

Notes on Ecclesiastes

2024 Edition
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Introduction

TITLE

The title of this book in the Hebrew text is all of verse 1. The Septuagint (Greek) translation (third century B.C.) gave it the name "Ekklesiastes," from which the English title is a transliteration. This Greek word is related to *ekklesia*, meaning "assembly." "Ekklesiastes" is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *qohelet* that several English translations have rendered "Preacher." Several other English translations read "Teacher." The NEB has "Speaker."¹ The Hebrew word designates a leader who speaks before an assembly of people. As such, this book is a sermon.² A more literal translation of *qohelet* would be "Gatherer," as the gatherer of people to an assembly, or the gatherer of thoughts or observations.

WRITER AND DATE

"... there is scarcely one aspect of the book, whether of date, authorship or interpretation, that has not been the subject of wide difference of opinion."³

The commentators sometimes treat the Hebrew word *qohelet* (1:1-2, 12; 7:27; 12:8-10) as a proper name.⁴ However, the fact that the article is present on the Hebrew word in 12:8, and perhaps in 7:27, seems to indicate that *qohelet* is a title.

Internal references point to Solomon as this preacher (cf. 1:1, 12—2:26; 2:4-9; 12:9). Evidently he used the name "Qohelet" as a pen name. Both

¹NEB refers to *The New English Bible with the Apocrypha*.

²J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, 3:143.

³Robert Gordis, *Koheleth—The Man and His World*, p. 4.

⁴E.g., *ibid.*, p. 5.

Jewish and Christian interpreters believed that Solomon was the writer until the sixteenth century. Martin Luther was apparently the first notable scholar to explicitly deny Solomonic authorship.¹ With the rise of literary and historical Bible criticism, a widespread rejection of Solomonic authorship set in.

"... whenever the problem of canonicity came up in the early Christian centuries as well as in the later ones, its place in the canon was never challenged on account of its authorship and date of writing, but rather because of its alleged agnostic content, and in each case, upon careful investigation, these arguments were rightly set aside and its canonicity was upheld."²

Rejection of Solomonic authorship rests mainly on linguistic factors (vocabulary and syntax) that some scholars feel were more characteristic of a time much later than Solomon's, namely, about 450-250 B.C.³ Conservative scholars have refuted this linguistic argument.⁴ Several more or less conservative scholars have rejected Solomonic authorship.⁵ Yet there is no information in the Bible that would eliminate Solomon as the writer.

"... the tradition that King Solomon is the great Biblical author is no longer airily dismissed as a figment of the folk-imagination."⁶

However, this same author wrote later:

"The tradition of Solomonic authorship ... has been surrendered today by all scholars."⁷

¹Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 33.

²Sanford C. Yoder, *Poetry of the Old Testament*, p. 356.

³See J. Stafford Wright, "Ecclesiastes," in *Psalms-Song of Songs*, vol. 5 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, pp. 1139-43; Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. xvix-xxiii.

⁴See *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, s.v. "Ecclesiastes," by Gleason L. Archer, 2:184-90; and idem, "The Linguistic Evidence for the Date of 'Ecclesiastes,'" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 12:3 (Summer 1969):167-81.

⁵These include Franz Delitzsch, E. W. Hengstenberg, H. C. Leupold, Edward J. Young, David A. Hubbard, Michael A. Eaton, Tremper Longman III, and C. G. Bartholomew.

⁶Gordis, p. 20.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 59.

"The difficulty is that the linguistic data show that Ecclesiastes does not fit into any known section of the history of the Hebrew language. ... Our conclusion must be that the language of Ecclesiastes does not at present provide an adequate resource for dating."¹

Assuming that Solomon wrote the book in its entirety, he must have done so during his lifetime and probably during his reign (971-931 B.C.). It has seemed probable to some Jewish and Christian scholars that he may have written Song of Solomon in his youth, Proverbs in his middle life, and Ecclesiastes in his old age (cf. 2:1-11; 11:9; 12:1).² This theory rests on the contents of the three inspired Bible books that he evidently wrote, specifically, clues in these books about the age of their writer.

"Ecclesiastes is best placed after his apostasy, when both his recent turmoil and repentance were still fresh in his mind."³

"... he conceals his name *Solomon, peaceable*, because by his sin he had brought trouble upon himself and his kingdom, had broken his peace with God, and therefore was no more worthy of that name."⁴

An alternative view of authorship is that the book consists of the writings of two individuals: a narrator, and Qohelet (who was not Solomon but pretended to be Solomon).⁵ According to this view, an unknown wisdom teacher introduced (1:1-11) Qohelet's monologue on the meaning of life (1:12—12:8). He then wrote a brief conclusion, calling his son to pursue a proper relationship with God (12:8-14). References to Qohelet appear in the third person in the introduction and conclusion. Thus the book is a framed autobiography. If this literary analysis is correct, the structures of Job and Ecclesiastes are quite similar. Qohelet's speech does not always express what is in harmony with the rest of the Old Testament, as the speeches of Job and his friends do not. It provides a foil for the second

¹Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 19. Paragraph division omitted.

²E.g., Gordis, p. 39; Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, pp. 474-75.

³Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*, p. 31.

⁴Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 791.

⁵Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 279-88; Bartholomew, p. 83. See also H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes*, p. 14.

wise man, the narrator, who uses Qohelet's observations to instruct his son concerning the dangers of skepticism and doubting.

PURPOSE

This book helps the reader develop a God-centered worldview and to recognize the dangers of a self-centered worldview.¹ It does not describe the life of faith or teach what the responsibilities of faith in God are. It also prescribes the limits of human philosophy (cf. 3:11; 8:16-17). The book teaches that people are accountable to God, and that they should avoid self-indulgence, which leads to the exploitation of others for selfish gain.²

"In an age when life often appears chaotic and meaningless, Koheleth has a special message for us, being dedicated to teaching men to love life, accept its limitations, and rejoice in its blessings."³

"Christians may ask how the stress on using and enjoying life tallies with the NT command 'Do not love the world' (1 John 2:15). The answer is that the Teacher (Ecclesiastes) would have agreed fully with John's next statement that 'everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away' (vv. 16-17). One could hardly find a better statement than this of the whole theme of Ecclesiastes (e.g., 2:1-11; 5:10). Life in the world has significance only when man remembers his Creator (12:1).

"There always have been two kinds of teaching about the way to holiness. One is by withdrawal as far as possible from the natural in order to promote the spiritual. The other is to use and transform the natural into the expression of the spiritual. While each kind of teaching has its place, some people need

¹See John E. Johnson, "The Special Relevance of Ecclesiastes for Contemporary Culture," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169:674 (April-June 2012):159-71; and Gordis, pp. 122-32.

²See Robert Laurin, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 585.

³Gordis, p. x.

one emphasis rather than the other. Ecclesiastes definitely teaches the second."¹

"Ecclesiastes does not pretend to preach the Gospel. Rather, it encourages the reader to a God-centered worldview rather than falling victim to frustrations and unanswered questions. None of its contents has to be rejected in the light of the NT. Although the NT revelation is vastly greater than that in Ecclesiastes, the two are not devoid of similarities (e.g., James 4:13-17). Like the people of God in Solomon's time, believers today are subject to the unexpected changes and chances common to mankind. Yet they know that God works through every vicissitude of life. Respecting the future, which for Solomon was shrouded in a shadow land, Christians have the glorious hope of being in the presence of Christ himself (2 Cor 5:6; Phil 1:23)."²

"It seems, then, that the chief aim of the writer is to evaluate all things in order to determine what is most worth while [*sic*]."³

Leupold, who believed that Qohelet lived in the days of Malachi (fifth century B.C.), believed that the purposes of the book are as follows:

"It shows God's people how to meet their difficult problems.

"The best service that can be rendered a man is to divorce him from the things of this world as completely as possible. We call that disillusionment. The author aims to achieve such an end as thoroughly as possible."⁴

"In addition to these two major purposes of the book, which run parallel with the two halves of this book, there is a subsidiary purpose, we believe, which takes account of the

¹Wright, p. 1146.

²Ibid., p. 1148. See also George R. Castellino, "Qohelet and His Wisdom," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968):25-28, reprinted in Roy B. Zuck, ed., *Reflecting with Solomon*, pp. 40-43; Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, pp. 271-79; and Gordis, pp. 122-32.

³Yoder, p. 353.

