Right Time to Act	(3:1-4:6)
"The Problem of A 'Second One'	(4:7-16)
"One Can Lose All That One Accumulates	(4:17-6:9)

"II. Qoheleth's Conclusions (6:10-11:6)

"Introduction (6:10-12): man does not know what God has done, for man cannot find out what is good to do and he cannot find out what comes after.

"A. Man Cannot Find Out What Is Good For Him to do

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[15]Professor Wright provides an interesting collection of proposed outlines which demonstrate the diverseness of those which have been suggested, pp. 315-17.

[16]Ibid., p. 318.

"Critique of Traditional Wisdom on the Day of Prosperity and Adversity (7:1-14)
"On Justice and Wickedness (7:15-24)
"On Women and Folly (7:25-29)
"On the Wise and the King (8:1-17)

"B. Man Does Not Know what Will Come After Him

"He Knows He Will Die the Dead Know Nothing (9:1-6)
"There is no Knowledge in Sheol (9:7-10)
"Man Does Not Know His Time (9:11-12)
"Man Does Not Know what Will Be (9:13-10:15)
"He Does Not Know What Evil Will Come (10:16-11:2)
"He Does Not Know What Good Will Come (11:3-6)

"POEM ON YOUTH AND OLD AGE (11:7-12:8)

"EPILOGUE (12:9-14)."[17]

To date, this is the best outline of Qoheleth that has been suggested. The strength of Wright's outline lies in the fact that it is objective and exposes all facets of Qoheleth's thought. The strength of this outline may also be noted in the fact that the only disagreements concerning it are minor.[18] Thus Wright's outline seems to have done justice to the thought of Qoheleth and should add to the reader's ability to correctly understand Qoheleth.

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[17]It is important to understand that Professor Wright divides Qoheleth into two parts (1:12-6:9 and 6:10-11:6) because of the recurring phases found in each. Part one contains the recurring phrase "vanity and a chase after wind"; and part two contains the recurring phrase "do not know/no knowledge." His outline of Qoheleth may be found, pp. 325-26.

[18]Robert K. Johnston believes that Wright is

Author

As was noted above there have been attempts to demonstrate that Qoheleth is the product of several authors. At this time, however, most scholars agree that Qoheleth is best dealt with as a unity. Robert Gordis points out that it may be difficult to demonstrate the unity of Qoheleth, but it is even more difficult to deny it![19] One may also note from Wright's outline that there is a basic unity to Qoheleth. It is certain that the epilogue (12:9-14) is not the work of the original author, but rather the work of a later editor. This is evident because it is obviously written by someone else, who is providing a description of the original author (9-10); and the remaining verses are perhaps the work of another editor who is reacting to what appear to be impious thoughts.[20] The title as well is probably the work of an editor.

The content of Qoheleth reveals that it is the product of an intelligent man wrestling with the problems

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mistaken in his inclusion of 11:7-8 with the concluding poem. This disagreement may be found in his article "'Confessions of a Workaholic' A Reappraisal of Qoheleth," The Catholic Biblical Quarterly 38 (January 1976):19.

[19]Gordis, Koheleth, pp. 72-73.

[20]Gerald T. Sheppard in his article "The Epilogue to Qoheleth as Theological Commentary," The Catholic Biblical Quarterly 39 (April 1977): 182-89, divides the epilogue into three parts: a description of Qoheleth (9-10); a generalization of the words of the wise and wisdom sayings (11) and a warning against more unneeded

of life. It is this profound wrestling with life's problems, the weighing and investigating that make the structure difficult to deal with. As noted above, it appears to be a set of notes that the author jotted down as he reflected on life. Perhaps one might describe his approach to the meaning of life as Socratic.

The author of Qoheleth is unknown, as is common with most Biblical material. The author is described as Qoheleth (which has been translated as "Preacher"), the son of David, King in Jerusalem (1:1). The autobiographical sketch (1:12-2:11) reflects the glory of Solomon (I Kgs. 4:21-34). For these reasons Qoheleth has traditionally been attributed to Solomon. It is commonly held by scholars today, however, that Solomon did not compose this book because of its late date of composition and the reflections that criticize the bureaucratic structure of the government (5:8-9), which could hardly be those of a king. It is important to realize that pseudonymity was a characteristic of late Jewish writing and was used to increase the effect of the document. Indeed, Qoheleth was attributed to Solomon in order to give more force to the argument. The Midrash Rabbah on Qoheleth 3:11

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wisdom (12); and a statement of the law and divine restitution (13-14). He believes that the epilogue is an adaptive commentary or thematizing of Qoheleth in order to make the text sound more pious. He also, interestingly, notes that verses 13-14 are quite similar to the ideas found in Sirach 17:6-15. If then the editor knew of Sirach, the date of the epilogue would be considerably later than the rest of Qoheleth.

states: "I might have said that this man who never owned two farthings in his life makes light of the wealth of the world and declares 'vanity of vanities'; but for Solomon it was appropriate to declare 'vanity of vanities' because of him it is written, 'And the king made silver to be in Jerusalem as stones' (I Kgs. 10:27)."[21] The fact that Qoheleth was attributed to Solomon was also a factor in Qoheleth's admission into the Old Testament canon.[22]

All that can be learned of the author is to be found in the epilogue (12:9-10). It thus seems that the author was a scribe who perhaps taught in an academy in Jerusalem. His attitudes and thoughts reflect an upper class background. Gordis holds that this can especially be observed in 4:17-5:6, which deals with religious etiquette.[23] Being a scribe, it would be expected that he was from an aristocratic background, for only the wealthy could afford to engage in such work.

Date

As noted above the date of Qoheleth is believed to be late. Today it is generally agreed that Qoheleth was written in the third century B.C. There are several

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[21] H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, eds., Midrash Rabbah vol. VIII: Ruth Ecclesiastes, trans. L. Rabinowitz (London: The Socino Press, 1939), pp. 86-87.

[22] R. B. Salters, "Qoheleth and the Canon," The Expository Times 86 (August 1975):340.

[23] Gordis, Koheleth, p. 164.

reasons for dating Qoheleth at this time. First, the language of Qoheleth with its strong Aramaic coloring suggests a late date of composition.[24] The references to the rich oppressing the poor and the omnipresent power of the king may reflect the Ptolemai. period.[25] One may also point to what are felt to be traces of Greek influence as evidence that it was written after the conquests of Alexander the great (333 B.C.). Because it does not demonstrate any knowledge of the Maccabean revolt (167-163 B.C.), one must place the document somewhere in the third century B.C. Perhaps another indicator of a late date of composition is the reference to Qoheleth's work as a scribe. It was only in post-exilic times that scribes became prominent. Thus, for this reason also one may date this document after the exile.

Interpretation

As was noted above, there are many different attitudes toward Qoheleth. How does one go about interpreting such a document? What should be emphasized, his skepticism or his urge to enjoy life? There are indeed sentiments in Qoheleth which could hardly be described as pious (cf. 1:13; 8:14). Thus, it was only because of the type of exegesis used by the Rabbis that Qoheleth was admitted into the canon. For the Rabbis used techniques to make

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[24] Hengel, 1:115.

[25] Ibid.

impious passages sound pious.[26] In a similar way the early Christian Church interpreted Qoheleth as a critique of material life, which demonstrates that true meaning can only be found in Jesus Christ.

Interpretations of Qoheleth have run the gamut from pessimism to joy. James Crenshaw believes that Qoheleth was a man who had experienced the "religious bankruptcy of life and was emptied of trust in God."[27] Crenshaw has also described Qoheleth's mood as that of "tragic pessimism" in holding that God is totally indifferent to men.[28] Another view is that Qoheleth possesses an "ethical cynicism" based on the fear of the Lord.[29] What is meant by "ethical cynicism" is that Qoheleth is cynical concerning his view of humanity (3:18-21); yet he

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[26]Salters, "Qoheleth and the Canon," p. 341; J. Stafford Wright in his essay "The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," in Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation ed. Walter C. Kaiser (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), p. 134, notes that Jewish expositors used three methods in interpreting Qoheleth: Epicurean passages were read as a question; a legend was adopted that Solomon was driven from his throne for his disobedience to God and wrote this document in his period of estrangement; and unorthodox statements were paraphrased to be orthodox.

[27]James L. Crenshaw, "In Search of Divine Presence: Some Remarks Preliminary to a Theology of Wisdom," Review and Expositor 74 (Summer 1977):361.

[28]Idem, "The Eternal Gospel (Eccl. 3:11)," in Essays in Old Testament Ethics, J. Philip Hyatt Festschrift, eds. J. Crenshaw and J. Willis (New York: KTAV, 1974), pp. 28-30.

[29]Carl H. Shank, "Qoheleth's World and Life View as Seen in His Recurring Phrases," Westminster Theological Journal 37 (Fall 1974):57.

still encourages righteousness and reverance for God (8: 12). Qoheleth has also been called a gentle cynic and realistic. Thus the interpretations of Qoheleth range from strong to mild skepticism and cynicism.

Other interpretations which deal with Qoheleth emphasize his admonition to enjoy life. One can see from Professor Wright's outline that the emphasis of Qoheleth is that man should simply enjoy life, because no one can master it. Though it is easy to point to Qoheleth's emphasis on the enjoyment of life, one must consider: does Qoheleth emphasize a hedonistic enjoyment of life or a practical enjoyment based on the fear of the Lord and on what is best for man? There have been interpretations which emphasize both of these views. Qoheleth has also been interpreted as presenting an answer to man's feeling of alienation from the world by exhorting men to be open to the world in the fear of God.[30] Thus not only has Qoheleth been interpreted in ways that emphasize the joy to be found in life, but he has been interpreted existentially as well.

Qoheleth is clearly subject to many different interpretations. Should it then be said that Qoheleth is all things to all people? Surely there is a proper means by which one may go about interpreting Qoheleth. Perhaps a proper understanding of Qoheleth may be reached through

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[30]Williams, p. 181.

an investigation of the author's use of tradition. It has been noted that there are traces of Greek influence to be found in Qoheleth. It is almost certain that Qoheleth grew up with a knowledge of Israelite religion and traditio·. Thus it seems that an investigation into the sources behind Qoheleth might yield fruitful information that would be helpful in understanding the author's intention. The traditions that need to be dealt with are the Biblical traditions (wisdom, Pentateuch, history and prophets) and foreign influences (Greek and Ancient Near Eastern).

Indeed Qoheleth does possess a special relevance for all ages because of the topics with which he deals. Perhaps Qoheleth would then be even more meaningful if one had some knowledge of his intention. Thus, a study of Qoheleth's use of tradition may be helpful in understanding his intention and, in turn, lead to a proper understanding and appreciation of this timeless classic.

CHAPTER II

QOHELETH AND HEBREW TRADITION

The book of Qoheleth presents a shocking contrast to the other books in the Old Testament. For Qoheleth presents what appears to be a skeptical outlook on God, man and life, while most other Old Testament books seem more certain in their knowledge of these areas. One is then justified in questioning the relationship between Qoheleth and the rest of the scriptures, if indeed there is any relationship. Because Qoheleth was probably composed sometime in the third century B.C., he was hier to the Pentateuch and the prophets, both of which were most likely by that time canonized. He was also hier to much of the rich tradition of Israelite wisdom.[1] One is perhaps safe in holding that Qoheleth was probably familiar with these Hebrew traditions, even though there may seem to be an absence of any specific references to them in the text. As a Jewish scribe living in Palestine it is likely that Qoheleth was reared under the Pentateuch and Prophets as well as in the wisdom tradition.[2] If Qoheleth was familiar with

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[1] Gordis, "Was Koheleth a Phoenician?", p. 103.

[2] Idem, Koheleth, p. 70.

the other scriptures, it then seems that he would betray some knowledge of them in his work. Moreover, an investigation into the traditions of Israel and Qoheleth's use of those traditions might yield helpful insights into Qoheleth's intention in writing this document. It is to this that we now turn.

Qoheleth and the Wisdom Tradition

The Purpose of Wisdom

Before one can compare Qoheleth to the wisdom tradition one must first ask about the purpose and approach of the wisdom tradition.[3] The book of Proverbs is the best known wisdom book in the Bible; but also included in the category of wisdom literature are Job, Song of Songs and some of the Psalms. The traditional wisdom, such as that found in the book of Proverbs, seems very matter of fact. The sayings and beliefs found here have their roots perhaps in the beginnings of the Hebrew people themselves. Hebraic wisdom deals with diverse traditions which aim at how to best understand life. These traditions are in agreement with Qoheleth that it is God who shapes the courses of lives and controls the outcome of all endeavors.[4] Thus a motive

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[3] A thorough study of the purpose of wisdom is beyond the scope of this study. For this reason no exhaustive study will be attempted.

[4] Crenshaw, "In Search of Divine Presence," p. 353; cf. Ps. 73, Prov. 3:5-6; 16:1-4,33.

behind this tradition is to give glory to God, because the world is under His control.[5] Wisdom then seeks to know God and how man should behave before God. As James Crenshaw points out, a characteristic of all segments of Israelite society is the belief in the efficacy of good works, i.e., that God rewards the righteous.[6] This claim is one which may easily be substantiated from the wisdom tradition (cf., Prov. 10:1-5). It is thus clear that the major concern of wisdom is man's conduct before God.