⁴Leupold, p. 17.

danger which godly men run of falling into the sins of a certain age. This is the purpose of *warning*."¹

Jennings contrasted the New Testament revelation with Qohelet's view of life "under the sun," which is quite dark and dismal:

"We have concluded that we find this book included in the inspired volume for this very purpose, to exalt all 'the new' by its blessed contrast with 'the old.'"²

GENRE

This is a book of Hebrew poetry, specifically, wisdom literature designed to teach the reader. It is also autobiographical, relating the personal experiences of the writer.³ Thus it is a combination of poetry and prose. The writer also included some proverbs in Ecclesiastes. It is more similar to Job and Song of Solomon, however, than it is to Psalms, Proverbs, and Lamentations.⁴ There were two types of wisdom literature that were common in the ancient Near East: proverbial wisdom, and speculative wisdom. Ecclesiastes is an example of speculative wisdom. In speculative wisdom, dialogues (as in Job) and monologues (as in Ecclesiastes) disclose wisdom to the readers.⁵

"*Hokmah* ["wisdom"] may be defined as a realistic approach to the problems of life, including all the practical skills and the technical arts of civilization."⁶

"Whereas Job was a challenger of man and God, Qoheleth—the speaker in Ecclesiastes, shared Job's daring spirit, but his search was for happiness and the enduring quality rather than for personal vindication. He was no challenger and had no contempt for God or man. He, like Job, was a man of wealth, but unlike Job, he had lost nothing tangible. Yet he realized

¹Ibid., pp. 17-18.

²F. C. Jennings, *Old Groans and New Songs*, p. 26.

³See Gordis, p. 75.

⁴See Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, pp. 15-20, for further discussion of the genre.

⁵*The Nelson Study Bible*, p. 1090.

⁶Gordis, pp. 16-17.

that much needed to be gained. Wealth could not soothe a heart that was troubled by the transience of human life, especially when so much else in the world was more enduring than man. The injustice in the world caused him pain, but he did not demand that God provide an explanation, as had his spiritual brother, Job. He accepted the fact, though commending a life of charity to his wealthy students, and waited for the day of judgment. To compensate for the transience of human life, he urged the enjoyment of the present moment, recognizing it as a gift from God.

"Ecclesiastes serves as an appropriate balance for the practical wisdom of Proverbs. Although Qoheleth too had found practical wisdom beneficial, he had come to it along a reflective path. Wisdom aphorisms for Qoheleth were not stones he had gathered along the way but jewels he had mined out of the earth. The quality of his proverbs was the result of his long, frustrating pursuit for happiness and meaning. Although he most likely wrote later than Job and Proverbs, he stood somewhere between them in philosophy and spirit. He represented, in a sense, the mediation of reflective and practical wisdom."¹

OUTLINE²

- I. The introductory affirmation 1:1-11
 - A. Title and theme 1:1-2
 1. The title 1:1
 2. The theme 1:2

¹C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Poetic Books of the Old Testament*, pp. 189-90. See Bartholomew, pp. 61-82, for an extended discussion of Ecclesiastes' genre and literary style.

²Compare the outlines by James S. Reitman, "The Structure and Unity of Ecclesiastes," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154:615 (July-September 1997):317-19; and that of "The Scope and Plan of the Book of Ecclesiastes," *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 29 (July 1859):419-40, reprinted in Zuck, ed., pp. 115-31.

- B. The futility of all human endeavor 1:3-11
 - 1. The vanity of work 1:3
 - 2. The illustrations from life 1:4-11
- II. The futility of work 1:12—6:9
 - A. Personal observations 1:12—2:17
 - 1. Solomon's investigation of human achievement 1:12-15
 - 2. Solomon's evaluation of his investigation of human achievement 1:16-18
 - 3. Solomon's investigation of pleasure 2:1-11
 - 4. Solomon's evaluation of his investigation of pleasure 2:12-17
 - B. General observations 2:18—6:9
 - 1. The outcome of labor 2:18-26
 - 2. Labor and divine providence 3:1—4:3
 - 3. The motivations of labor 4:4-16
 - 4. The perishable fruits of labor 5:1—6:9
- III. The limitations of wisdom 6:10—11:6
 - A. God's sovereign foreordination of all things 6:10-12
 - B. God's inscrutable plan chs. 7—8
 - 1. Adversity and prosperity 7:1-14
 - 2. Righteousness and wickedness 7:15-27
 - 3. The value and limitations of wisdom ch. 8
 - C. Man's ignorance of the future 9:1—11:6
 - 1. The future of the righteous on earth 9:1-10
 - 2. The future of the wise on earth 9:11—10:11
 - 3. The folly of criticism in view of the uncertain future 10:12-20
 - 4. Wise behavior in view of the uncertain future 11:1-6
- IV. The way of wisdom 11:7—12:14
 - A. Joyful and responsible living 11:7—12:7

1. Joyful living 11:7-10
 2. Responsible living 12:1-7
- B. The concluding summary 12:8-14

MESSAGE

I believe that the message of Ecclesiastes is essentially a positive one. This may seem strange since the temporary nature of various human endeavors is such a major theme in this book. Nevertheless, the total statement that Solomon made was positive.

"We have shown [in 3:151-52] that in its final conclusion the book is *not* pessimistic; but it may be freely granted that many of the sentiments expressed in the argumentative processes of the book *are*."¹

"Commentators remain polarized as to whether Ecclesiastes is fundamentally positive, affirming joy, or basically pessimistic. The majority incline to the latter view. In my view scholars continually fall into the trap of leveling Qohelet toward his *hebel* [enigmatic] pole, or toward his *carpe diem* ["seize the day"]—affirmation-of-joy pole. This is to ignore the literary juxtaposition of contradictory views that is central to the book and the life-death tension it embodies."²

Solomon was saying, I believe, that even though every human endeavor lacks *ultimate* value, we should live life in the fear of God (i.e., with the proper recognition of Him). Furthermore we should enjoy life maximally as a gift from God.

Ecclesiastes 12:13 ("Fear God and keep His commandments"³) is very similar to Proverbs 1:7 and 3:5-6. In both of these books, as well as in Job, the fear of God is the prerequisite for successful living here and now. The difference between Ecclesiastes and Proverbs is that in Ecclesiastes the emphasis is on the inability of every human endeavor to provide *ultimate*

¹Baxter, 3:164.

²Bartholomew, p. 93.

³Quotations from the English Bible in these notes are from the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB), 2020 edition, unless otherwise indicated.

value. In Proverbs, the emphasis is on the *comparative* value of living in the fear of God.

Solomon's attitude is very important for us to grasp in order to understand this book. He never lost sight of God's existence. He was not an atheist or even an agnostic. The fact that Solomon kept God in view throughout the book enabled him to see that "all is vanity under the sun." The person who disregards God does not say that. For him, what is under the sun is all that is meaningful. I do not believe that Solomon did everything he said he did in rebellion against God. Some things were acts of disobedience, but many other things were experiments in living designed to discover the relative value of various experiences.

The major revelations of the book are three:

First, Ecclesiastes reveals that every human endeavor lacks ultimate value. All is vanity in that sense. Every human endeavor has only temporary value. Solomon stated this thesis in 1:2. Then he supported his thesis with examples that he took from nature (1:3-11). Next, Solomon appealed to various human achievements to apply his thesis. He did this first by citing his own personal experiments and observations on this subject (1:12—2:17). Then he referred to facts observable by all people that confirm the same conclusion (2:18—6:9). Solomon next showed that every human endeavor lacks ultimate value, by reminding us of the limits of human wisdom (6:10—11:6). He supported these assertions with empirical evidence, namely, what people experience generally in life. God's intentions shall indeed come to fruition. However, man does not know God's plan fully. Therefore, man does not know exactly what will happen.

The second major revelation of this book is that people should live life in the fear of God and enjoy life as much as they can. This is really Solomon's practical conclusion to the truthfulness of the thesis that he proved in 1:3—11:6. Since death is coming, we should enjoy life now, not in disregard for God, but in the fear of God (11:7-8). We should enjoy life in our youth, while at the same time remembering that God will judge our lives (11:9-10). Moreover, we should behave responsibly in our youth, since old age is coming (12:1-7).

The third major revelation of the book is its statement of what true wisdom is (12:13). God intends people to rejoice, but to remember God and to live with recognition of Him (cf. Prov. 3:5-6). Failing to fear God will result in a

life of emptiness. To fear God and live in harmony with His will results in a life of fullness.

Here are some important implications of the teaching of this book:

First, conviction results in conduct that produces character. That is a basic reality of life regardless of what one's convictions may be. When we have a conviction that God exists, and we live under His loving authority, our conduct should be obedience to His will. Furthermore, responsibility and joy will mark our character. However, if we believe that God either does not exist, or He is not worth considering, our conduct will be disregard of His will, and hollowness will mark our character.

Second, to dethrone God is to lose the key to life. We may pursue many human endeavors, but all that we will find is vanity, the lack of ultimate fulfillment. On the other hand, if we enthrone God, we will enter into the fullness of life (cf. John 17:3; Ps. 16:11).

The major lessons of Ecclesiastes are essentially two: recognize God (fear Him), and rejoice in life (smell the roses).¹

"We may summarize the message of Ecclesiastes as the emptiness of life, even at its best, without God, and the richness of life, even at its worst, when lived with God. The book is a book about hope, not despair. It is a book of answers, not a book of questions."²

¹Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:2:57-70.

²Kenneth G. Hanna, *From Moses to Malachi*, p. 314.

Exposition

I. THE INTRODUCTORY AFFIRMATION 1:1-11

The first 11 verses of the book introduce the writer, the theme of the book, and a general defense of the assertion that Solomon made in the theme statement (v. 2).

A. TITLE AND THEME 1:1-2

The first two verses contain the title of the book and its theme.

1. The title 1:1

The author identified himself by his titles (cf. Prov. 1:1). These titles, as well as other references to the writer in the book (cf. 1:12, 16; 2:4-9), point to Solomon more than to any other person.¹ Later he claimed divine authority for this book (12:1).

The term "Preacher" (Heb. *qohelet*, or "Teacher") refers to a wise sage who taught the Israelites God's will. Along with the priests and prophets, the teachers were those through whom God communicated His Word to His people (cf. 12:9; Jer. 18:18; Ezek. 7:26). Teaching typically appeals to the mind, and its main purpose is to impart information, whereas preaching typically appeals to the will, and its main purpose is to promote action. In Israel, the priests were primarily the teachers, and the prophets were primarily the preachers. In most modern church services—and this was true in Israel as well—speakers often seek to combine teaching and preaching. This is especially true in expository preaching.

2. The theme 1:2

"Solomon has put the key to Ecclesiastes right at the front door: 'Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labor which he

¹See Kaiser, pp. 25-29, for a good defense of Solomonic authorship.

taketh under the sun?' (1:2-3). Just in case we missed it, he put the same key at the back door (12:8)."¹

"Futility" (Heb. *hebel*, or "vanity") probably does not mean "meaningless." As Solomon used this word in Ecclesiastes he meant lacking real substance, value, permanence, worth, or significance. *Hebel* appears 38 times in Ecclesiastes, and only 35 other times elsewhere in the Old Testament. In 13 of these passages, the word describes idols. "Vapor," "breath-like," ephemeral," or "enigmatic" captures the idea (cf. Prov. 21:6; Isa. 57:13; Rom. 8:20).² At least two writers favored the words "absurd" or "absurdity."³ Another said *hebel* connotes primarily what is fleeting and transitory.⁴ Eugene Peterson paraphrased it as "smoke."⁵

"It appears to imply here both (1) that which is transitory, and (2) that which is futile. It emphasizes how swiftly earthly things pass away, and how little they offer while one has them (cf. Jas 4:14)."⁶

"You think you have all the dishes washed and from a bedroom or a bathroom there appears, as from a ghost, another dirty glass. And even when all the dishes are washed, it is only a few hours until they demand washing again. So much of our work is cyclical, and so much of it futile."⁷

"All," in the context of what he proceeded to describe, refers to all human endeavors (cf. v. 3). Hubbard understood it in a slightly different way:

"*Hebel* stands more for human inability to grasp the meaning of God's way than for an ultimate emptiness in life. It speaks of human limitation and frustration caused by the vast gap between God's knowledge and power and our relative

¹Warren W. Wiersbe, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible Exposition Commentary/Wisdom and Poetry*, p. 478.

²See Kathleen A. Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good? A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, pp. 142-46; Graham S. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, pp. 17-22; Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, p. 219.

³See Michael V. Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qoheleth," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105:3 (September 1986):409-27; Murphy, p. lix.

⁴Leupold, p. 41.

⁵Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*, pp. 884-96.

⁶Laurin, p. 586.

⁷David A. Hubbard, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, p. 48.

ignorance and impotence. The deepest issues of lasting profit, of enlightening wisdom, of ability to change life's workings, of confidence that we have grasped the highest happiness—all these are beyond our reach in Koheleth's view."¹

C. L. Seow described *hebel* this way:

"Something that is *hebel* cannot be grasped or controlled. It may refer to something that one experiences or encounters for only a moment, but it cannot be grasped—neither physically nor intellectually."²

The phrase "is futility" is the most popular one in Ecclesiastes (cf. 1:14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:19; 4:4, 7, 8, 16; 5:7, 10; 6:2, 4, 9, 11, 12; 7:6, 15; 8:10, 14; 9:9; 11:8, 10; 12:8.³ It forms an *inclusio* with 12:8, surrounding the evidence that Solomon offered to prove that all is vanity. The phrase "futility of futilities" is a Hebraism for "the utmost futility" (cf. "holy of holies" [Exod. 26:33; et al.] and "servant of servants" [Gen. 9:25]).

This verse contains Solomon's "big idea" or proposition. It is the point he proceeded to support, prove, and apply in the chapters that follow. Some writers, however, believed that there is no logical development in the writer's thought.⁴ Proverbs 1:7 is such a statement in that book. This is the first hint that Solomon's viewpoint includes "exclusively the world we can observe, and that our observation point is at ground level."⁵

"Because it apparently contradicts other portions of Scripture and presents a pessimistic outlook on life, in a mood of existential despair, many have viewed Ecclesiastes as running counter to the rest of Scripture or have concluded that is [*sic*

¹Ibid., pp. 21-22.

²C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 47.

³See H. Carl Shank, "Qoheleth's World and Life View as Seen in His Recurring Phrases," *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (1974):65-67.

⁴E.g., Svend Holm-Nielsen, "The Book of Ecclesiastes and the Interpretation of It in Jewish and Christian Theology," *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute* 10 (1976):48.

⁵Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes: A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance*, p. 23. See also Edwin M. Good, "The Unfilled Sea: Style and Meaning in Ecclesiastes 1:2-11," in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien*, pp. 59-73.

it] presents only man's reasoning apart from divine revelation."¹

"... it is no exaggeration to say that there may be less agreement about the interpretation of Koheleth than there is about any other biblical book, even the Revelation of John!"²

For example, Leupold believed that verse 2 states a subtheme of the book, and the major theme is: "Fear God and keep His commandments" (12:13).³ Gordis wrote the following:

"Koheleth has two fundamental themes—the essential unknowability of the world and the divine imperative of joy."⁴

"The theme of the book, far from being a problem, is a virtual summary of the biblical world view: life lived by purely earthly and human standards is futile, but the God-centered life is an antidote."⁵

B. THE FUTILITY OF ALL HUMAN ENDEAVOR 1:3-11

In this pericope (section of text), Solomon gave general support to his theme (1:2). Essentially he said that it is impossible for any human endeavor to have permanent value. This section is a poem.⁶ Solomon chose the realm of nature as the setting for his argument.

1. The vanity of work 1:3

Rather than saying, "All work is vanity," Solomon made the same point by asking this rhetorical question that expects a negative response. He used

¹Roy B. Zuck, "A Theology of the Wisdom Books and the Song of Songs," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 243. This essay also contains studies of the doctrines of God (pp. 246-47) and man (pp. 248-51) in Ecclesiastes. See also idem, "God and Man in Ecclesiastes," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:589 (January-March 1991):46-56, which is an adaptation of the former essay; and Gordis, pp. 112-21.

²Hubbard, p. 23.

³Leupold, pp. 19, 40.

⁴Gordis, p. 58.

⁵Leland Ryken, *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, p. 269.

⁶See Addison G. Wright, "The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968):313-34.

this literary device often throughout the book (cf. 2:2; 3:9; 6:8, 11-12; et al.).

"Advantage" (Heb. *yitron*) refers to what remains in the sense of a net profit (cf. 2:11, 13; 3:9; 5:9, 16; 7:12; 10:10, 11). This Hebrew word occurs nowhere else in the Old Testament. Solomon was not saying there is nothing good about work, or that it is worse than being unemployed. He only meant that all the work that a person may engage in does not yield permanent profit—even though it may yield short-term profit, including financial security (cf. Mark 8:36).¹

"Under the sun," used 29 times in Ecclesiastes and nowhere else in the Old Testament, simply means "on the earth," that is, in terms of human existence (1:9, 14; 2:11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22; 3:16; 4:1, 3, 7, 15; 5:13, 18; 6:1, 5, 12; 8:9, 15, 17; 9:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 10:5; cf. 1:13; 2:3; 3:1). The phrase shows that the writer's perspective was universal, not limited to his own people and land.² And it shows that Solomon was looking at life from the perspective of people on the earth without the aid of special revelation from God.