In Israel, wisdom had a particular affinity to the command of God, which one can see from Proverbs 1:7 which says: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." The connection between the Law and wisdom, however, was a gradual development that only later lead to an identification of wisdom with Law (Sir. 24). Here again one may note that wisdom is concerned for the proper conduct one should have before God. Walther Zimmerli has noted that concrete wisdom sought to know where man had the right to wait for the blessing of God, i.e., wisdom seeks to know the ways of God.[7] He then goes on to note that the primary aim of wisdom is the

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[5]Staples, p. 144.

[6]Crenshaw, "Popular Questioning of the Justice of God in Ancient Israel," Zeitscrift für die Altestamentliche Wissenschaft 82 (1970):383.

[7]Walther Zimmerli, "The Place and Limit of the Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology," Scottish Journal of Theology 17 (1964):154.

art of steering through life with the goal of mastering it.[8] Perhaps one should question whether the aim of wisdom is mastery of life or steering through life. For there is a distinction between these two ideas; for mastery of life implies one can be able to control his life, while steering merely implies making the best of one's life as it is confronted.[9]

In dealing with Qoheleth it is certain that he did not hold to the concept that one could master life, as is clear from his concept of fate overcoming everyone (9:11). If then the aim of wisdom is to master life, Qoheleth is definitely assaulting traditional wisdom. On the other hand, Qoheleth would be within the wisdom tradition if its goal is to steer through life. Thus the great question to be answered, which is not without controversy, concerns the aim of wisdom.

Perhaps one could present a convincing argument for either position. Thus whatever the answer to this question, it must remain tenative. It has long been held that wisdom's goal was the mastery of life. Robert Johnston has noted that Walter Brueggemann and Gerhard von Rad have broken somewhat out of this tradition to view wisdom as steering through life in the asthetic

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[8]Zimmerli notes that wisdom was grounded in creation, and that in creation man is commanded to subdue the world (Gen. 1:28). It is thus believed that the goal of wisdom for man was the mastery of life, p. 149.

[9]Johnston, pp. 26-28.

demension.[10] Yet it seems that wisdom's aim is to steer through life as a whole. In order to confront this problem it may be helpful to call attention to the limits of wisdom, as seen within the wisdom tradition.

Crenshaw has pointed out that the limits of human wisdom can be seen even in Proverbs (16:19; 19:21; 20:24; 21:30; 27:1; 30:2-4).[11] As would be expected such ideas on the limits of human wisdom may be seen in Job as well (5:9; 11:7-12; 28:20-23). Von Rad, in concurrence with Crenshaw, also notes that wisdom was well aware of its limitations and that God's activities are unknowable.[12] It is interesting to note that within the wisdom tradition there was thus a paradox: that one should make every effort to be wise; yet one could never be certain.[13] One may find such ideas as this in Proverbs: "Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him." (26:12 cf. 14:12). There is thus a certain amount of skepticism within the wisdom tradition, which should cause one to question the purpose of wisdom. Wisdom certainly seeks to find insights into problems which deal with God and

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[10] Ibid., pp. 26-27.

[11] Crenshaw, "The eternal Gospel," p. 42.

[12] Von Rad, Wisdom in Israel, pp. 97-110.

[13] Murphy, "Qohelet's 'Quarrel' with the Fathers," Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, New Orleans, La., November 1978, p. 3.

his ways. But does wisdom claim to know the ways of God? Murphy holds that wisdom was aware of its limits, yet maintained a positive attitude towards the intelligibility of divine deeds.[14] Such ideas as this may also be found in Proverbs: "He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; He is a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice, and preserving the way of his saints." (2:7-8). Thus, it does seem that the wisdom tradition held a positive view toward discerning the ways of God, holding that He takes care of the righteous and wise. Such an attitude as this could hardly be found in Qoheleth, for he contends that nothing can be known about God.

Though one may find positive attitudes toward knowing the ways of God he must keep in mind that wisdom was well aware that God's ways cannot be defined. If then wisdom was aware of its limitations, one should not expect that the aim of wisdom was the mastery of life. It therefore seems that an effective argument can be made for the belief that the purpose of wisdom is merely to steer through life rather than to seek mastery over life.

One may note that wisdom literature such as Proverbs offers practical advice as to how to deal with life. In the same way Qoheleth too offers good,

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[14]Ibid., pp. 7-8.

practical advice. As noted above the efficacy of good works was a common Israelite belief (cf. Prov. 3:9-10). With such a belief Qoheleth could not agree; yet he still encouraged righteousness (8:12). There seems to have been a running discussion within the Wisdom tradition concerning divine rewards and punishment. This may be observed in the book of Job as well which confronts any ideas on the safety of the righteous. Thus one may observe two beliefs within the wisdom writings that the Lord watches over all the righteous and takes care of them and that God allows the righteous to suffer. It seems certain that there was a wrestling with the problem of the righteous suffering before Qoheleth, as one may clearly see from the book of Job (ca. 450 B.C.). It is thus possible that there were two factions within the wisdom tradition; one faction holding that God's ways may be known and the other which was not in agreement. Qoheleth is a part of the latter group, attacking the idea that man can know the ways of God. He supports this contention, not with mere hypothesis, but with his own careful observations (1:14; 2:12; 3:10; 3:22; 4:1,4, 7, 15; 5:18; 7:15; 8:9,17; 9:11,13; 10:7).[15]

Should one then conclude as does Crenshaw that

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[15]Johnstone notes that observation had to be a key tool of the wisdom tradition, as one could see from the Solomon narrative (I Kgs. 4:33 f.) as well as other portions of wisdom literature. In this respect it appears that Qoheleth was well grounded within the wisdom tradition, p. 213.

Qoheleth viewed human wisdom as bankrupt?[16] Qoheleth does maintain that man cannot know the ways of God or the future. One may find statements which sound as if he views wisdom as useless (2:15). Though such a reference may be found, one should not use it to conclude that Qoheleth viewed wisdom as bankrupt. For Qoheleth also holds a very positive view toward the wise, because the wise are better able to steer through life (2:13-14; 4:13; 7:1-19; 8:1,5).

Qoheleth provides a realistic view of life and wisdom. It is the apparent absence of any divine justice in the world that does not allow Qoheleth to appeal to the Law and revelation of God (3:16-19; 7:15; 9:11 f.). Such mysteries as the ways of God are evidence of God's majesty and freedom. Zimmerli therefore believes that Qoheleth fulfilled the task of limiting wisdom in Biblical theology. Zimmerli notes the idea that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" maintains that it is God and not man who is in control.[17] Therefore in this respect Qoheleth is within the wisdom tradition, for he maintains that one should fear God, not for reward but because it seems better to do so; and the wise man is equated with the one who does so (3:14; 5:1-7;

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[16]Crenshaw, "Popular Questioning of the Justice of God," p. 389.

[17]Zimmerli, pp. 157-158.

7:18).[18]

Job may have perhaps been a great influence on Qoheleth because both are concerned about the same questions concerning man and his relationship to God. Qoheleth differs from Job in one major respect. Qoheleth holds a more submissive view toward God. He does not attack God but rightly notes that man cannot contend with one who is stronger than himself (6:10). Could this be a reflection on Job (cf. Job 38-42:6)?[19] Charles Forman holds that Qoheleth goes further than Job in holding that God is hostile toward men and that wisdom is inaccessible.[20] Perhaps Qoheleth may have held that true wisdom is inaccessible (8:17), but Forman does not seem justified in holding that Qoheleth saw God as hostile. What of the repeated refrain throughout Qoheleth that it is God's will for man to enjoy life?

Qoheleth's Use of Traditional Material

Qoheleth's relationship to the wisdom tradition may also be seen in his use of traditional material. At times straightforward quotations are used to buttress an argument (10:18; 11:1). At other times the better

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[18]George R. Castellino, "Qohelet and his Wisdom," The Catholic Biblical Quarterly 30 (January 1968):26.

[19]O. S. Rankin, Israel's Wisdom Literature, (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1936; New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 95.

[20]C. C. Forman, "The Pessimism of Ecclesiastes," Journal of Semetic Studies 3 (October 1958):341-42.

proverbs are used as a text for a following ironic comment in which he affirms or refutes the proverb (cf. 7:2).[21] Still again, as may be noted in 4:5-6, he sometimes states a proverb only to state another which is opposed to it.[22] In this way Qoheleth aquires his richness and originality as he weighs and considers all angles of wisdom sayings.

Even the pessimistic lines found in Qoheleth may be judged consistent with traditional wisdom (cf. Prov. 14:13). In maintaining that death is preferable to a miserable existence, for example, he is in line with tradition (cf. Sir. 30:17; 40:28; Job 1:21; 3:1 ff). Qoheleth also uses traditional imagery as in 9:4, "A living dog is better than a dead lion." (cf. 1 Sam. 17:3; 24:15; Prov. 30:30).[23] His idea of man's portion in life (2:21; 11:2) may also be in line with traditional wisdom[24] and is certainly rooted in Hebrew religion (cf. Ps. 16:5; Num. 18:20). One might point to the absence of the divine name in Qoheleth to indicate a breach with wisdom; but it should be realized that in highter wisdom such as in the poetry of Job, the term "yahweh" is

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[21]Gordis, Koheleth, pp. 100-5.

[22]Ibid., p. 107; Graham S. Ogden, "The 'Better'-Proverb (Tob-Spruch), Rhetorical Criticism and Qoheleth," Journal of Biblical Literature 96 (December 1977):494.

[23]Ogden, p. 502.

[24]Williams, p. 190.

similarly seldom used at all.[25]

What may then be said of Qoheleth and his relationship to traditional wisdom? Von Rad has described Qoheleth an "outsider, free of tradition, one who swims against the stream." There are also many others who would agree with von Rad on this point. Yet there is an equally, perhaps more convincing argument for the belief that Qoheleth stands in the center of the wisdom tradition. From what has been noted Qoheleth is much in line with traditional wisdom, both in regard to its purpose and in his varied use of its materials. It is therefore the view of this author that Qoheleth is not "swimming against the stream," but rather is critiquing wisdom as one who stands inside the tradition. Robert Johnston holds, in concurrence with Zimmerli, that Qoheleth may be calling the wisdom tradition back to a central focus which is the enjoyment of life rather than its mastery.[27] If then this is the case, perhaps one might find that Qoheleth is more true to the wisdom tradition than most scholars, at present, care to admit.

Qoheleth and the Pentateuch

In dealing with Qoheleth's relation to the Pentateuch, one must proceed with extreme caution. There

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[25]Gordis, Koheleth, p. 32.

[26]Von Rad, Wisdom in Israel, p. 235.

[27]Johnston, p. 15.

are very few similarities between Qoheleth and the books of the Law, which were so important to ancient Israel. It seems strange that one who most likely was educated in the Law does not make any explicit reference to it. But such is typical of the wisdom writers prior to Sirach. While there seems to be little relation between Qoheleth and the Law it has been recognized that Qoheleth is grounded in a theology of creation. Charles Foreman has noted that the first eleven chapters of Genesis are the single most important influence on Qoheleth's ideas regarding nature and the destiny of man.[28]

In reading Qoheleth, for example, it is very important to realize that he viewed life from the perspective of an Old Testament believer, understanding life in the reality of God's curse placed upon life, as seen in Genesis Chapter Three.[29] Qoheleth is thoroughly grounded in creation as was perhaps the wisdom tradition itself. For creation was understood as being under the authority of wisdom (cf. Prov. 8:22-31),[30] and man was viewed as carrying out the mandate to subdue the world through wisdom, as was symbolized by Adam as he named the animals (Gen. 2:19-20).

There is much further evidence within Qoheleth

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[28]Forman, "Koheleth's Use of Genesis," Journal of Semitic Studies 5 (July 1960):263.

[29]Shank, p. 61.

[30]Crenshaw, "The Eternal Gospel," p. 32.

that the author knew of and accepted the book of Genesis. Foreman points out that both Genesis and Qoheleth see an order to the natural world which is fixed by God.[31] Qoheleth's most interesting subject in nature is of course man. Foreman has noted that perhaps Qoheleth may be making a word play in his use of the word vanity (habel), which is the root of the name Abel, the son of Adam and Eve. The man Abel typifies all men, as one who toils with nature and is typical of man's brief existence.[32] The name of Adam also reveals what man is, for "Adam" comes from "Adamah" which is the ground (cf. Gen. 2:7). This is reflective of Qoheleth's haunting words (6:10b), "and it is known what man [adam] is," by which he implies that man is but dust! By noting that man is of the earth and will return to it, both Genesis and Qoheleth reject any hope of the soul's immortality.

As Qoheleth acknowledges the problem of evil (7:29; 8:2; 9:3), he seems to reflect the Genesis account of the origin of evil (Gen. 3; 4:5). Qoheleth acknowledges that man was created upright, by God, but man resorted to many devices (7:29). Thus he notes that man of his own free will resorted to evil and his wording seems to be reflective of Adam and Eve's eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and

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[31] Forman, "Koheleth's Use of Genesis," p. 257.