"All that takes place beneath the sun belongs to the sphere which had its origin in the fall of man, is tainted with sin, and is attended by sin's fell train of suffering and punishment."³

"The phrase 'under the sun' (1:3, 9) describes life and reality as perceived by mere human observation. It is a world-view devoid of special revelation."⁴

"It defines the outlook of the writer as he looks at life from a human perspective and not necessarily from heaven's point of view."⁵

"... the little phrase 'under the sun' always says in effect, 'What I claim is true if one deals with purely earthly values.'"⁶

¹See John F. Genung, *Words of Koheleth*, pp. 214-15.

²J. S. Wright, p. 1152.

³Hengstenberg, p. 61.

⁴Eugene H. Merrill, in *The Old Testament Explorer*, p. 505.

⁵Wiersbe, p. 478.

⁶Leupold, p. 43.

"It suggests the troubled life of humanity in this world against the background of inevitable death ..."¹

"This man [Qohelet] had been living through all these experiences under the sun, concerned with nothing above the sun, on the modern level of experience in the realm of the material, until there came a moment in which he had seen the whole of life. And there was something over the sun. It is only as a man takes account of that which is over the sun as well as that which is under the sun that things under the sun are seen in their true light."²

"Of course, looked at only 'under the sun,' a person's daily work might seem to be futile and burdensome, but the Christian believer can always claim 1 Corinthians 15:58 and labor gladly in the will of God, knowing his labor is 'not in vain in the Lord.'"³

"In these two verses (vv. 2, 3), the Preacher has established one of his principal ideas: Life may seem pointless because it is quickly passing. It is the burden of the rest of his book to help the assembly of the wise understand how to truly value life because it does indeed pass so very quickly."⁴

2. The illustrations from life 1:4-11

To clarify his meaning and to support his contention in verse 3, Solomon cited examples from nature. Work produces nothing ultimate or permanently satisfying, only what is ephemeral.

1:4 No person is permanent on the earth. The earth remains, but people die and the next generation replaces them. The point is that since man is not permanent, it is obvious that his work cannot be. While a person's work may outlive him or her (e.g., a skyscraper usually outlasts its builder), it will only last a little

¹Murphy, p. 7.

²G. Campbell Morgan, *The Unfolding Message of the Bible*, p. 229.

³Wiersbe, p. 479.

⁴*The Nelson ...*, p. 1080.

longer than he or she does. It, too, is only relatively permanent, not permanent like the earth is.

History does not answer the questions of ultimate meaning or purpose. These only come from divine revelation.

1:5-7 Science does not answer the question in verse 3 either.

People's work is similar to the aspects of nature cited in these verses. In nature there are many things that recur in a cyclical pattern. They are never complete. For example, we never have a rainstorm that makes it unnecessary to have any more rainstorms (cf. Job 36:27-28). Our work is never complete in the sense that we never finally arrive at a condition in which no more work is necessary. There is always the need to do more work. Any homeowner can testify to this!

"The only constant thing about the wind [v. 6] is its changing."¹

One writer argued that the preacher did not intend verses 5-7 to show the futility of the phenomena he recorded. He intended to show only "... the limitations imposed on them by their allotted natures and functions, which necessitates their constant cyclical repetition."² These limitations reflect futility.

1:8-11 By saying, "there is nothing new under the sun" (v. 9), Solomon was not overlooking inventions and technological advances that have resulted in civilization's advancement through the centuries. Nevertheless, these have been only innovations, not basic changes. Man still struggles with the same essential problems he has always had. This is the round of work that is weariness to people, similar to the repetitious rounds observable in nature (vv. 5-7).

¹Leupold, p. 46

²R. N. Whybray, "Ecclesiastes 1.5-7 and the Wonders of Nature," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 41 (June 1988):105.

"[David] Hume's brand of empiricism (that certain knowledge can be gained only through experience) is undermined here [v. 8]."¹

"Many people watch television for hours day after day. Why? Because the eye is never satisfied with seeing; the ear is never filled with hearing [v. 8]."²

There appears to be a significant advance (e.g., social evolution), but that is only because people evaluate history superficially (v. 11a).

"The environment may change, and there may be new gadgets around, but there really is nothing new under the sun. Man stays the same. Only the stage setting may vary a bit from age to age."³

"Things are ... occasionally referred to as being new because we do not remember how they appeared earlier in history."⁴

"That man never finds satisfaction in earthly things, but on the contrary is ever asking for yet more and more, is a sign of their emptiness. Such being their nature they can never fill the heart."⁵

We dream of futuristic utopias partially because we fail to see that man has made no real progress (v. 11b). Future generations will make the same mistake (v. 11c-d). Technology changes, but human nature and human activity remain the same.

What about the doctrine of eternal rewards? The New Testament teaches that what a person does in this life, for good and for evil, affects his or her eternal state (Matt. 7:24-27; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; et al.). Is there not eternal "net profit" for

¹Christopher Cone, *Life Beyond the Sun*, p. 23. See also pp. 24-40.

²J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 3:109.

³*Ibid.*, 3:110.

⁴Leupold, p. 49.

⁵Ernest W. Hengstenberg, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, p. 55.

believers who do good works? Solomon had an unusually broad perspective for a person living when he did. Evidently most of the Hebrews were aware that there is life beyond the grave. The patriarchs also had some revelation of life after death (cf. Gen. 1:27; 25:8, 17; 35:29; Ps. 16; 73; et al.).¹ However, Solomon evidenced no knowledge of revelation that deals with the effect a person's work has on his or her *eternal* condition (cf. Job). In this respect, his perspective was not as broad as those of us who benefit from New Testament revelation. Solomon was correct within his frame of reference. New Testament revelation has not invalidated Solomon's assessment of life *from his perspective*.

"Koheleth knew no such scenario as Jesus gave us in the parable of talents. The old sage had no real inkling of the ultimate judgment that offered, 'well done, good and faithful servant. ... Enter into the joy of your Lord,' and 'You wicked and lazy servant,' your destiny is 'outer darkness' with 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matt. 25:21, 26, 30)."²

Whether or not Solomon had insight into life beyond the grave, in this book he chose to limit his observations to life this side of the grave: "under the sun."

A factor that makes our work of lasting value is God's enablement with His grace by His Spirit. Reference to either of these supernatural resources is totally absent in Ecclesiastes. This omission further highlights the fact that Solomon's viewpoint was that of earthly life without supernatural intervention.

The fact that the name "Yahweh" does not occur in this book also clarifies the writer's perspective. The name "Elohim," however, appears about 37 times. Yahweh was the name God used to describe Himself in His relationships to people. The man "under the sun" in Ecclesiastes is one unaided by a

¹See articles on "immortality" in Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias.

²Hubbard, p. 205.

personal relationship with God, not that he was necessarily unsaved. The man in view is every man, including the Israelites. Solomon's analysis simply omitted God's enablement in the human condition. He did assume man's belief in God, however, since it is a perversion of what is self-evident to deny God's existence (Ps. 14:1).

"Ignoring the book's title (1:1), epigrams (1:2, 12:8), and epilogue (12:9-14), one discovers that Qoheleth begins with a poem concerning the 'profit'-lessness of man's toil (1:3-11) and ends with another poem calling man to enjoy life which he can (11:9—12:7) . . . These two poems set the tone and direction of Qoheleth's investigation and reflection. From a focus on the pointlessness of a work orientation—on the profitlessness of man's toil when it is absolutized and, thus, misguided—Qoheleth turns to argue for the importance of enjoying life from God as a gift while we can. 'Enjoyment,' not 'work,' is to be our controlling metaphor of life."¹

"The enigmatic character and polarized structure of the book of Qoheleth is not a defective quality but rather a deliberate literary device of Hebrew thought patterns designed to reflect the paradoxical and anomalous nature of this present world. The difficulty of interpreting this book is proportionally related to one's own readiness to adopt Qoheleth's presupposition—that everything about this world is marred by the tyranny of the curse which the Lord God placed upon all creation. If one fails to recognize that this is a foundational presupposition from which Ecclesiastes operates,

¹Robert K. Johnston, "'Confessions of a Workaholic': A Reappraisal of Qoheleth," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 38 (January-March 1976):17-18.

then one will fail to comprehend the message of the book, and bewilderment will continue."¹

II. THE FUTILITY OF WORK 1:12—6:9

The writer proceeded to elaborate on his thesis that all human endeavor lacks permanent value—by citing evidence that he had observed personally, and then evidence that everyone has observed.

A. PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS 1:12—2:17

There are four parts to this section, and they fall into two pairs. Solomon first related his investigations (in 1:12-15 and 2:1-11), and then gave his evaluations of each of these experiments (in 1:16-18 and 2:12-17). McGee divided 1:12—2:11 into two parts: experiments in wisdom and philosophy (1:12-18), and experiments in pleasure (2:1-11).²

1. Solomon's investigation of human achievement 1:12-15

Solomon had unique resources for investigating life. He was the king of Israel who lived in Jerusalem (v. 12). Some English translations have rendered the Hebrew verb in this verse in the past tense ("was"), implying that the writer was no longer a king. This has led some readers to conclude that Solomon was not the writer of Ecclesiastes. But the verb can denote a condition that began in the past and continues into the present. Other translators captured this meaning with "have been king." Solomon possessed superlative wisdom (v. 13; cf. v. 16; 1 Kings 4:26-34).

Qohelet says that he made a comprehensive study of all kinds of human activities (v. 14). He observed that they were all a "sorry task" (v. 13; cf. 4:8; 5:14), namely, difficult and disappointing. "Striving [chasing] after wind" (v. 14) graphically pictures the futility that Solomon sought to

¹Ardel B. Caneday, "Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?" *Grace Theological Journal* 7:1 (Spring 1986):21. See also Ángel M. Rodríguez, "Genesis and Creation in the Wisdom Literature," in *The Genesis Creation Account and Its Reverberations in the Old Testament*, pp. 252-55.

²McGee, 3:110-14.

communicate (cf. 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6; 6:9). This phrase occurs frequently in 1:12—6:9 and is a structural marker that indicates the end of a subsection of Solomon's thought (cf. 1:17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 6:9).

Solomon was saying that there is no type of effort or activity that can produce something ultimately permanent and therefore satisfying. There is nothing that people can do that will yield this: no type of work or activity.

"Solomon is not claiming that there is no use trying to straighten out or change anything. Rather, he explains that no amount of investigating or using the resources of earth will ever straighten out all that is crooked, twisted, perverted, or turned upside down (7:13)."¹

2. Solomon's evaluation of his investigation of human achievement 1:16-18

Solomon's reference to "all who were over Jerusalem before me" (v. 16) has created a problem for some readers. How could Solomon say that there were many rulers over Jerusalem before him when he was only the second king of Israel to rule there? Probably he was referring to all the previous rulers over Jerusalem (e.g., Melchizedek [Gen. 14:18], Adoni-zedek [Josh. 10:1], and others), not to previous kings of Israel exclusively.

"*'Heart'* ["mind," v. 16] points to the combined use of mind and will in the quest for knowledge. Biblical Hebrew has no specific words for mind or brain. Thinking and understanding and deciding are all done by the *'heart'*."²

To conduct his investigation of human achievements, Solomon had employed the tool of wisdom. Wisdom here does not refer to living life with God in view. It means using human intelligence as an instrument to ferret out truth and significance. However, he discovered that wisdom was inadequate to turn up any truly meaningful activity. Consequently, wisdom was in this respect no better than "insanity and foolishness" (v. 17; i.e., foolish ideas and pleasures).

¹ *The Nelson ...*, p. 1081.

² Hubbard, p. 64.

"... in Scripture both 'madness' and 'folly' imply moral perversity rather than mental oddity."¹

"The closest analogy to the experiment here described would in our day be an honest attempt to solve all problems and to attain to all knowledge by the processes of rational thinking. It would be the philosopher's attempt to probe into the depth of matters by his unaided and unenlightened reason apart from any disclosures of truth that God has granted to man."²

Greater wisdom had only brought the writer "much grief" (mental anguish) and "increasing pain" (emotional sorrow, v. 18).

3. Solomon's investigation of pleasure 2:1-11

"After having proved that secular wisdom has no superiority to folly in bringing true happiness to man, he [the writer] seeks his happiness in a different way, and gives himself up to cheerful enjoyment."³

"Solomon ... decided to test his own heart to see how he would respond to two very common experiences of life: enjoyment (1-3) and employment (4-11)."⁴

2:1-3 Pleasure produces no lasting accomplishment, either. That is, while it has some temporary, immediate value (e.g., relieving grief or boredom), it does not produce anything permanently or ultimately worthwhile. Rather, the pursuit of pleasure yields a hollow life. It is clear from verse 3 that Solomon's investigation of pleasure was not a mindless dive into the morass of hedonism.

"Consumerism, one can argue, is the dominant ideology of our age, and central to consumerism

¹Kidner, p. 31.

²Leupold, p. 55.

³Delitzsch, p. 232.

⁴Wiersbe, p. 487.

is the quest for pleasure through possessions and experience."¹

Wisdom guided Solomon throughout. (Bartholomew understood the writer's use of "wisdom" here to be ironic and in opposition to godly wisdom.²) Solomon evidently pursued every pleasure available to an oriental monarch.

"Solomon is not simply testing the meaningfulness of pleasure, but rather goodness in general."³

"Our happiness consists not in being idle, but in doing aright, in being well employed."⁴

2:4-11

"From the lust of the flesh Solomon now passes to the lust of the eye and to that pride of life which delights in, and understands how to procure for itself, outward splendour [vv. 4-8]."⁵

"A sensible use of money may be a form of creativity; so Solomon expressed himself in extensive buildings and the planting of vineyards, fruit trees, and gardens (vv. 4-6)."⁶

Some of this experimentation involved sin (v. 8; cf. Num. 15:39; Ps. 131:1). Solomon did not say he experienced no pleasure; he did. Nevertheless, his final evaluation was that pleasure does not yield long-term profit, i.e., real significance in this life (v. 11).

"Virtue ethics reckons happiness as the highest end, achievable by means of virtue. Happiness is the highest end because all else is done for the sake of itself and for the sake of something else, while happiness is supposed to be pursued only for

¹Bartholomew, p. 136.

²Ibid., p. 131.

³Cone, p. 87.

⁴Henry, p. 793.

⁵Hengstenberg, p. 77.

⁶J. S. Wright, p. 1156. Cf. 1 Kings 9:19.

its own sake. This system [i.e., virtue ethics] represents man's natural pursuit of goodness or piety. The desired destination is happiness under the sun rather than goodness in the sight of God."¹

4. Solomon's evaluation of his investigation of pleasure 2:12-17

The king realized that few people would be able to check the results of his experiments. Few if any would have the resources that he had at his disposal to duplicate his experiments (v. 12). McGee believed that all of chapter 2 from this point onward (vv. 12-26) deals with Solomon's experiments in materialism, or, I would say, hedonism.²

"To see wisdom (chokmah), madness (holelah), folly (sikluth). Solomon had previously engaged in a sampling of these, now he turns to a rationally disinterested viewing of the three."³

Wisdom is better than folly in some respects, but neither provides a key to discovering real profit. Consequently, Solomon concluded that being wise only has temporary and limited advantages over being foolish. Ultimately there is not much difference. Both the wise man and the fool die, and their survivors forget them. "Unhappy" (v. 17, Heb. *ra*) is the opposite of "advantage" (1:3, profit). It is loss. The fact that Solomon could find nothing in work or pleasure that could yield anything ultimately profitable led him to view life itself as distasteful and repugnant (v. 17).⁴

"Purely earthly values have a queer tendency to let one down and thoroughly disappoint one."⁵

¹Cone, p. 90.

²McGee, 3:114-15.

³Cone, p. 133.

⁴For a study of how the writer of Ecclesiastes viewed death, see James L. Crenshaw, "The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth," in *Israelite Wisdom ...*, pp. 205-16.

⁵Leupold, p. 65. See Cone, pp. 134-76, for discussion of a philosophical parallel: epistemological grounding.

B. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS 2:18—6:9

Thus far, Solomon had reflected on the futility of all human endeavor generally (1:3-11), and the futility of human achievement (1:12-15) and his own achievements in particular (2:1-17). Next, he turned to an evaluation of labor, his own (2:18-20), as well as that of all other people (2:21—6:9). What he described in this section did not require a privileged position; it can be observed by anyone.

1. The outcome of labor 2:18-26

In this pericope the emphasis is on what happens to the fruits of labor that one accumulates over a lifetime of toil. These fruits include: money and all it can buy, fame, and happiness.

2:18-21 Solomon viewed all his labor during his lifetime ("under the sun," v. 18) with despair, because there was no real permanence to its fruits. He could not take them with him.

"A Jewish proverb says, 'There are no pockets in shrouds.'"¹

Solomon would have no control over what he had accumulated or accomplished after he died, either (v. 19). The idea so common today that a good job is more desirable than a bad job, because it yields benefits the worker can enjoy, is a very short-sighted, selfish view. It seems to contradict Solomon's conclusion, but it does not. Solomon's perspective was much broader and more altruistic. He was thinking about what long-range changes for good could come out of all human toil.

2:22-23 In view of what comes of it all, Solomon concluded that human labor costs more pain and restlessness than it is worth.²

2:24-26 Since we cannot expect permanent changes to come out of our work—changes that will continue forever after—the best we can do is to enjoy its fruits and find some satisfaction in the work itself (cf. 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7, 9). This

¹Wiersbe, p. 490.