[32] Ibid., p. 258.

evil.[33] Qoheleth also maintains a low opinion of women in regards to the problem of evil (7:26-28). Though he does not have a high regard for women he exhorts the reader to "enjoy life with the wife whom you love" (9:9). He also holds companionship in high regard (4:9-12), which is reflective of Genesis 2:18 as God created Eve as a companion for Adam.[34]

Qoheleth's recurring theme on what is good for man may be in agreement with the creation motif of the creation being pronounced good by God (Gen. 1:31).[35] Qoheleth especially seems to reflect this as he states, "Go then eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works." (9:7). In this way it seems that Qoheleth is placing more force in his argument, that God wants man to enjoy life!

The existence of God is assumed by Qoheleth. He does not doubt the existence of God, and he seems to hold that God is known without any appeal to such revelation as the acts of God in Israelite history.[36] Qoheleth perhaps takes the same view as did the apostle Paul regarding the knowledge of the existence of God

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[33]Ibid., P. 259.

[34]Ibid., pp. 259-60.

[35]Johnston, p. 22.

[36]Jasper, p. 268.

being manifest in the visible creation (Rom. 1).[37] What Qoheleth does doubt is that man can have any knowledge about God beyond what is seen in creation. In holding such a view he is consistent with the Genesis account that God does not want man to have any knowledge (Gen. 2:15 ff.; 3:22; 11:6). Perhaps it is for this reason that Qoheleth never refers to the divine name (yahweh) but always uses the generic title God (elohim). In this Qoheleth views God as a transcendent, remote, and inscrutable deity who keeps man from learning of His ways.[38] Thus Qoheleth holds that one should fear (stand in awe of) God because God is too dangerous for man to deal with (5:1-7).

It is widely accepted that Qoheleth is grounded in Genesis and that it was a major influence on him, as has been demonstrated. What then is the relationship between Qoheleth and the remaining books of the Pentateuch? As was noted there seems to be in Qoheleth hardly any relationship to the Law which was a major part of Israelite life. During the period in which Qoheleth lived the educated community of scribes (sopherim) became prominent. These scribes were known for interpreting the Law as well as dealing with wisdom.[39]

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[37] Shank, p. 63.

[38] Forman, "Koheleth's Use of Genesis," pp. 261-63.

[39] Gordis, Poets, Prophets, and Sages, p. 331.

From what can be known of Qoheleth one may assume that he was a part of this movement which would imply that he was well aware of the books of the Law (12:9-10). A. F. Rainey has offered a possible solution to the absence of the Law in Qoheleth. Rainey notes that at the Elephantine garrison the Jews never made any reference to the Law or sacred scriptures. Thus he believes that after the diaspora many of the Jews did not make use of the Law but used wisdom books instead.[40] Such a solution may be possible, but it is more likely that the document was composed in Jerusalem, as it claims.

One may note that the sage uses the Law to demonstrate man's helplessness in an unknowable and uncontrolable universe as he reflects on the command not to add to or take away from God's Law (3:14; cf. Deut. 4:2).[41] Qoheleth also seems reflective of the Law as he holds to the idea that God must remain free and that man cannot define the ways of God. Concerning the aspect of God's freedom he seems to be mindful of Exodus 33:19, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."[42] In dealing with making vows before God, Qoheleth seems to hold an

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[40]A. F. Rainey, "A Study of Ecclesiastes," Concordia Theological Monthly 36 (December 1965):155.

[41]Gordis, Koheleth, p. 43.

[42]Murphy, "Qohelet's 'Quarrel' with the Fathers," p. 9.

affirmative view of the Law. For he warns against making vows and exhorts people to take seriously their vows, as does the Law (5:4-5 cf. Deut. 23:22-25; Lev. 5:4).

It might at first glance seem that the author is at times critical of the Law. For example, Qoheleth states:

> Rejoice O young man in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgement. (11:9).

This would appear to be an assault upon the commandment of God, "not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes which you are inclined to go after wantonly." (Num. 15:39). But one should realize in dealing with this passage that Qoheleth does not prescribe hedonism; rather he warns against asceticism.[43] Qoheleth should also be taken seriously as he qualifies this statement with the warning to remember that God will bring everyone into judgement for these things; for this warning is consistent with his exhortation to fear God.

Qoheleth seems to hold an aloofness toward the priestly cult as prescribed in Leveticus. The reason for this aloofness is the spectacle of hypocritical priests and others who were associated with the cult

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[43] H. L. Ginsberg, "The Structure and Contents of the Book of Koheleth," in Wisdom in Israel and the Ancient Near East, eds. M. Noth and Winton Thomas. Supplements to Vetus Testamentum, vol. 3 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1955), p. 147.

(8:10).[44] Such an attitude seems to be that of a precursor to the pharisaic movement which began to take shape during the Hellenistic period of Judaism.

Qoheleth thus demonstrates a knowledge of and respect for, but very little direct relationship to, the revealed Law found in the Pentateuch. His theology is, instead, firmly grounded in creation as has been demonstrated. Thus when one reads the exhortation to fear God he is not justified in holding that by fear of God Qoheleth means to keep the commandments. One might point to the second epilogue (12:12-14), which advises readers to keep the commandments of God, as evidence of his affirmation of the Law. Readers should remember that the epilogue is not a part of the original work; rather it was added by a later scribe, perhaps a disciple of Qoheleth.[45] Therefore, any meaningful relationship between Qoheleth and the Law has yet to be demonstrated. At this time all that can be demonstrated, aside from Qoheleth's use of Genesis, is that at least he knew of the law.

Qoheleth and Israelite Histroy

Because Qoheleth was a member of the Jewish community and most likely did live in Jerusalem, it seems that a knowledge of the history of Israel would have been a great influence upon him. As noted in the

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[44] Ibid.

[45] Hengel, 1:128.

discussion dealing with Qoheleth's relation to the Law, however, he displays no knowledge of the salvation history of Israel as found in the books of the Law. He does, though, demonstrate a thorough knowledge of Israel's political history in his attributing the work to Solomon. The reason for this, as was noted, was to increase the force of his argument.

Qoheleth's use of history is done very skillfully. He begins in 1:12 by stating that he had been king over Israel in Jerusalem. His use of the name Qoheleth, which has to do with a congregation, may have been taken from I Kings 8:1, where Solomon is described as assembling the leaders of Israel together in Jerusalem.[46] Qoheleth then draws attention to his wisdom and wealth which he notes was greater than all who preceeded him in Jerusalem (1:16). As he recalls his accomplishments and experiences he reflects the glory of Solomon, which at his time had long been lost. His wisdom, noted in 1:16-17; 2:1-3; 2:9; 2:12; 2:15, reflects I Kings 4:29-34, which states that God gave Solomon wisdom and great discernment and knowledge beyond measure and that he surpassed all the wisdom of the east and Egypt. Thus Qoheleth prudently chose the wisest man in all the world as the author of his document, which would naturally lend support to the validity of his argument.

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[46]Robert Henry Pfeiffer, Introduction to the Old Testament (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1948), p. 724.

Qoheleth also reflects the glory of King Solomon as he recalls his projects (2:4-9). He mentions several undertakings which he did, such as building houses, planting gardens, trees and vineyards and gathering great wealth. Solomon was especially known for his great wealth which was given to him by God because he had requested that God grant him wisdom, when God told him to make one request (I Kgs. 3:13; 10:27). Solomon was also known for the great building projects which he undertook, such as building the temple (I Kgs. 6), his palace and other buildings (I Kgs. 7). Another reference which reflects Solomon is the note that he had many concubines (2:8), for Solomon is said to have had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (I Kgs. 11:3).

Qoheleth so skillfully used his knowledge of the greatness of the Solomonic age that the document was attributed to Solomon, though Solomon's name is never mentioned! His use of the historic tradition demonstrates that he was very familiar with Israelite history. His use of Solomon in his document adds force to the argument concerning the vanity of life, for who should know better than the wisest and wealthiest man that ever lived! Qoheleth also adds further force to his argument when he says:

> I hated all my toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me; and who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I

> toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. (2:18-19).

Here Qoheleth clearly reflects the sobering fact that though Solomon had wealth and wisdom beyond measure, his son, Rehoboam, foolishly lost most of his kingdom to Jeroboam (I Kgs. 12:1-20) and most of his wealth to the king of Egypt (I Kgs. 14:25-28). Thus even the wisest and wealthiest of men has no assurence of what will come after him.

Qoheleth also demonstrates his familiarity with the history and traditions of Israel by his exhortations. Qoheleth states: "Even in your thought, do not curse the king, nor in your bed chamber curse the rich; for a bird of the air will carry your voice, or some winged creature tell the matter." (10:20). As Qoheleth advises the reader not to curse the king or a rich man, he advises one to be careful even in his bed chamber (chamber of your bed). This statement is very similar to II Kings 6:12, which states: "Elisha the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the words which you speak in your bed chamber [chamber of your bed]." There is thus a clear similarity between these two passages concerning being careful, even in one's bedroom. The similarity may even go farther than this, for Qoheleth says, "some winged creature will tell the matter." The word used for creature is baal which refers to a deity. In this case perhaps it is possible that Qoheleth has in mind that

some incorporeal being would make known the matter, just as in II Kings it is inferred that God is the one who revealed the matter to Elisha. One cannot be certain what is meant by this reference to "baal," but it does seem to reflect Qoheleth's knowledge of this story.

In summary, Qoheleth grounds little or any of his argument on the salvation history of Israel though he knows this tradition. Moreover, he only uses his knowledge of the political history of Israel illustratively, in order to advance his argument. Again one should keep in mind that Qoheleth is grounded in Genesis, so that he makes no appeal to special revelation. It is perhaps for this reason that he makes no reference to the salvation history. Qoheleth does demonstrate a good knowledge of the history of Israel which was important to all Jews. One may therefore note that this knowledge of Israel's political history had a great effect upon him and perhaps the conditions prevailing at that time prompted him to write his treatise as he reflected upon the lost glory of Israel.

Qoheleth and the Prophets

Of all the sections of the Old Testament in which one might wish to find connections with Qoheleth, the prophets present the most interesting similarities. As a Jew living in the third century B.C., Qoheleth was most likely familiar with the prophets whose writings were already in circulation. It seems that the prophets

may have exerted a great influence upon the thinking of Qoheleth, for he presents some of the same ideas as did the prophets. Qoheleth confronts men in much the same way as did the prophets. He attacks the certainty of the wise, notes men's short lives compared to God's eternity, speaks out against social injustice and attacks those who feel they know the ways of God. Thus, a study of Qoheleth's similarities to the prophets may yield helpful insights into his background and intention.

There seems to have been some wisdom influence upon the prophets, though this subject is not without controversy. The prophets do supply some interesting insights into wisdom itself, for they resemble wisdom in style, and many times they speak of the wise. That the prophets had been influenced by the wisdom tradition may be noted in their use of the parables, allegories, proverbial expressions, comparisons, similes and metaphors which were common to wisdom (cf. Isa. 5:28; Hos. 6:4f.; Isa. 10:15; Am. 6:12; Mich. 6:6f.; Hag. 2:10ff.; Mal. 1:7; Isa. 10:15).[47] It is for such reasons as these that many scholars hold that the prophets were influenced by the wisdom tradition. Also typical of the wisdom school in the prophets is the comparison of the righteous and the wicked concerning rewards and punishments. Isaiah

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[47]Johannes Lindblom, "Wisdom in the Old Testament Prophets," in Wisdom in Israel and the Ancient Near East, ed. M. Noth and Winton Thomas. Supplements to Vetus Testamentum, vol. 3 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1955), p. 201.

is especially believed to display characteristics of the wisdom school. His vocabulary suggests that he may have grown up in the wisdom school.[48] In contrast to Isaiah, the prophet Amos is held to be reflective of Israel's folk wisdom, which is a different source of wisdom. Amos' logical reasoning and sayings seem to be distinctive of folk wisdom, but this too is not without debate.[49]

The prophets do reflect many characteristics of the wisdom tradition and it should be expected that such men who were aware of current events would be familiar with the wisdom tradition. The extent of influence of the wise upon the prophets is subject to much debate, but that the prophets were aware of and influenced by wisdom is beyond doubt. As was noted, the prophets supply some information about the wisdom school. The prophets make it clear that they were familiar with foreign wisdom and a class of wise men in Israelite society (cf. Jer. 49:7; Ob. 8; Isa. 19:11ff.).[50]

From one perspective the influence of the wisdom school upon the prophets seems to have been largely negative, for often the prophets are found to be speaking against the wisdom of the wise. This conflict with the wise seems to have begun in the royal court, where

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[48]Ronald Ernest Clements, Prophecy and Tradition (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), pp. 74-75.

[49]Ibid., pp. 77-78.