²See Cone, pp. 178-85, for discussion of utilitarianism.

is the first of seven passages in which the writer recommended the wholehearted pursuit of enjoyment (2:24a; 3:12; 3:22a; 5:17; 8:15a; 9:7-9a; and 11:7—12:1a), and they make the point with increasing intensity and solemnity.¹ Bartholomew called these sections *carpe diem* ("seize the day") passages.² However, the pursuit of enjoyment is possible only with God's help (vv. 24-25).

"Solomon is not advocating 'Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die!' That is the philosophy of fatalism not faith. Rather, he is saying, 'Thank God for what you do have, and enjoy it to the glory of God.'"³

"God mercifully spares His children the sad experiment which Solomon made, by denying them the goods which they often desire. He gives them the fruits of Solomon's experience, without their paying the dear price at which Solomon bought it."⁴

Sometimes God channels the fruits of a wicked person's work into a righteous person's hands (v. 26).⁵

"... in themselves, and rightly used, the basic things of life are sweet and good. Food, drink and work are samples of them, and Qoheleth will remind us of others [cf. 9:7-10; 11:7-10]. What spoils them is our hunger to get out of them more than they can give; a symptom of the longing which differentiates us from the beasts, but

¹For a study of these passages, see R. N. Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1982):87-98, reprinted in *Reflecting with ...*, pp. 203-12.

²Bartholomew, pp. 80.

³Wiersbe, p. 491.

⁴Jamieson, et al., p. 477.

⁵See J. Stafford Wright, "The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," in *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation*, pp. 144-45.

whose misdirection is the underlying theme of this book."¹

In these verses Solomon implied that God's rewarding or punishing a person for his trust in God, and his ethical behavior, would take place before death. This is normally what happens (cf. Proverbs). Therefore, Solomon's counsel is good advice. However, from later revelation we learn that final judgment will take place after this life and that God's rewards are not just temporal but eternal (cf. Job's problem). Therefore, as believers, we can find greater satisfaction in our work itself than Solomon could. In short, later revelation has not invalidated Solomon's views but enriched them.

2. Labor and divine providence 3:1—4:3

In this section Solomon expressed his conviction that in view of God's incomprehensible workings, all human toil is without permanent profit. McGee wrote that Solomon described his experiments in fatalism in 3:1-15, and his experiments in egotism, or egoism, in 3:16—4:16.²

3:1-8 As is customary in Ecclesiastes, the writer began this section by stating a thesis (v. 1). He then proceeded to illustrate and to prove it true (vv. 2-8). The word "time" appears 28 times in these seven verses, in 14 pairs of opposites, evidently to cover the whole range of human life.³ "Every matter" (v. 1) means every human activity that one engages in by deliberate choice. Each of these activities has its proper time and duration.

"Qohelet now raises a subject characteristic of ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature—the proper time. After all, it is the wise person who knows the right time to say or to do the right thing (Prov. 15:23) ... In the final analysis Qohelet powerfully expresses that everything is frustratingly out of the control of human beings."⁴

¹Kidner, p. 35.

²McGee, 3:116-20.

³Leupold, p. 83.

⁴Longman, p. 111.

"Through these words, the Preacher is not teaching that everything has an opportune time according to which one should choose one action or the other. Rather, he teaches that all events are in the hand of God, who makes everything happen in the time He judges appropriate."¹

"God does not condemn, but approves of, the *use* of earthly blessings (vs. 12); it is the *abuse* that He condemns, the making them the chief end (I Cor. 7:31)."²

Verses 2-8 are a poem in which the preacher listed 14 opposites.

"The fact that Solomon utilized polar opposites in a multiple of seven and began his list with birth and death is highly significant. The number seven suggests the idea of completeness and the use of polar opposites—a well-known poetic device called merism—suggests totality (cf. Ps. 139:2-3)."³

The casting of stones (v. 5) probably refers to the ancient custom of destroying a farmer's field by throwing many stones on it. The gathering of stones describes the clearing of stones from a field.⁴

The fact that there are proper times for expressing love (v. 8) and other times for refraining from love reminds us that there are standards for sex, though this is not the only application.

"Verses 1-8 have an important connection with the theme of the book and relate closely to what precedes and to what follows. Man is to take his life day by day from the hand of God (2:24-26;

¹ *The Nelson ...*, p. 1083. Cf. Murphy, p. 39.

² Jamieson, et al., p. 478.

³ Donald R. Glenn, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 983.

⁴ Hubbard, p. 103.

3:12-13), realizing that God has a fitting time for each thing to be done (v. 1). The significance of this section is that man is responsible to discern the right times for the right actions; and when he does the right action according to God's time, the result is 'beautiful' (v. 11)."¹

3:9 Another rhetorical question expects another negative response (cf. 1:3; 2:11). There is no net gain in one's toil—given Solomon's perspective.

"... one thing that elevates us above the animal world, in addition to the God-given sense of eternity [v. 11], is the desire to understand the whole. This accounts for all science, philosophy, and human knowledge, as well as theology."²

3:10-11 God's plan is unfathomable. Nevertheless, God has an appropriate time for every activity (v. 11). The meaning is not, "beautiful in its own way," as the song goes.

"A harmony of purpose and a beneficial supremacy of control pervade all issues of life to such an extent that they rightly challenge our admiration."³

God has also placed within the heart of every person a sense of something eternal and a desire to know the eternal significance of what we do (v. 11, "set eternity in their heart").⁴

"This quest is a deep-seated desire, a compulsive drive, because man is made in the image of God to appreciate the beauty of creation (on an aesthetic level); to know the character, composition, and meaning of the world (on an academic and philosophical level); and to discern

¹J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 1160. Cf. Eph. 2:10.

²Ibid., p. 1162.

³Leupold, p. 90.

⁴Delitzsch, p. 261.

its purpose and destiny (on a theological level). ... Man has an inborn inquisitiveness and capacity to learn how everything in his experience can be integrated to make a whole."¹

"'Eternity' to Old Testament people was not timelessness or *absence* of time. They knew no such realm. It was, rather, *extension* of time—as far back and as far forward as one could imagine—'time in its wholeness' (JB), 'sense of time past and future' (NEB)."²

The idea of a timeless state is Platonic, not biblical.

We cannot grasp fully all of God's plans. Consequently, because we cannot see the full consequences of our works beyond the grave, our labor lacks ultimate gratification.

Verse 11 "summarizes the teacher's whole argument, and in context (3:10-15) it serves equally well as a summary for the entire wisdom corpus."³

One writer suggested that the Hebrew word translated "eternity" should be re-pointed (i.e., the vowels should be replaced with other vowels), in which case it means "darkness."⁴

3:12-13 Solomon repeated his former counsel in view of this limited perspective (cf. 2:24). "Do good" (v. 12) should read "enjoy themselves." We could translate verse 13, "If any man eats and drinks and finds satisfaction in all his toil, it is a gift of God."⁵

¹Kaiser, p. 66. See also Hengstenberg, p. 107; *The Nelson ...*, p. 1084.

²Hubbard, pp. 106-7. JB refers to *The Jerusalem Bible*.

³Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "Integrating Wisdom Theology into Old Testament Theology: Ecclesiastes 3:10-15," in *A Tribute to Gleason Archer*, p. 206.

⁴Brian P. Gault, "A Reexamination of 'Eternity' in Ecclesiastes 3:11," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 165:657 (January-March 2008):39-57.

⁵Christian D. Ginsburg, *Song of Songs and Coheleth*, pp. 311-12.

3:14-15 Solomon described God's plans and our proper response in view of our inability to comprehend them fully. He said we should fear God. This is a common emphasis in all Hebrew wisdom literature.

3:16—4:3 A phenomenon that makes it most difficult for us to understand God's ways, and respond to them properly, is the problem of injustice in this life. Solomon believed God would eventually balance the scales of justice (v. 17), and that He uses injustice for His own purposes (v. 18).

"If judgment instantly followed every sin, there would be no scope for free-will, faith, and perseverance of saints in spite of difficulties."¹

Probably Solomon believed judgment would take place on earth (Prov. 22:22-23), though he did not say this explicitly. God uses injustice to remind us of our finite bestiality, among other things. We behave as beasts and die like them (vv. 18-20). "The same place" (v. 20) is the grave (cf. 6:6), not that man's future is identical to an animal's.

"The reason man is beginning to react like an animal is because he is being taught in our schools that he *is* an animal."²

"Living for self, enjoying life for self, is the reason men get involved in some projects which are good. For example, many men get interested in athletics and give themselves to it. Others give themselves to art, others to literature, others to music, and many different things. These things are not wrong, but they are selfish; they gratify man's selfish desires."³

¹Jamieson, et al., p. 478.

²McGee, 3:118.

³Ibid., 3:117.

No one can observe any differences between the future of man and animals, but God has revealed these differences. In view of these things, Solomon repeated his counsel (v. 22).

"Man cannot observe beyond the sun, as God has limited human perspective. It has been said that the concept of faith is foreign to Solomon in Ecclesiastes, however, it is evident he is exhorting the reader to operate on faith: God's beyond the sun program exists. But God has placed man under the sun. Thus man is prescribed to operate under the sun with a beyond the sun perspective."¹

"From unjust decisions a transition is now made to the subject of the haughty, unmerciful cruelty of the wide-extended oppressions inflicted by men."²

God has, of course, enabled us to see what will occur after we die by giving us additional revelation after Solomon's time. The alternative response to the one Solomon advocated is despair, which reflecting on unjust oppression causes (4:1-3).

"These three verses [4:1-3] contain some of the harshest language in Ecclesiastes, and certainly one of the strongest conclusions: if for no other reason than oppression, life is not worth living. This conclusion is more hopeless than even suicidal nihilism."³

"By thoroughly disgusting us with the world, and by making us realize its absolute vanity, God means to draw us to himself. Only in this way can Jahveh, the true and absolute Being, become to us what he really is. Through much tribulation

¹Cone, pp. 238-39.

²Delitzsch, p. 273.

³Cone, p. 251. See pp. 252-69, for a discussion of Marxism as a philosophical parallel, and pp. 269-300 for a synthesis of historical views on the problem of evil.

must our hold on earthly things be loosened and ourselves enter into the kingdom of God."¹

"In this [fourth] chapter, Qohelet deals with four areas of life he observes that reinforce his view that all is enigmatic: oppression (vv. 1-3), rivalry as the motivation for work (vv. 4-6), isolation in work and life [lack of community] (vv. 7-12), and the problem of government (vv. 13-16)."²

3. The motivations of labor 4:4-16

The phrase "futility and striving after wind" (vv. 4, 16) brackets this section. This structure emphasizes the relative vanity of everything between these statements. The main theme of this section seems to be "the power complex common among humans and ways of reacting to it."³

Envy of others 4:4-6

"Every labor and every skill" (v. 4) undoubtedly means every type of labor and skill, rather than every individual instance of these things. Solomon used hyperbole; he made exaggerated statements or claims not meant to be taken literally. Much achievement is the result of a desire to be superior.

"Those that excel in virtue will always be an eye-sore to those that exceed in vice, which should not discourage us from any right work, but drive us to expect the praise of it, not from men, but from God."⁴

Verse 5 seems to be the opposite of verse 4.

"We pass from the rat-race with its hectic scramble for status symbols to the drop-out with his total indifference."⁵

"He [the drop-out] is the picture of complacency and unwitting self-destruction, for this comment on him points out a deeper

¹Hengstenberg, p. 126.

²Bartholomew, p. 185.

³J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 1165.

⁴Henry, p. 797.

⁵Eaton, p. 93.

damage than the wasting of his capital. His idleness eats away not only what he has but what he is: eroding his self-control, his grasp of reality, his capacity for care and, in the end, his self-respect."¹

"Does this ["consumes his own flesh"] mean a foolish man is a cannibal? No, it means that he is not willing to do anything to protect himself. He will not work for himself. We have developed quite a society like that today; people want everything given to them."²

Verse 6 is the middle road between the two preceding extremes.

Greed for self 4:7-12

"How little the life of a man depends on many possessions, the author shows in a picturesque description of the example of a rich man who has so completely isolated himself by his selfishness and avarice, that he stands alone and deserted, without enjoyment and without protection in life."³

The reader cannot miss the folly of working just to accumulate more in this powerful description. The attitude behind this selfishness finds expression in the philosophy of ethical egoism (rational selfishness).⁴

"Such a man, even with a wife and children, will have little time for them, convinced that he is toiling for their benefit although his heart is elsewhere, devoted and wedded to his projects."⁵

"Wealth, so the conclusion runs, must, therefore, be a pretty sorry thing to acquire if it isolates a man and robs him of some of the finest of helps and joys that he might have had in life."⁶

¹Kidner, p. 46.

²McGee, 3:118.

³Hengstenberg, p. 128.

⁴See Cone, p. 314.

⁵Hengstenberg, pp. 46-47.

⁶Leupold, p. 108.

Solomon commended sharing, rather than hoarding, by calling attention to several advantages that come from cooperating with other people (vv. 9-12).

"A man without a companion is like a left hand without the right [v. 9; cf. Gen. 2:18]."¹

Position and prestige 4:13-16

It is also futile to work to gain advancement and popularity, thinking that these advantages will provide ultimate satisfaction. Having shown the vanity of possessions, in the preceding verses, Solomon now proceeded to show the vanity of rulers.

"He has reached a pinnacle of human glory, only to be stranded there."²

Verse 14 evidently describes the poor lad in verse 13, rather than the king. The second lad of verse 15 is the same boy who replaced the former old king. What is in view is a succession of kings, none of whom fully satisfies the populace (cf. Solomon, Rehoboam, Abijah, etc.). The point is that even though a man may rise from the bottom of society—this youth had been in prison—to the top, not everyone will accept or appreciate him. Therefore, since it is impossible to achieve full acceptance, it is foolish to spend one's life seeking it. It is better to stay poor and wise. We might respond by saying that some acceptance by other people is better than none, but this is an evaluation of short-term advantage. Solomon was thinking and speaking of ultimate long-term significance.³

"Today's hero may become tomorrow's beggar."⁴

4. The perishable fruits of labor 5:1—6:9

This section emphasizes the folly of trying to find ultimate satisfaction in one's work. Solomon focused on a variety of situations that involve the fruits of labor: money and what it can buy, fame, and pleasure.

¹Talman, quoted in Jamieson, et al., p. 479.

²Kidner, p. 52.

³Cone, pp. 316-27, suggested a philosophical parallel in Nietzsche's will to power.

⁴*The Nelson ...*, p. 1086.

"The connection of thought with what precedes seems to be this: having demonstrated quite fully that all things are vain, the Preacher feels the desirability of warning his readers lest, being set in the midst of so much vanity, *they themselves* become vain. He warns them to watch that area of life where such vanity is most likely to gain entrance, namely, the area of worship."¹

The effect of rash vows 5:1-7

An interlude of proverbs follows the personal section just concluded. For the first time, Qohelet admonished his readers. McGee described verses 1 through 8 as Solomon's experiment in religion.²

"The sacrifice of fools" in view (v. 1) is a rash vow, as is clear from what follows. In view of God's transcendence, Qohelet counseled his readers to speak few words to God (v. 2). But the New Testament, in view of the Incarnation, encourages believers to speak freely to God (e.g., Phil. 4:6-7; 1 Thess. 5:17; 1 Pet. 5:7).³

Verse 3 seems to compare the verbosity of a fool in making a rash vow to God, and the endless dreams one often experiences after a very busy day. Much work generates many dreams, and a fool utters too many words.⁴ If a person makes a rash promise to God and then does not keep it, God may destroy the work of his hands (v. 6). Pleading with the priest ("the messenger of God," v. 6) that the vow was a mistake would not excuse the vow-maker (cf. Deut. 23:21-23; Matt. 6:7).

"Our promise may involve giving to some special work of God or pledging prayer and other support for a missionary. When the representative of the work looks for the fulfillment of our promise, we must not draw back and make an excuse about not having understood what we were required to do."⁵

¹Leupold, p. 116.

²McGee, 3:120-22.

³Jennings, p. 38.

⁴Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes ...*, p. 75.

⁵J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 1168.

Verse 7 uses dreams to illustrate what is ephemeral. "Fear God" (v. 7) also occurs in 3:14; 7:18; 8:12, 13; and 12:13.

"... we should try to put ourselves in a position to discover God's way to use what he has given us in our daily life."¹

"This section on public worship has much to teach us. Worship has to do with God, but we have a constant tendency to shift the focus elsewhere, for example, entertainment, one another, or growing the church."²

The effect of political officials 5:8-9

"The admonition just addressed to his externalistic coreligionists being disposed of and properly concluded, Koheleth proceeds to comfort, for there is much need of kindly words when men find themselves in a difficult situation."³

The point of these verses seems to be that the fruits of one's work can also disappear as a result of taxes and unfair oppression by political rulers. A hierarchy of officials is in view. By legal and illegal means, rulers squeeze money out of the populace. Even so, it is better to have government than not have it (cf. Rom. 13:1-7).⁴ One translation of verse 9 is, "But an advantage to a land for everyone is: a king over cultivated land."⁵

McGee believed verse 9 begins Solomon's experiment with wealth, which runs through 6:16.⁶

The effect of personal covetousness 5:10-12

If a rich man is covetous, all that his increasing wealth will bring him will be the need for greater vigilance and more anxiety (cf. 1 Tim. 6:9-10). For example, more wealth in the home may lead to more locks and burglar alarm systems and the hassle they bring. "To look at" (v. 11) means having to keep an eye on them.