[50]Lindblom, p. 193.

wise men acted as counselors to the king (cf. II Sam. 15:31-37; I Kgs. 12:3-14). To support the belief that wise men were present in the royal court one may also note much wisdom material which deals with the proper conduct in the royal court (cf. Prov. 25:2-7; Qoh. 10:4-6; 16-17). There is thus much evidence within the historical narratives and wisdom material to suggest the use of wise men as counselors in the royal court. It appears that it is primarily this wisdom which the prophets attack.[51]

From what can be learned from the prophets there seems to have been a misuse of wisdom in Israel which the prophets attack. In his book The Message of the Prophets, Von Rad notes that a new element of eighth century prophecy was the idea of divine judgment upon Israel. This idea was new because the people seemed to believe that their Yahwistic traditions insured salvation.[52] Johannes Lindblom has suggested that Jeremiah denounces a special class of the wise who are specialists in the Law and who instruct the people in its application. This Law they held to be true wisdom (cf. Jer. 8:8f.; 9:22f.).[53] The prophets, then, attacked those who believed that because they had the Law of the Lord,

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[51]Clements, pp. 82-83.

[52]Von Rad, The Message of the Prophets, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1967), pp. 147-49.

[53]Lindblom, p. 195.

they were in no danger. It seems that the prophets reacted against this wisdom because it presumed that the people knew the activity of Yahweh.[54] The prophets point out that Yahweh acts as He will, not as the people believe He will (Isa. 31:1f.).

A great difference between the prophets and those who believed themselves to be wise is that the prophets were theocentric, while the latter were anthropocentric. These wise men believed that they were wise and knew the best ways to go about political affairs. The wisdom of those who abused wisdom was set up outside of Yahweh; thus the prophets called for a return to God.[55] An example of this kind of wisdom, though it is not grounded in the Law, is that of the king of Assyria, who believed that through his own power and wisdom he was in control of the war. The prophet Isaiah in response to the king of Assyria notes that it is God who is in control of affairs (10:5-11; 10:15). There were also such political leaders in Israel and Judah who had rejected the guidance of Yahweh for their own wisdom (Isa. 5:21; 19:11; Jer. 49:7). The prophets also seem to attack the flexiability of the old wisdom which contributed to corruption of the government, with bribery which wisdom observed as being

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[54] William McKane, Prophets and Wise Men, Studies in Biblical Theology, no. 44 (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson Inc., 1965), p. 67.

[55] Ibid., p. 66.

helpful (Prov. 17:8; 19:6; 21:14 cf. Isa. 5:20).

The prophets continually speak of the wisdom of the wise being put to shame because it is not based in God (cf. Isa. 19:11; Jer. 49:7). It is also interesting to note that the prophets speak out against this misuse of wisdom not only in Israel but in other nations, as well as Tyre (Ez. 28:2ff.). It is therefore interesting to compare the attitude of Qoheleth to that of the prophets. For though he is seperated from the prophets by several centuries, Qoheleth holds much the same view toward the wise (7:23; 8:17). Qoheleth not only holds that no one can attain perfect wisdom, but in the same way as the prophets he holds that no one can know the ways of God (3:11; 8:17; 9:12; 11:5). It is very interesting to note that the prophets speak out against those who believe they know about the activity of God or that possession of the Law is insurance against misfortune. Could it then be that Qoheleth was confronted with such an abuse of wisdom? Qoheleth's language certainly seems as though it could be aimed at the audacity of the wise. Further, if Qoheleth is confronting such beliefs, this would explain his lack of reference to the Law of Moses or the divine name Yahweh.

One cannot be certain, at this point, about what Qoheleth was confronting; but the idea that he confronted a misuse of wisdom is one that should not soon be ruled out. Derek Kidner has called Qoheleth "a critique

of secularism and of secularized religion." Kidner holds that Qoheleth speaks as a prophet in pressing for reality in the religious realm.[56] Thus, the argument that Qoheleth was confronting such a misuse of wisdom becomes more forceful as one realizes that Qoheleth is critiquing secularism.

Qoheleth contains other similarities to the prophets besides his critique of wisdom. For Qoheleth's view of man is consistent with the prophets. He calls men to realize the brevity of their lives in contrast to the eternity of God. In the same way Isaiah says "All flesh is grass" (40:6f. cf. Qoh. 1:4).[57] Thus both Qoheleth and the prophets call men to view their lives in the proper perspective.

Perhaps it was the prophets who gave Qoheleth the desire to speak out against social injustice. For just as the prophets called for social justice and denounced injustice so does Qoheleth (3:16; 4:1; 5:8 cf. Isa. 1:7; 56:1; 59:14f.; Jer. 22:1ff.; Lam. 3:35; Am. 5:7,11f.; Mic. 7:3; Hab. 1:4; Zech. 8:16). Though Qoheleth seems to indicate that the prophets had left their mark on him in regard to justice, Qoheleth lacked the drive of the prophets to change existing evils and their optimistic

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[56]Derek Kidner, A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1976) pp. 23,52-53.

[57]Williams, p. 192.

view of the inevitable triumph of righteousness.[58]

It is therefore very likely that Qoheleth was well aware of the prophets and that they exerted a powerful influence over him, especially regarding their attitude toward wisdom. James Crenshaw has stated his belief that it was the unfulfilled promises of the prophets concerning the messianic age that lead to a "volcanic eruption" in Job and Qoheleth, questioning the righteousness of God.[59] Such a belief is possible, but this study has demonstrated that the prophets most likely had a much more profound influence on Qoheleth than that of a tragic disappointment which triggered a pessimistic treatise.

It is then clear that Qoheleth was not far removed from the traditions of his people. He stands within the wisdom tradition exhorting men to enjoy life as long as it is possible to do so, for this is the only practical advice one can give. If Qoheleth swims against the current of wisdom, it is the current of its misuse. Not only is Qoheleth firmly grounded in the wisdom tradition, but he also stands in a theology of creation as found in Genesis. Though he never refers specificly to the Mosaic Law he never refutes it, and he exhorts men to fear God. Qoheleth is also very familiar with Israelite

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[58]Gordis, Poets, Prophets and Sages, p. 340; Koheleth, pp. 80-81.

[59]Crenshaw, "Popular Questioning of the Justice of God," pp. 384-86.

history and the message of the prophets. Because Qoheleth is grounded in Israelite tradition it is a mistake to prejudge Qoheleth without first becoming familiar with his use of that tradition.

CHAPTER III

QOHELETH AND FOREIGN INFLUENCES

There has been a popular tendency to interpret Qoheleth as being heavily influenced by foreign ideas. Many scholars have found traces of Greek and Near Eastern thought in Qoheleth. These theories have attempted to explain the strangeness of Qoheleth and his view of life within the Hebrew canon. P. W. Skehan holds that at best, Qoheleth's contacts with popular Hebrew writings are slender.[1] Even though this has been a popular belief and helps to explain the apparent skepticism of Qoheleth, is this a solid thesis? A brief investigation of such foreign ideas, that seem to be in Qoheleth, may perhaps shed light on his meaning and how the document is best approached.

There are some good reasons to believe that Qoheleth was familiar with ideas from Greece and the Near East. Because it is most likely that Qoheleth was a scribe, it is likely that he had traveled extensively. The reason one might believe that Qoheleth

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[1] Partick William Skehan, The Literary Relationship Between the Book of Wisdom and the Protocanonical Wisdom Books of the Old Testament (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1938), p. 9.

traveled extensively is that the duties of a scribe as listed by Sirach included travel (Sir. 39:4).[2] One may also note that within the Old Testament itself, it is noted that Israel had extensive contacts with Egypt (cf. I Kgs. 10:28-11:1) and Phoenicia (cf. I Kgs. 5). Because Israel, as early as David's and Solomon's reigns, had contacts with these cultures it is very likely that there was an exchange of thought. One should also keep in mind that this document was written after the Babylonian exile. Since many Jews lived in Babylon during and after the exile, it seems quite likely that Babylonian thought was known among Jews. The document's late date of composition (third century B.C.) is also a reason to believe that Qoheleth was familiar with Greek thought. For this would place the document after the conquests of Alexander the great, who believed himself to be an apostle of Hellenism, and did spread Greek thought into Palestine. Israel could have come into contact with Greek thought through Phoenicia before this time, but there is no real evidence at present for this. It is therefore quite likely that Qoheleth was familiar with the ideas of these foreign cultures: Egypt, Babylon, and Greece. Yet it is the extent of this influence that remains to be seen.

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[2]Pfeiffer, p. 729.

Qoheleth and Greek Thought

Hellenistic ideas have long been held to have had the most profound influence upon the thinking of Qoheleth. This theory has been the most popular and perhaps for good reasons, given the spread of Greek thought at that time. One is perhaps safe in holding that Qoheleth was familiar with Hellenistic thought whether or not he used such ideas consciously. For today most people are familiar with such terms as "existentialism" or "class struggle" even though they may not use such terms.[3] It is in this way that W. E. Staples holds that Greek ideas are found in Qoheleth. Staples believes that either consciously or unconsciously Qoheleth used Hellenistic ideas for his own purposes.[4] This may sound convincing as one points to such passages as might reflect Hellenistic thought, but its soundness remains to be proven.

There have been theories that Qoheleth contains many Greek words and phrases. The belief that there are Hellenistic phrases in Qoheleth has even given rise to the theory that Qoheleth was originally written in Greek. Yet this theory is without foundation.[5] One may point to different words and phrases in Qoheleth, such as "chance,"

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[3] Staples, p. 142; Gordis, Koheleth, p. 56.

[4] Staples, p. 142.

[5] Forman, "The Pessimism of Ecclesiastes," pp. 337-38.

"under the sun" or "there is nothing better for a man" as being evidence of Greek influence. Oswald Loretz in his book Qoheleth und der Alte Orient has noted that these words and phrases are not necessarily foreign to the Old Testament and that in Qoheleth there is not one unique Greek word or phrase.[6] One should remember that Qoheleth is grounded in creation which may explain such phrases as "what is good" and "under the sun." The word "chance" is not foreign to the Old Testament, for it may be found in more traditional portions of scripture (cf. I Sam. 6:9; 20:26). Thus the belief that Qoheleth wrote in Greek or contains Greek phrases is without substantiation and does not warrant further discussion.

Others have looked for Greek influence in the themes Qoheleth addresses. Qoheleth's use of the "Golden Mean" (7:14-18), for example, has been the subject of much speculation concerning Greek influence. Qoheleth does suggest that one should not be over righteous or over wicked. This may be held to be ethical advice on how to conduct one's self, as Aristotle stated it. Yet in contrast to the classical, ethical mean, Qoheleth held the "Golden Mean" in a unique way. Rather than being ethical advice it is advice on how to best

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[6]Oswald Loretz, Qohelet und der Alte Orient (Wien: Herder, 1964), pp. 45-48.

steer through an uncertain life.[7] If in this passage Qoheleth is demonstrating his familiarity with the "Golden Mean," he is using it in his own way to serve his own purpose.

Martin Hengel has pointed out that the inevitability of death for all people was a common problem in Greece in the third century.[8] It is clear that the inevitability of death posed a great problem for Qoheleth as well, but it would not be wise to hold this as evidence of Greek influence. Certainly death is a fact with which men in every culture must grapple, independently of other cultures. The interesting difference between Hellenistic beliefs on death and Qoheleth's is that Qoheleth did not hold to the belief in an after life (3:20,21). It seems that perhaps Qoheleth is attacking the idea of life after death when he says "who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth?" (3:21). He may perhaps be attacking the Platonic notion that the soul ascends upward.[9] It is not impossible that Qoheleth is

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[7]Murphy, The Book of Ecclesiastes and the Canticle of Canticles, Pamphlet Bible Series, no. 38 (New York: Paulist Press, 1961), pp. 17-18; Ernest Horton Jr., "Koheleth's Concept of Opposites," Numem 19 (April 1972):1-2; Gordis, Koheleth, p. 57.

[8]Hengel, 1:123.

[9]H. Louis Ginsberg, Studies in Koheleth (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950), p. 43.

attacking this belief, for Sirach seems to be dependent upon Qoheleth in his own polemic against life after death (cf. Sir. 34:1-4).[10]

O. S. Rankin has recognized that the idea of the soul of man ascending upward may be a result of Hellenistic influence. Yet, Rankin holds that it is more likely that Qoheleth was influenced by the Astral Religion of the east; because like the Astral Religion he accepts determinism and rejects the after life.[11] The belief that Qoheleth was influenced by the Astral Religion may be a possibility, but it is not likely. Throughout the Old Testament one may see that the Israelite religion developed its own view of determinism (cf. Ps. 73) and did not hold to an after life. One must also take into consideration that the belief in an after life became a problem for Judaism only after the spread of Hellenism. It is therefore more likely that Qoheleth was reacting to Hellenism.

Some interesting comparisons between Qoheleth and Hellenistic thought may be found in the New Comedy of Menander. For Menander states: "The gods (help) the bad

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[10] Ibid.; It is interesting to compare Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) and Qoheleth on their views of life after death. It is almost certain that one of Sirach's primary purposes was to attack Hellenistic beliefs, which had become dominant in Jewish culture at that time (ca. 190 B.C., cf. Hengel, 1:162). One is therefore led to believe that Qoheleth too intended to refute popular Hellenistic beliefs.

[11] Rankin, pp. 140-41.

but we (although we are good) bring nothing good to pass, no one who is just gets rich quickly."[12] This statement is very similar to Qoheleth's complaint that the righteous are rewarded as the wicked and the wicked are rewarded as the righteous (3:14). Menander also notes the problem that wealth does not necessarily bring happiness.

> I used to think the wealthy did not groan or toss up and down in the night but enjoyed slumber. But now I see that you so called happy ones suffer like us. (frag. 281k; cf. 5:12).[13]

Menander also displays characteristics of Qoheleth as he notes that the wisdom of the poor man is not heard. "A poor man is not believed even when he speaks the truth." (frag. 856k; cf. 9:16).[14] Just as Qoheleth may be similar to Menander one may find similarities between Qoheleth and Sophocles. For Sophocles states: "Not to be born at all is best." (cf. 4:13).[15]

With examples such as these, it seems clear that there are some similarities between Qoheleth and Greek Comedy and Tragedy. But does this warrant the conclusion that Qoheleth used such sources? Such observations may be made of any culture, for these statements are typical

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[12]Menander quoted in Hengel, 1:122.

[13]Menander quoted in Ginsberg, Koheleth, pp. 43-44.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Sophocles Oedipus at Colonus, Loeb Classical Library, p. 261.

of human nature. One may find the same ideas in the writings of men of other cultures and times. For example, these statements of Menander are very similar to statements found in the Babylonian document "A Dialogue about Human Misery." Would one then conclude that the author of this Babylonian document was influenced by Menander? One may find the same ideas concerning not being born in the book of Job (3:1ff.). A better conclusion, perhaps, is that these similarities in documents represent parallel development rather than direct influence. It is possible that Qoheleth knew of Menander and Sophocles, but there is no substantial evidence to support the belief that Qoheleth was influenced by their works.

Lewis Ginsberg has pointed out that esteem of youth (11:-12:5) and misogyny (7:28) are further examples of Greek influence.[16] It may be true that youth were held in high regard and women were held in low esteem in Hellenistic culture; but can one point to this in Qoheleth as Greek influence? Surely such ideas were common to Jewish culture as well. One may point to the Pentateuch for examples of what might be called misogyny, such as Eve's disregard for God's commandment (Gen. 3:6) and God's curse upon women (3:16). Yet it should also be noted that Qoheleth is not misogynous, for he

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[16]Ginsberg, "The Structure and Contents of the Book of Koheleth," p. 148; Koheleth, p. 44.

advises his readers to enjoy life with the wife of their youth (9:9). Moreover, the esteem of youth in Qoheleth is not necessarily an idolization of the young. Rather it is practical advice to enjoy one's youth before old age sets in. There seems little reason to accept Ginsberg's contention.

One might also point to the individualism found in Qoheleth as an example of Hellenistic influence. For it is true that Qoheleth presents a more individualistic approach than other portions of the Old Testament which deal with people more collectively. Yet perhaps, it is not wise to hold this as Hellenistic influence. For one may note that the proverbs contain a certain amount of individualism. It should also be expected that in an academic milieu, such as the wisdom school, a certain amount of individualism would develop. Therefore, this seems to be a natural development of a society rather than that of a foreign influence.

There have been many theories that Qoheleth reveals the influence of Greek philosophy. The most popular theory is that Qoheleth was strongly influenced by Epicurus. Qoheleth's view of pleasure seems on first reading similar to that held by Epicurus. Yet Qoheleth found no gratification in light hearted pleasure but only in that which comes from contentment in connection

with one's work.[17] There are also ideas which were expressed by disciples of Epicurus which sound similar to Qoheleth. For Metrodorus believed that wealth was good only when it did not bring more trouble than joy.[18] Such ideas as this sound similar to some of those held by Qoheleth; but again all they show is a parallel development in thought, which could probably be found in any culture. Such similarities as these do not indicate a direct borrowing. As Oswald Loretz has noted: any real relationship between Qoheleth and Epicurus remains to be seen.[19]

Charles Forman has noted that the Greeks and Hebrews developed along the same lines, with the Greeks developing in civilization and the Hebrews developing in religion. They both held to a universalism, in that there was a creation and fall. Yet they differed in their concepts of man, God and the meaning of history. In their concept of history the Greeks held that it had no meaning, while the Hebrews saw history as being directed by God. Qoheleth uniquely held that the meaning of history was beyond man's comprehension.[20] Thus according to Forman there is no direct relationship

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[17]Staples, pp. 148-49.

[18]Ginsberg, Koheleth, p. 43.

[19]Loretz, p. 50.

[20]Forman, "The Pessimism of Ecclesiastes," pp. 338-39.

between Qoheleth and many of these Greek thoughts. Many of Qoheleth's ideas, as with his concept of history, are only similar to Greek thoughts. Robert Gordis in concurrence with Forman believes that it is only through a forced eisegesis that one can see many of these Hellenistic thoughts in Qoheleth.[21]

There is really no way, nor is there any need, to refute the belief that Qoheleth was aware of Hellenistic thought, for in all probability he was familiar with it. Yet there is no substantial evidence that this thought had a profound influence upon Qoheleth, except that it possibly precipitated his attack on such ideas as life after death. After what has been demonstrated, one may conclude that any profound effect of Hellenistic thought upon Qoheleth remains to be seen.

Qoheleth and the Ancient Near East

Of all foreign influences it stands to reason that Ancient Near Eastern thought would most likely be found in Qoheleth. The Israelite culture and religion developed among these cultures, and there is a striking similarity between such beliefs as creation and the flood stories. The history of Israel itself reveals that Israel had relations with the various cultures of the Near East. Moreover, earlier Israelite wisdom has within it repeated evidence of being influenced by the

[21]Gordis, Koheleth, p. 52.

wisdom literature of the Ancient Near East, particularly Egypt. For the influence of Egypt may be seen even in the book of Proverbs, for a section of this book (22:17-24:22) is a direct borrowing from the "Instruction of Amenemope."[22] Such an example as this attests to the international character of wisdom. It would therefore be natural to expect that the traditions of these cultures became a part of the tradition and background of Qoheleth, as well.

It is interesting to compare Qoheleth to Egyptian wisdom, for there are many similarities. The first two chapters of Qoheleth are similar to the description of the king's achievements found in "Instruction of King Amenemhet."[23] The poem found in Qoheleth 3:2-3 resembles the encyclopedic lists from Egyptian and Mesopotamian wisdom literature.[24] Qoheleth also reflects Egyptian wisdom as he notes that his successor can only do what he has already done (2:12). For in "The Instruction for King Merikere" it is stated:

> For of what value is a man coming after the king who can only repeat what he has already done. I would fain see a brave man that equaleth me therein and doeth more than I have done.[25]

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[22]Crenshaw, "In Search of Divine Presence," p. 355.

[23]Gordis, Koheleth, p. 10.

[24]Ibid., p. 111; Crenshaw, "The Eternal Gospel," p. 27.

[25]Gordis, "Was Koheleth a Phoenician?", p. 113.

These are typical examples of Egyptian wisdom literature, which reflect statements found in Qoheleth. What is more important than similarities between isolated quotations is the similarity between Qoheleth and other works as a whole. One may find similar themes in such works as "A Pessimistic Dialogue Between Master and Servant," which is an Assyrian document, and "A Dispute over Suicide." In both of these documents emphasis is placed on the vanity of life, human misery and the inevitability of death. Both documents come to the same conclusion in answer to the question dealing with what is good for man. The servant expresses it in this way, when asked by his master concerning what is good ("A Pessimistic Dialogue between Master and Servant"): "To break my neck, your neck, throw both into the river that is good."[26] This presents a striking difference from Qoheleth. For as Qoheleth considers the same question, he returns to his recurring theme that enjoyment of life is good, for it is a gift from Yahweh.

Roland Murphy has pointed out that in these documents there is no real problem posed or solved, for there is only resignation to death.[27] One might also see from this literature that it lacks the profound

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[26]James B. Pritchard, ed., Ancient Near Eastern Texts, 2nd ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 438.

[27]Murphy, "Introduction to Wisdom Literature," in Jerome Biblical Commentary, eds. Raymond E. Brown,

wrestling with life's problems as is found in Qoheleth. These documents merely point out problems in life, but provide no solutions. As noted above it is likely that Qoheleth knew of these documents because of the interchange of ideas in the Near East. It should then be clear that if these documents had any great effect upon Qoheleth, it was the motivation to find something better for man than merely waiting for death.

There are some clear similarities between Qoheleth and Ancient Near Eastern wisdom just as Qoheleth presents similarities to Greek thought. These similarities do not add any insights into Qoheleth's thought, except that the tragic pessimism presented in these documents reveals the clear sightedness of Qoheleth's realistic views and advice. If for no other reason than this Ancient Near Eastern wisdom is valuable, for it affords the reader a greater appreciation of Qoheleth's thought.

The Babylonian wisdom literature presents further interesting parallels to Qoheleth. For the "Gilgamesh Epic," also known as the "Babylonian Qoheleth," reveals that Qoheleth probably used it as a source. The "Gilgamesh Epic," like Qoheleth, deals with the ultimate meaning of life and the problem of death. The hero of the story, Gilgamesh, was in search of eternal life when Siduri the barmaid said:

> Thou Gilgamesh, let full be thy belly, make thou merry by day and by night. Of each day make thou a feast of rejoicing, day and night dance thou and play! Let thy garments be sparkling fresh, thy head be washed; bathe thou in water. Pay heed to the little one that holds on to your hand, let thy spouse delight in thy bosom! For this is the task of mankind![28]

In the same fashion Qoheleth states:

> Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white; let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life which he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. (9:7-9).

The similarities between these two statements are quite evident. Both statements present the same idea, though one might note that Qoheleth is more theocentric in his advice, for according to Qoheleth such things are a gift from God. The idea that man's joy is a gift from God does not seem to be present in Gilgamesh. What is important is that this parallel would indicate that Qoheleth was most likely familiar with the "Gilgamesh Epic." Though Qoheleth appears to agree with the advice given to Gilgamesh, it is interesting to note that he does not indicate any knowledge of why God has reserved immortality for himself as the "Gilgamesh Epic" seeks to explain this.

It is also interesting to note that Qoheleth disagrees with the conclusion of the "Gilgamesh Epic."

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[28]Pritchard, p. 90.

For after Gilgamesh has lost the opportunity to gain immortality, he returns to the city of Uruk, of which he was king, and takes pride in the city and his accomplishments, as consulation (tablet XI, 300ff.). In contrast to this Qoheleth takes no delight in his accomplishments, because he must leave them to the man who will come after him (2:18), and no one knows what will occur in the future (3:22). It is therefore evident that Qoheleth may have been familiar with and used Gilgamesh as a source. Yet it is also evident that if he did use the "Gilgamesh Epic" he used it creatively to further his own agrument.

The Babylonian wisdom tradition also developed works much like those of Egypt, which have been mentioned. Such Babylonian works as "A Dialogue about Human Misery"[29] present problems which are in life, but offer no solutions. Much like Egyptian works this Babylonian document deals with divine inscrutability, the problem of evil and death. This document, like Egyptian literature, does not offer a solution to the problems found in life but rather resigns to death. Again one may see that the tone of this Babylonian document is one of tragic pessimism. Thus Qoheleth may evidence some similarities such as his complaint about the existence of evil and the problem of death; but on

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[29]Ibid., pp. 438-440.

the whole, when one considers his profound wrestling with life and his practical conclusions, he stands as quite distinct from his counterparts in the Babylonian literature.

As was mentioned above Qoheleth was grounded in the Hebrew creation story (Genesis), which holds some similarities to the Babylonian and Mesopotamian creation and flood stories. Because the Genesis account of creation could be in some areas dependent upon the Babylonian creation stories, Qoheleth would then be indirectly connected to Babylonian thought through creation. Creation seems to account for Qoheleth's view that the universe is in a cyclic order when he says that "there is a time for all things" (3:1) and that "there is nothing new" (1:9).[30] Because such a view of the universe may be found in Genesis, the belief that Qoheleth was dependent on the Babylonian creation is not impressive.

Other interesting similarities include the common belief that the divine mind is remote. This is one of the concerns which is found in "A Dialogue about Human Misery." This was a common belief in Ancient Babylon. For even Ea (the god of wisdom), who was known for helping man, deceived Adapa in order to keep him

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[30]Staples, p. 147.

from gaining eternal life.[31] Thus one may note that Qoheleth is in agreement with Babylonian wisdom by holding to the idea of divine inscrutability. Yet Qoheleth held to this for other reasons, as well. He was not concerned to picture God as deceiving men, but rather in placing human wisdom in its proper place, i.e., as subject to God. It is not Babylonian wisdom, but Yahweh as sovereign creator and sustainer that stands behind Qoheleth's notion of inscrutability.

It is thus very probable that Qoheleth was aware of Babylonian wisdom as one may see from his use of the "Epic of Gilgamesh." Yet one should be careful to realize that though there are several parallels, Qoheleth is original in his use of these sources. A careful comparison of Qoheleth and the Babylonian documents reveals Qoheleth's distinctiveness and originality. Such a comparison also affords the reader some insight as to a proper understanding of Qoheleth. For as one sees the pessimism of these documents, the realistic and practical character of Qoheleth is highlighted.

Another trait which may betray foreign influence of a different sort may be noted in Qoheleth's description of the political bureaucracy. Qoheleth's critique of governing officials (5:8-9) may reflect the government structure of the old Persian Empire. The Persain

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[31] Williams, p. 183; This may be found in the myth of "Adapa" in Pritchard, p. 101.

government was made up of different levels of officials, of whom the higher was the predator of the lower. The Satrap was in charge of state officers, with the inspectors over the Satrap and the king over all.[32] It is possible that Qoheleth was familiar with the Persian government, yet this same structure may have applied to any number of governments.

Mitchell Dahood holds that Qoheleth reflects the government of a Phoenician city state (10:4ff.), and the ten rules of the Carthagenians in his reference to ten rulers in a city (7:19).[33] But again, Qoheleth's description of the government could apply to many nations. Thus such theories have little solid foundation. Dahood strongly holds that Qoheleth was a Phoenician and holds such ideas as casting one's bread upon the waters (11:1f.) as reflecting Phoenician Maritime trade.[34] Dahood's argument also rests on linguistics as well as thought. At the present time Dahood's thesis is unimpressive, for as Robert Gordis has noted, these parallels with Phoenician culture may be found to have Hebrew parallels as well.[35] One should also take into consideration that

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[32]Kidner, pp. 54-55; Rainey, p. 151.

[33]Mitchell Dahood, "Qoheleth and Recent Discoveries," Biblica 39 (1958):315.

[34]Ibid., pp. 315-16.

[35]Gordis, "Was Koheleth a Phoenician?", pp. 104-5.

ancient Israel had extensive contacts with Phoenicia. It should therefore be expected that there would be some similarities between Hebrew and Phoenician culture.

The search for foreign influences in Qoheleth could be endless. But what such parallels indicate, in the main, is parallel development. There are many subjects which have developed in various cultures independently of each other. Among these subjects are eroticism and various religions beliefs. Dominant subjects in all cultures are those of death, evil and the desire for happiness. Thus it should not be strange to find that Qoheleth deals with a subject of universal interest. Even in instances where Qoheleth seems to be directly related to foreign cultures, his use of those materials is found to be original. Qoheleth cannot be understood solely in terms of parallels. Yet as has been noted, these parallels do highlight Qoheleth's thought which may lead to a deeper understanding of his purpose.

CHAPTER IV

QOHELETH'S INTENTION

Qoheleth is perhaps the most popular book to be found in the canon of the Old Testament. It is not necessary for one to be either Christian or Jewish to enjoy the continuing relevance of Qoheleth. Perhaps for this reason, however, there is a tendency among readers to read into the text from his own world. Christians may spiritualize the text, while agnostics may hold the book as a prime example of skepticism. Yet a responsible interpretation of Qoheleth rejects both such approaches. Instead, it requires that one be familiar with the world of which the author was a part. Just as an individual can better appreciate a work of art by knowing something of the background and character of the artist, so Qoheleth, too, is best understood against his background. It is Qoheleth's use of the tradition, which was handed down to him that helps aid in understanding his intention. There are no definite conclusions to which one may come, and perhaps there never will be. Yet, through such a study, one may still gain significant insights into the author's intention and how to properly understand Qoheleth.

As was pointed out in Chapter One Qoheleth may be dated in the third century B.C. It is valuable to know the approximate date of this document, for it sheds light on the environment of which Qoheleth was a part. The third century was a dark period in the history of the Jews, because those who had survived the exile had been disappointed by the prophet's unfulfilled promises of the coming new age. This was a time of growing Greek influence and disintegration of morals among the upper classes.[1] For most individuals living at this time it was most likely a time of oppression at the hands of such foreign powers as the Persians and Greeks. This was perhaps a time when, as in the fifth century, neighboring peoples were hostile toward the Jews (Neh. 4:7-8). If such conditions persisted in Palestine at the time of Qoheleth, then these conditions would explain such complaints as the problem of a foreigner enjoying someone else's wealth (6:1-2). It is therefore likely that Qoheleth was confronted with the problem of evil in a very concrete way.

It is most probable that Qoheleth was raised in an environment of economic well-being, because only the wealthy were able to pursue the scholarly work in which

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[1]Gordis, Poets, Prophets and Sages, p. 330; Eduard Lohse, The New Testament Environment, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdom, 1976), pp. 19-22.

Qoheleth obviously took part.[2] One may observe from this document some of the things that were most meaningful to Qoheleth. It seems clear from the text that Qoheleth loved truth, for he spent much time in this futile search (cf. 1:17; 2:1-3,12). Qoheleth must have loved justice as well, for he continually points out injustices for which there is no cure (cf. 4:1; 5:8f.; 6:1f.). It seems that above all things Qoheleth loved life and the joys that can be found in life (cf. 2:24; 3:12f.; 5:18ff.). These three things seem to stand out in Qoheleth as his primary concerns. He realized, however, that ultimate truth was beyond his grasp and that there was no real solution to injustices. Thus Qoheleth rightly held on to the joy that life had to offer.

Qoheleth was most likely familiar with traditions that were foreign to Israel. Yet a close study of Qoheleth reveals that he did not use as his authority any materials that were foreign to Hebrew thought. He represents an approach to life and religion that goes back to the earliest times of Israelite History.[3] For it is clear that Qoheleth was well aware of Hebrew traditions and used those traditions (wisdom, creation, Israelite History, and the prophets) to state his point.

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[2]Gordis, Poets, Prophets and Sages, p. 332.

[3]Jasper, p. 261.

Qoheleth creatively used all of the traditions with which he was familiar. If there is any alien material that may be found in Qoheleth, it was not used in a fashion that was destructive to his contemporary culture.[4]

Qoheleth may very well mark a transitional phase in the spiritual life of Judaism, for it was a time of increased Hellenistic influence. Yet, no matter what influences one may find, Qoheleth cannot be understood purely in terms of parallels. For as Robert Gordis has noted, Qoheleth is a product of Hebrew life and thought and represents a definitely individual interpretation of Hebrew tradition.[5] Thus no matter what parallels one may find with other cultures, they do not provide any definite conclusions as to their having been a profound influence on Qoheleth's thought. It therefore seems that Qoheleth is best understood in relation to the national tradition which he inherited.

The great question that remains to be answered concerns the intention Qoheleth had in mind when he prepared this document. It is apparent that Qoheleth wished to call his readers away from their futile attempts of struggling with life to the enjoyment of life

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[4]In his article "The Pessimism of Ecclesiastes," (p. 336) Charles Forman holds that there are two possibilities as to the source of Qoheleth's thought: "Greek influences, which were sullying the clear waters of Jewish orthodoxy or Qoheleth was true to oriental spirit and thought." Forman holds Qoheleth was true to Hebrew thought.

[5]Gordis, Koheleth, p. 87.

as God's gift. This is in line with the wisdom tradition itself, which seems to have been concerned with steering through life rather than mastering it. For wisdom, at its best, was too well aware of its own limitations to attempt to master life. Thus if this is the central concern of wisdom, Qoheleth cannot be said to be standing against the current of wisdom. Yet, perhaps Qoheleth was standing against the current, i.e., the popular current of the misuse of wisdom.

It has already been pointed out in Chapter Two that in the prophets there is evidence that there had been a misuse of wisdom in Israel. What this means is that there was a certain class of politically oriented individuals, known as the wise, who believed that they knew how to master life and provide good counsel. It is also possible that this group of the wise even used the Mosaic Law to validate their wisdom and understand the ways of God. As noted, the prophets took a hard line against these individuals, who were wise only in their own eyes, holding that their wisdom would be turned to foolishness. The prophets also noted that God's ways were not within man's reach (Isa. 55:8f.).

Qoheleth seems to take a similar stand against wisdom by holding that try as one may he cannot find out the ways of God or find ultimate wisdom (3:11, 8:17). With the incoming of Greek Philosophy and thought many Jewish people turned to Hellenistic methods to gain

wisdom from the Mosaic Law through didactic conversation and debate to clarify the divine will.[6] Perhaps then Hellenistic influence lead to a misuse of wisdom, and Qoheleth represents a polemic against this influence. It therefore seems plausible that Qoheleth's concern was to call wisdom back to its rightful place, that of steering through life rather than seeking to master it.[7]

A second possible intention that Qoheleth could have had in mind was to encourage the people of his day to accept their current situation. As was pointed out, after the exile the Jews were disillusioned by the condition of their state. For the Jews of the fourth century there was only a vague remembrance of the former temple and its glory which most likely became greater as it receeded farther into the past. The people were perhaps anxious for political autonomy since they remained subject to the Persian authorities. Thus it is understandable that the remnant of Israel would look back on the past glory of such monarchs as David and Solomon with a desire for its revival.

It is likely that such conditions persisted into the third century, for even though the Jews were no longer under the Persians they had come under the control

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[6]Lohse, p. 21.

[7]Johnston, p. 28

of the Greeks. History testifies to the fact that there were messianic expectations and a desire for political antonomy. If indeed during the time of Qoheleth there was a longing for the lost glory of Israel, it seems that he may have addressed himself to this problem. The reason for this suggestion is that the author purposely reflects the past glory of Solomon (2:1-11), as being lost by Solomon's son Rehoboam (2:18,19 cf. I Kgs. 12). Qoheleth's theme on the shortness of life and the uncertainty of the future, led him to exhort his readers to enjoy life as they received it. It seems that he may reflect his purpose as he states: "Say not, 'why were the former days better than these?' For it is not from wisdom that you ask this." (7:10). He, therefore, seems to be confronting those who dwelt on Israel's past glories, exhorting them not to dwell on the past but to enjoy their present lives as well as could be done. Opposed to any militant ideas of regaining Israel's lost glory, he urges his readers to submit to God (5:1-7) and the ruling authorities (8:2). If this was part of Qoheleth's intention it seems that he is consistent with the character of later Jewish Temple leaders, who were concerned in New Testament times that there be no trouble with the Roman authorities (cf. John 11:47f.).

It thus seems possible that even though Qoheleth was distressed by the injustices that were present, he believed it was better to live with these injustices

than to revolt. Qoheleth seems to take the stand that Israel's glory is past and the Jews must accept their current situation which could always be worse. The future, at best, is uncertain.

There is no way to know for certain Qoheleth's intention and what, if any, things he was confronting. It is quite likely that he was concerned to confront an abuse of wisdom; and it seems that he does reflect the political conditions of his time. Yet, what one can know with some confidence is that if Qoheleth is interpreted in a responsible way, he is neither a cynic, tragic pessimist nor skeptic. His outlook on life is wholly realistic and consistent with Old Testament theology. Qoheleth's primary purpose is to encourage joy in life rather than desperation.

For Qoheleth joy is the divine imperative, for this is the theme to which he constantly returns. One may note from Wright's outline of Qoheleth that the emphasis is on enjoyment of life rather than mastery of it.[8] It has been previously noted that this is the only realistic conclusion to which one may come. It is to Qoheleth's credit that after seriously wrestling with evil he resigns himself to enjoy the life which God has given him. This is especially the case as one considers the fatalistic conclusions of Egyption and Babylonian

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[8]Ibid., p. 18.

works, with which Qoheleth was most likely familiar. Yet even as Qoheleth had to deal concretely with the problem of evil, he still felt one could find happiness from God, which would keep him from dwelling on the uncertainties of life (5:20).[9]

One might believe Qoheleth's concept of God is hardly orthodox. Yet he may be more orthodox than one might believe. For all that Qoheleth will affirm concerning God is that in His creative power and sovereignty God has given men the innate desire for happiness.[10] Qoheleth also affirms that God encourages righteousness (11:9). It therefore seems that Qoheleth urges joy in life tempered by reverence for God. In this respect Qoheleth in no way sounds unorthodox in his view of God, for other than these things Qoheleth notes that God's activities are a total mystery (8:16f.). Qoheleth believes that no man is in the place to question God. Thus Qoheleth believes one should submit to God without questioning divine justice.[11] Again, in comparison to other cultures of the Ancient Near East this is to Qoheleth's credit, for other such documents place the blame for evil on divine activity. Even the book of Job questions the justice of God more than Qoheleth.

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[9]Ginsberg, "The Structure and Contents of the Book of Koheleth," p. 142.

[10]Gordis, Poets, Prophets and Sages, p. 339.

[11]Hengel, 1:120.

Roland Murphy notes that it is in this area that Qoheleth is reduced to faith; for even though man cannot see God's judgement or intervention into worldly affairs, Qoheleth says, "this is God's way of testing man." (3:18).[12]

In respect to Qoheleth's view that man cannot know the ways of God he comes close to the New Testament view of God. For, one may note that the gospel of John holds a similar view of God and man's inability to know His ways (cf. Jn. 3:8).[13] He is also in line with the teachings of Jesus in holding that one should enjoy life as a gift from God rather than being concerned for the future, which is uncertain (cf. Matt. 6:34). It seems that Qoheleth is also in agreement with the teachings of Jesus and Paul in that he does not speculate on life after death but says "Who knows?" (3:21). In this respect when speaking of life after death Jesus and Paul did not speculate but left the people to faith (cf. I Cor. 15:44; Mk. 12:25).[14]

It would not be fair in judging the thought of Qoheleth to spiritualize his writings, nor would it be fair to label this book as a pessimistic treatise. Qoheleth can only be adequately understood in terms

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[12]Murphy, "The Pensees of Coheleth," p. 189.

[13]J. Edgar Bruns, "Some Reflections on Coheleth and John," The Catholic Biblical Quarterly 25 (October 1963):414-16.

[14]Howard N. Bream, "Life Without Resurrection: Two Perspectives from Qoheleth," in A Light unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob M. Myers,

of his tradition. It has been demonstrated that Qoheleth knew of and made full use of Hebrew tradition. While it is true that Qoheleth does not mention the Law of Moses it is also true that he does not refute it. Moreover, there seem to be strong allusions to it in the text and he forthrightly makes use of the Law's prologue (Gen. 1-11). One should also keep in mind that when he points to situations in which evil is dominant, he is merely making observations, which individuals at any time may also make. These observations also add force to Qoheleth's argument concerning the unknowability of God and the world. When viewed along with the literature from other cultures one may find interesting parallels to Qoheleth, which some scholars hold explains Qoheleth's skepticism. But of the many parallels that have been found between Qoheleth and the literature from other cultures, there remains a great difference in that Qoheleth resigns himself to enjoy life under the fear of God, rather than resigning himself to death or unrestrained sensualism. One should also keep in mind that it is not uncommon for different cultures to develop parallel thoughts independently of each other. Thus Qoheleth is found to be true to Hebrew tradition, while attempts to connect Qoheleth with foreign traditions are difficult to maintain.

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eds. H. N. Bream, R. D. Heim, and C. A. Moore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974), pp. 57-64.

When one reads Qoheleth against his background and tradition, some light will be shed upon his intention. In light of his background and use of tradition his intention is clearly to exhort his readers to enjoy life rather than futilely to attempt to master it. Until Qoheleth is read and viewed against his background, this book will remain an enigma and open to atomistic interpretation. Yet when Qoheleth is understood in terms of his use of tradition, readers, particularly in this age of stress and uncertainty, will find that his book retains a practical message that is applicable to people of all ages.

APPENDIX

Lower case letters such as (a) indicate additional comments on the Hebrew text concerning idioms and word plays that cannot be appreciated in a translation.

A TRANSLATION OF QOHELETH

1:1The words of Qoheleth,(a) son of David, king in Jerusalem.

2Vanity of vanities says Qoheleth, vanity of vanities, all is vanity. 3What profit is there for man in all his labor which he labors under the sun? 4A generation comes and a generation goes, but the land remains forever. 5And the sun rises and the sun sets and in the direction of its place eagerly rises there. 6Going toward the south and changing toward the north the wind comes over its circuit and returns. 7All the streams lead to the sea, and the sea is not filled. To the place the streams lead, in that direction they continue. 8All things are wearying, man is not able to tell of it. The

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(a)The name Qoheleth, which is usually translated "the preacher" is generally thought to come from the stem "Qahal," which means to assemble or congregate. Qoheleth has therefore been translated as "the preacher," one who would assemble the people. There are other possible translations of Qoheleth such as the "Philosopher" (Good News Bible). Edward Ullendorff, in his article "The Meaning of קהלת," Vetus Testamentum 12 (April 1962):215, has noted that Qoheleth may be an Aramaic word that should be translated "the arguer." Another possible translation has been pointed out by W. E. Staples, p. 143. Staples believes Qoheleth is best translated as "the one who meditates." It would then be to the advantage of the reader to keep in mind the possible meanings of this name, which is not unambiguous to say the least. Any of these translations may fit nicely into the text and add to its richness.

eye is not filled by seeing and the ear is not satisfied by hearing. 9What exists will exist and what is done, will be done. Nothing is new under the sun. 10There is something of which one will say, "Behold this is new!" It already existed in the ages before. 11There is no remembrance of former things and also of the things after that there will be no remembrance from those who will then be.

12I Qoheleth have been king over Israel in Jerusalem, 13and I gave my heart to seek and explore, in wisdom, over all that has been done under Heaven. It is an evil task, God has given to the sons of man to afflict them. 14I have seen all the activities which are done under the sun, and behold everything is vanity and a shepherding(b) of wind. 15What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted. 16I said to myself, "Behold I have become great and have increased wisdom over all those which were before me over Jerusalem; and my heart has seen an abundance of wisdom and knowledge." 17And I gave my heart to know

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(b)Most translations render this passage as "striving after wind." The word which is translated "striving" is difficult to translate, for it may be either Hebrew or Aramaic. The meaning of the Hebrew word is "to pasture," thus it is here translated as "shepherding." In any case the basic meaning remains, which deals with the impossibility of grasping the wind. It is also interesting to note that the word for wind (ruach) is used for spirit or breath as well (cf. 3:19). Thus it seems that when Qoheleth speaks of chasing after the wind he is comparing this to man's futile attempts to master life.

wisdom and knowledge, madness and folly. I knew that this also is a shepherding of wind. 18For in much wisdom is much sorrow and the one increasing knowledge is increasing pain.

2:1I said to myself, "come now, I will test you with rejoicing and with happiness." And behold this too was vanity. 2Of laughter I said to myself, "It is madness." and of rejoicing, "What does this accomplish?" 3I investigated with my heart how to stimulate my body with wine, and my heart was concerned with wisdom, and to take hold of folly until I could see what is good for the sons of man in that which they do under the heavens, the numbered days of their lives. 4I made great works; I built buildings, and planted vineyards. 5I made gardens and parks, and I planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. 6I made for myself ponds of water to moisten a forest of growing trees. 7I purchased male and female slaves and I had sons of slaves born in my house. I also had a herd of cattle and sheep, more than those before me in Jerusalem. 8I also collected for myself silver and gold and the property of kings and provinces. I had for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of the sons of man, many mistresses. 9And I became great and I increased more than they who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom stood by me. 10And all that my eyes demanded I did not keep from them. I did not withhold from my heart any merriment,

and my heart rejoiced in all my labor, for this was my portion from all my labor. 11And I turned to all my work which my hands had done and the labor that I had done, and behold all is vanity and a shepherding of wind, and there was no profit under the sun. 12And I turned to consider wisdom, madness and folly, for what will the man do who comes after the king, but that which has already been done?

13And I myself, saw that there is more profit in wisdom than in folly just as light is brighter than darkness. 14The eyes of the wise man are in his head but the fool walks in darkness. And I perceived that one fate will befall each. 15And I said to myself, "the fate of the fool will even befall me. Why then have I been wise?" And I said to myself, "even this is vanity." 16For there is no remembrance of the wise or the fool, to the extent that in the coming days all will be forgotten. And how the wise man will die as the fool! 17And I hated living, for the work which was done under the sun was grievous to me, because all is vanity and a shepherding of wind.

18And I hated all my labor(c) which I had done under the sun, because I must leave it to a man who will be

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(c)This word (amal) which is usually translated as labor or toil may have another meaning. H. L. Ginsberg, Studies in Koheleth, p. 3, holds that "amal" means not "to toil" but "to gain or earn by toil." Such a meaning is not inconsistent with Qoheleth's theme dealing with what a man receives from his toil.

after me. 19And who knows if he will be wise or foolish, yet he will rule over all for which I have toiled, and for which I have been wise under the sun. Even this is vanity. 20And I turned my heart over to dispair over all the toil which I had done under the sun. 21For there is a man who toiled in wisdom, knowledge and skill, and he will hand over his portion to a man who has not toiled with them. This also is vanity and a great evil. 22For what does a man receive in all his labor and striving which he labors under the sun? 23For all his days his toil is sad and grievous, even at night his heart does not rest. Even this is vanity.

24Nothing is better for a man than to eat and drink and to see goodness in his labor. Even this I have seen is from the hand of God. 25For who can eat or find enjoyment without Him? 26For to a man who is good in his sight He grants wisdom, knowledge and joy, but to the sinner He grants toil, to gather and heap up, to give to the one who is good before God. Even this is vanity and a shepherding of wind.

3:1There is a time and a season for every matter
under heaven;
2a time to give birth and a time to die;
a time to plant and a time to root out what is
planted;
3a time to kill and a time to heal;
a time to tear down and a time to build;

4 a time to weep and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn and a time to dance;
5 a time to cast away stones and a time to collect
stones;
a time to embrace and a time not to embrace;
6 a time to seek and a time to lose;
a time to keep and a time to throw away;
7 a time to tear to pieces and a time to sew
together;
a time to be silent and a time to speak;
8 a time to love and a time to hate;
a time for war and a time for peace.
9 What profit is there to the laborer in that which he has labored? 10 I have seen the toil which God gave to the sons of men to aflict them. 11 Everything, He has made appropriate in its time, and He has placed eternity in their hearts, yet man will not find out the activity which God has done from the beginning to the end. 12 I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in their lifetime. 13 And also every man who will enjoy and drink and see good in all his toil, this is given from God. 14 I know that everything which God does will be to eternity, He leaves nothing to be added to it or seperated from it, and God has worked so that they will fear before Him. 15 That which is was long ago, and that which will be existed long ago, and God seeks that which is past.

16 And further I have seen under the sun that in the place of justice there exists wickedness and abiding in the place of the righteous, the wicked. 17 I said in my heart, "God will judge the righteous and the wicked, because there is a time for every matter and activity." 18 I said in my heart concerning the sons of man, "God has tested them to show that they are beasts in themselves." 19 For the fate of the sons of man and the fate of the beasts is the same fate; as one dies so the other dies. And each has the same breath and there is no profit for man over the beast, for all is vanity.(d) They all go to the same place, all were from the dust and all return to the dust. 21 Who knows that the breath of the sons of man ascends upward and the breath of the beasts descends down into the earth? 22 And I saw there is nothing better for man than to be joyful in his activity, for this is his inheritance. For who will bring him to see what will be after him?

4:1 And I turned and saw all the oppressions which are done under the sun. And behold the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to have compassion on them. And the oppressors had power, and there was no

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(d) It is interesting to note that in this verse the word which means death is "mot" and the word used for profit is "motar." This is the only occurrence of the word "motar" for profit, for Qoheleth usually uses "yetron." It thus seems that Qoheleth is playing on the meaning of "mot" and its similarity to "motar," by which he implies that death is man's end and he has no advantage over the beasts.

one to have compassion on them. [2]And I praised the dead, who are already dead, more than the living who are still alive; [3]But better than both is the one who until now has not lived, who has not seen the evil activity under the sun. [4]And I saw that every labor and skill is because of man's envy of his neighbor. This is vanity and a shepherding of wind.

[5]The fool folds his hands and consumes his flesh.

[6]Better is a hand full of rest than two fists full of labor and shepherding of wind.

[7]And I turned and saw vanity under the sun. [8]There is one who has no dependent or a son and no brother, and there is no end to all his labor. His eyes are never satisfied with riches, nor does he ask: "And for whom am I toiling and depriving my self of good things?" Even this is vanity and an unpleasent business. [9]Two are better than one because they receive a better reward for their work. [10]For if they fall, the other will raise his companion. But woe to the one who falls down without a companion to raise him up! [11]Even if they lie down, two will keep warm, but how will one keep warm? [12]And if one may overcome one, two will be able to stand against him, and the cord of three parts is not quickly broken.

[13]Better is a poor and wise young man than an old and stupid king, who is no longer able to be advised. [14]For he came forth from the house of the rebellious to

be king, even though he was born poor in the kingdom.
15 I have seen all the living under the sun go with the
second lad who will stand in his stead. 16 There is no
end to all the people, to all who were following him
and will not be pleased with him; for even this is
vanity and a shepherding of wind.

17 Guard your step as you go to the house of God,
and come near to hear rather than to offer the sacrifice
of fools. For they do not perceive that they are doing
evil.(e) 5:1 Do not be quick with your mouth and let not
your heart be hasty to bring up a matter before God.
For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore
let your words be few. 2 For the dream comes in much toil
and the noise of a fool in many words. 3 When you vow
a vow to God, do not be slow in paying it, for He has
no delight in fools. Pay that which you vow! 4 Better
not to vow than to vow and not pay. 5 Do not allow your
mouth to cause you to sin; and do not say before the
messenger, "it was a mistake." Why should God be angry
over your speech and destroy the work of your hands?
6 For a multitude of dreams and increased words are
useless. Rather fear God.

(e) Most translations begin chapter 5 at verse 17 of chapter 4. The reason for this is that some older texts have only 16 verses in chapter 4 and begin chapter 5 with verse 17. Both the Septuagint and the Masoretic text place verse 17 in chapter 4.

7 If you see oppression of the poor and violation of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be astonished over this matter; for the high official has keeping watch over him a higher official and over them higher officials. 8 And a cultivated field is a profit for the king and all the land.

9 He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor whoever loves plenty with its profit. Even this is vain. 10 When abundance of goods increase, consumers increase. And what advantage is there for the owners, but to see them with their eyes. 11 The sleep of the laborer is pleasent whether he has much or little to eat. But, the surfeit of the wealthy will not let him sleep. 12 There is a grievous evil I have seen under the sun: riches kept by their possessor to his destruction. 13 And he lost the riches through a bad investment; and a son was born to him, and he was without anything in his hand. 14 As he was born naked from the womb of his mother, so he will go as he came; and he will take nothing of his labor which he can carry in his hand. 15 And even this is a grievous evil: just as a man is born so he will die. What profit is there for him who toils for the wind? 16 Even all his days he eats in darkness, and sorrow, suffering and anger are increased.

17 Behold, this is what I have seen to be good and excellent: to eat and to drink and to see good in all one's labor which he does under the sun, the number

of the days of his life, which God has given to him for his portion. 18Every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and has given him power to enjoy them and to be cheerful in his portion and to enjoy his labor, this is a gift from God. 19For he will not long remember the days of his life, for God occupies him with the joy of his heart.

6:1There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is heavy upon men. 2A man to whom God gives wealth, riches and honor and his soul lacks nothing of all that he desires; but God has not empowered him to enjoy them, for an alien devoures them. This is vanity and an evil affliction. 3If a man begets one hundred children and lives many years and the days of his years are many; but his soul is not full of good things and he is not buried, I say the untimely birth is better than him. 4For it comes in vanity and it goes in darkness and in darkness its name is concealed; 5it did not even see the sun and it did not know anything; yet it has more rest than the other. 6And if he lives a thousand years twice and does not enjoy good things, do not all go to one place?

7All of man's labor is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied. 8For what advantage does the wise have over the fool? What advantage does the poor have in understanding how to walk before the living? 9Better is the sight of the eyes than the desire of

the soul. Even this is vanity and a shepherding of wind.

10 That which is, has already been named, and it is known what man is and that he is not able to dispute with one who is mightier than him. 11 For there are many words to increase vanity. What then is the advantage for man? 12 For who knows what is good for a man during the number of the days of his vain life? And he will spend them as a shadow. Who then will declare to a man what will be after him under the sun?

7:1 A good name is better than good ointment;
and the day of death is better than the day of birth.

2 It is better to go into the house of mourning
than to go into the house of feasting;
for this is the end of all men,
and the living will take it to heart.

3 Sorrow is better than laughter,
for when the face is sad the heart will be cheerful.

4 The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning and the heart of the foolish is in the house of rejoicing.

5 It is better to listen to the rebuke of a wise man than to listen to the song of fools;

6 For as is the noise of thorns under the kettle,
so is the laughter of the fool;

and even this is vanity.

7 For oppression will make a wise man mad,
and a bribe ruins the heart.

8 The end of a matter is better than the beginning; patience of spirit is better than pride of spirit.

9 Do not be hasty in spirit to be angry,
for anger resides in the bosom of fools.

10 Do not say: "Why were the former days better than these?" For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.

11 Wisdom with an inheritance is good, and an advantage to those who see the sun.

12 For the protection of wisdom is as the protection of money; and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of its owner.

13 Behold the activity of God. Who can straighten that which He has bent? 14 On the good day be in comfort and in the day of adversity, behold: God has made one as well as the other inorder that man will not find out what will be after him.

15 I have seen everything in my days of vanity: there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who extends his life in his wickedness. 16 Do not be abundantly righteous and do not be too wise. Why should you destroy yourself?

17 Do not be too wicked and do not be foolish. Why should
you die before your time? 18 It is better that you grasp
this and not withhold your hand from that, for he who
fears God will come out of them all.

19 Wisdom strengthens a wise man more than ten
rulers who are in a city. 20 For there is not a righteous
man in the land who does good and never sins. 21 Do not
take to heart every word that is spoken lest you hear
your servent cursing you. 22 For you know in your heart
that many times you cursed others.

23 All this I tested in wisdom. I said, "I will
be wise," but it was far from me. 24 What has been is
mysterious and unsearchable. Who can discover it? 25 I
turned my heart to know and explore and to seek wisdom
and an explanation, and to know the wickedness of folly
and the folly of madness.

26 And I found more bitter than death the woman
whose heart is nets and snares, and her hands are bonds.
He who is good in God's sight will escape from her, but
the sinner will be caught by her. 27 Behold this I have
found, says Qoheleth, adding one thing to another to
find the sum, 28 for which my mind has searched, but I
have not found. One man in a thousand I have found, but
I have not found a woman among all these. 29 Behold,
only this I have found: God made mankind upright, but
they have sought out many devices.

8:1 Who is like the wise man?

And who knows the interpretation of a matter?
Wisdom illumines his face,
and causes his stern face to change.

[2]Keep the command of the king on account of the oath before God. [3]Do not be hasty to leave the king; do not be envolved in an evil matter, for he will do what ever pleases him. [4]The word of the king is authoritative, and who will say, "what are you doing?" [5]He who keeps a command will not come into evil and the wise heart knows the time and proceedure. [6]For to every matter there is a time and proceedure, though a man's troubles are multiplied upon him. [7]For he does not know what will be; for who will declare to him what will be. [8]Man has no power to restrain the wind and there is no power over the day of death; and there is no dismissal in war, and godlessness will not deliver those who practice it. [9]All this I have seen and gave my heart to every activity that is done under the sun, when a man rules over another man to his hurt.

[10]Then I saw the godless buried; they had entered and came out of the holy place, and they will be forgotten in the city where they had done thus. Even this is vanity.(f) [11]Because a sentence is not quickly

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(f)J. J. Serrano in his article, "I saw the wicked buried (Eccl. 8:10)," The Catholic Biblical Quarterly 16 (April 1954):169-70, notes a variant translation of this verse is "And I saw the wicked approach, they entered and went out of the Holy place and they were praised in the city because they acted thus."

executed against an evil deed, the hearts of the sons of man are fully given to do evil. 12Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know it will be good with those who fear God, because they fear before him. 13And it will not be good for the godless, and he will not prolong his days as a shadow because he does not fear before God.

14There is a vanity which is done in the land, that there are righteous men who die in their activities as the wicked, and there are wicked men who die in their activities as the righteous. I said, "Even this is vanity." 15And I praised pleasure, for there is nothing better for a man under the sun than to eat and to drink and to rejoice; and this will accompany him in his labor through the days of his life which God has given him under the sun.

16When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the labor which is done upon the land, even though one's eyes do not see sleep day or night; then I saw all the work of God, for man will not be able to discover the work which is done under the sun. Even though man will toil to search, he will not discover. And even if the wise man says he knows, he will not be able to discover.

9:1For I have given my heart to all this and to examine all this, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God. Whether it is love or hatred man does not know. Anything awaits them.

[2]There is one fate for all, for the righteous, and for the wicked, for the good, for the clean and for the unclean, for the one who sacrifices and for the one who does not sacrifice. As it is to the good so it is to the sinner; as it is to the one who swears so it is to those who are afraid to swear. [3]This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, for one fate comes to all; and even the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil, and folly is in their minds during their lives, and after that they go to the dead. [4]For whoever is joined to the living there is hope, for a live dog is better than a dead lion. [5]For the living know that they will die, but the dead do not know anything and they no longer have a reward for their memory will be forgotten. [6]For their love and hate and zeal has already perished, and they no longer have a portion in all that is done under the sun.

[7]Go eat your bread in rejoicing and drink your wine with a merry heart, for already God is pleased with your labor. [8]At all times let your clothes be white and let not oil be lacking upon your head. [9]Enjoy life with the woman whom you love, all the days of your vain life, which He has given you under the sun, for this is your portion in life and in your labor at which you have labored under the sun. [10]All that your hand can find to do, do with all your power; for there is no labor and reasoning and knowledge and wisdom in sheol where you are going.

11 I turned and saw under the sun that the race
is not to the swift, and the battle is not to the mighty,
and food is not to the wise, and wealth is not to the
discerning, and favor is not to the knowledgeable, for
time and fate will happen to them all. 12 For man does
not know his time; like fish which are caught in an
evil net, and like birds caught in a snare, so the sons
of men are ensnared in a time of evil which falls on
them suddenly.

13 Even this I saw, wisdom under the sun, and
it seemed great to me. 14 There was a small city with
a few men in it and a great king besieged it and built
up great siege works. 15 And a poor wise man was in it
and delivered the town in his wisdom. Yet no man remem-
bered the poor man. 16 And I said, "wisdom is better than
strength," yet the wisdom of the poor is despised and
his words are not heard.

17 The words of the wise heard in quiet are better
than the outcry of a ruler among fools. 18 Wisdom is
better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys
much good.

10:1 Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment
loathsome; so a little foolishness is heavier
than wisdom and honor.

2 A wise man's heart directs him to the right;
but a fool's heart directs him to the left.

3And even along the road, as the fool walks his heart is lacking in understanding, and he says to all he is a fool.

4If the anger of the ruler rises against you, remain in your place, for calmness abates great transgressions. 5There is an evil which I have seen under the sun as an error which goes forth from before the ruler: 6folly is in many high places and noble men are seated in lowly places. 7I have seen servants upon horses and nobles walking as servants upon the ground.

8One who digs a pit will fall into it;
and one who breaks through a wall will be
bitten by a serpent.

9He who quarries stones will be hurt by them;
he who splits wood will be endangered
by them.

10If the tool is blunt and he does not sharpen the edge, then he must exert more strength, and wisdom gives prosperity.

11If the serpent bites because he has not been
charmed, there is no profit to the charmer.

12The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious,
but the speech of a fool will consume him.

13The beginning of the words of their mouth is
folly and the end of their speech is evil
madness;

14And the fool multiplies words.

No man knows what will be, for who will tell
him what is to be after him?
15 The fool's toil wearies him so that he does
not know how to walk to town.
16 Woe to you O land when your king is a child
and your princes feast in the morning!
17 Happy are you O land when your king is a son
of nobles, and your princes eat at the proper
time for strength, and not for drunkenness!
18 Through sloth the frame work sinks,
and through laziness of hands the house leaks.
19 For joy food is prepared, and wine will make
lives joyful, and money will answer everything.
20 Even in your thoughts do not curse a king, and
in the chamber of your bed do not curse a rich
man; for birds of heaven will carry the sound
and a deity, possessing wings, will make the
matter known.
11:1 Cast your bread over the surface of the
waters, for in a number of days you will find
it.
2 Give a portion to seven and even to eight,
for you do not know what evil will come upon
the land.
3 If the clouds are full they will empty rain
upon the land; and if a tree falls toward the
south or toward the north, at the place where

the tree falls there it will lie.

4He who watches the wind will not sow,
and he who looks at the clouds will not reap.

5Just as you do not know how the spirit enters as bodies in the womb are formed, so you do not know the activity of God who does all things. 6Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening do not rest your hand; for you do not know which one will prosper, this or that, or perhaps both will be good.

7The light is pleasant, and it is good for the eyes to see the sun. 8For if a man lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; yet remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. All that comes is vanity.

9Be joyful O young man in your youth and let your heart be pleasent in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and the vision of your eyes; but know that upon all these, God will bring you into judgement. 10Remove sorrow from your heart and put away evil from your body, for childhood and youth are vanity.

12:1Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of evil come and the years arrive, when you will say I have no delight in them; 2before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark and clouds return after the rain; 3in the day when those who watch the house tremble and the mighty stagger, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through

the windows become dark, [4]and the doors in the street are shut; and the sound of the mill is low, and one rises to the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are low. [5]Further, they are afraid of a high place and of terrors in the way; and the almond tree blooms, and the locust drags itself along, and the caperberry is ineffective, because man goes to his eternal home and the mourners go about in the street; [6]before the silver cord is broken and the golden vessel is crushed and the vessel upon the fountain is shattered and the wheel at the cistern is broken; [7]and the dust will return to the land as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.(ε) [8]Vanity of vanities says Qoheleth, everything is vanity.

[9]Qoheleth was also a wise man and taught the people knowledge and tested and investigated and arranged many proverbs. [10]Qoheleth sought to find pleasing words

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(ε)John Sawyer in his article, "The Ruined House in Ecclesiastes 12: A Reconstruction of the Original Parable," Journal of Biblical Literature 94 (December 1975):520-24, holds that the allegory of old age does not fit into the theme of Qoheleth, which deals with the uncertainty of life. Sawyer holds that this is best understood as a parable about a ruined house. In his argument Sawyer has offered a variant translation that deals not with old age, but a ruined house. The ruined house represents the futility of man's achievements; and Sawyer holds this fits into the text better than the traditional translation. The validity of this argument remains to be seen. The ruined house parable is based on speculation as to the original text and makes Qoheleth's point no better than does the allegory of old age. The ruined house parable also does not fit in the text after Qoheleth's admonition to enjoy youth (11:9-12:1) as does the allegory of old age. One should also note that the allegory of old age is consistent with traditional Hebrew thought (cf. II Sam. 19:34,35).

and to write words of truth correctly. 11The words of wise men are as goads and as driven nails, and they are given by one shepherd. 12Besides these my son take warning. Of making many books there is no end and much study is wearying to the flesh.

13The end of the matter, when all has been heard: fear God and keep his commandments, for this is to all men. 14For every activity, God will enter into judgement, upon every secret thing whether good or evil.

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