¹Ibid.

²Bartholomew, p. 209.

³Leupold, p. 123.

⁴See Cone, pp. 332-38, on consensual democracy as a parallel philosophy.

⁵Eaton, p. 101.

⁶McGee, 3:122-24.

"How often have we read of an athlete—say, a boxer—whose golden moments found him surrounded by an entourage that gladly shared his wealth, but whose twilight days saw him both broke and abandoned. Wealth can carry its own frustration—that was the Preacher's apt observation."¹

"King Solomon was also a rich king. Who made use of his great possessions? His royal household. Who uses, who eats and drinks up the wealth of princes? All manner of attendants, troopers, servants, waiters, officials and innumerable other fellows who do not in the least deserve it."²

The effect of misfortune 5:13-17

The Hebrew expression translated "bad business" (v. 14) refers to any misfortune that results in the loss of wealth.

"The author does not imply that this happens regularly. It is merely one of those things that may come to pass."³

Striving to hoard the fruits of labor is futile, because any misfortune can overtake one and reduce him or her to poverty—if God allows it. Death itself is such a misfortune that overtakes everyone eventually and robs him of his wealth. No one can take the fruits of his labor with him when he dies. Therefore Solomon concluded that we really gain nothing of truly long-term value from our labor. Verse 17 pictures the miserly workaholic. One example is Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

The way to enjoy the fruits of one's labor 5:18—6:9

Again Solomon urged the enjoyment of life (v. 18; cf. 2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22), but he warned of some obstacles to that enjoyment. Solomon was not advocating hedonism but the simple enjoyment of life day by day (v. 18). In other words, he recommended that we take some time to enjoy the beautiful experiences of life as we travel down its path. Seize the day (Lat. *carpe diem*)! Smell the roses!

¹Hubbard, p. 140.

²Hengstenberg, p. 146.

³Leupold, p. 128.

However, not everyone can enjoy life, for one reason or another, even though one may be wealthy (6:1-2). This problem "is wide-spread among mankind" (v. 1). Solomon returned to the subject of wealth, which he began in 5:10-17, that he interrupted with the *carpe diem* passage in 5:18-20.

"A friend told me that when he was in a hotel in Florida, he saw John D. Rockefeller, Sr., sitting and eating his meal. He had just a few little crumbs, some health food, that had been set before him. Over at a side table my friend saw one of the men who worked as a waiter in the hotel sitting with a big juicy steak in front of him. The man who could afford the steak couldn't eat one; the man who could not afford the steak had one to eat because he worked for the hotel. It is better to have a good appetite than a big bank account!"¹

Only in heaven will we find the solution to why this has been the earthly portion of various individuals.

"Man can acquire nothing unless God permits him to have it."²

A miscarried baby (v. 3) is better off, in that it has not experienced as much sorrow as the rich man who could not enjoy his wealth (cf. Job 3:16; Ps. 58:8). The "same place" (v. 6) is the grave.

"Better to miscarry at birth than to miscarry throughout life."³

Solomon's final word of counsel was to be content with what you have (vv. 8-9; cf. Heb. 13:5). In verse 9, the intended comparison is between actions, rather than objects.⁴ This is the last of nine times the phrase "striving after wind" occurs (cf. 1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16). This phrase opened and now closes the section of the book dealing with the ultimate futility of human achievement (1:12—6:9).

¹McGee, 3:124.

²Leupold, p. 134.

³Eaton, p. 106.

⁴Murphy, p. 54.

III. THE LIMITATIONS OF WISDOM 6:10—11:6

Clues in the text indicate the value and purpose of 6:10—11:6. The phrases "who knows" and "who can tell" and their equivalents occur frequently (6:12; 7:14, 24, 28; 8:17; 19:1, 12; 10:14; 11:2, 6). Also, the recurrence of "it is good" (7:18), and "is better" (7:2, 5; 9:16, 18), helps us realize that in this section, Solomon gave much practical advice on how to live. He did not let us forget that our understanding of God's ways in the present (7:13; cf. 8:17) and in the future (9:1; 10:14; 11:2) is partial. The conclusion is: we should fear God (7:18; 8:12; 12:13) and seek to please Him (7:26; cf. 2:26).

A. GOD'S SOVEREIGN FOREORDINATION OF ALL THINGS 6:10-12

In 6:10-12 Solomon returned to his theme of the immutability and inscrutability of divine providence (i.e., why God allows things to happen as they do; cf. 1:15, 19; 3:11, 14, 22). "Named" (v. 10) refers to the practice of expressing the nature of something by giving it an appropriate name. In the ancient world people recognized that the person who named someone or something was sovereign over it. Thus God "called" what he had created day, heaven, man, etc.; and Adam named the woman, the animals, etc. Solomon's point in verse 10 is that God has sovereignly decreed the nature and essence of everything that exists.

Consequently it is foolish for man to argue with God about what He has foreordained (v. 10b). More arguing only results in more futility for man (v. 11). Man does not know what is best for him because he does not know what the future holds completely (v. 12; cf. 3:22b; James 4:13-17). Solomon pointed out that we are ignorant of our place in God's all-inclusive plan. Even though we have more revelation of God's plans and purposes than Solomon did, we still are very ignorant of these things.¹

"The Latin saying *Solvitur ambulando* ('It is solved by walking') suggests that some problems are elucidated only as one goes forward in practical action (cf. Isa 30:21; as we go, the Lord guides)."²

¹See Cone, pp. 346-59, for an excursus on postmodernism and globalism.

²J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 1173.

B. GOD'S INSCRUTABLE PLAN CHS. 7—8

Solomon proceeded in this section to focus on the comprehensive plan of God: His decree. His point was that we cannot fathom it completely. McGee believed that 7:1—12:12 describes Solomon's experiment in morality, or "the good life."¹

"Now we will see him [Solomon] try the last experiment: morality. Today we would call him a 'do-gooder.' I would say that this is the place to which the majority of the people in America are moving."²

1. Adversity and prosperity 7:1-14

Qoheleth began by exposing our ignorance of the significance of adversity and prosperity (7:1-14; cf. Job).³ Both of these conditions, he noted, can have good and bad effects—depending on how a person responds to them. Prosperity is not always or necessarily good (cf. 6:1-12), and adversity, or affliction, is not always or necessarily evil (cf. 7:1-15). Actually, adversity is often a greater good than prosperity.⁴

"With his sure touch the author now brings in a stimulating change of style and approach. Instead of reflecting and arguing, he will bombard us with proverbs, with their strong impact and varied angles of attack."⁵

7:1 It is better to end life with a good character ("good name") than to begin it favorably but then ruin it through folly.

"**name**—character; a godly mind and life; not mere *reputation* with man, but what a man *is* in the eyes of God, with whom the *name* and *reality* are one thing (Isa. 9:6)."⁶

¹McGee, 3:124-40.

²Ibid., 3:124.

³Cf. Jay K. Hollinshead, "'What Is Good for Man?' An Exposition of Ecclesiastes 7:1-14," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 170:677 (January-March 2013):31-50.

⁴Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes ...*, pp. 80, 82.

⁵Kidner, p. 64.

⁶Jamieson, et al., p. 481.

This emphasis on the importance of living wisely continues through the rest of the book (cf. 2:26; 11:9; 12:14).

"Christ paid Mary for her ointment with a *good name*, a name in the gospels (Matt. xxvi. 13)."¹

The mother rubbed the "good oil" on her baby and supposedly got it off to a good start in life by doing so.

7:2-4 The point of these verses is that it is wise to bear the brevity of life in mind as one lives (cf. 12:1).

"Better to attend a funeral than a party (e.g., wedding), as it turns the focus beyond the sun (to questions of eternal significance[])."²

"For Qohelet, it is better to go to the house of mourning, because that is our ultimate destination anyway."³

The "heart" (vv. 2, 3) is where we make moral decisions (cf. Prov. 4:23). Thoughtful rather than thoughtless living is wise (cf. Ps. 90:12). Sobriety contrasts with self-indulgence.

"A sorrow shared may bring more inner happiness than an evening with back-slapping jokers (vv. 3-4)."⁴

7:5-6 All things considered, it is wiser to live a life of thoughtful self-restraint than to pursue a life of hedonism.

7:7-10 Both adversity and prosperity tempt people to abandon a wise lifestyle for one of folly. The wise man's prosperity might tempt him to accept a bribe, or his adversity might tempt him to oppress others (v. 7; cf. Prov. 30:8-9).

¹Henry, p. 800.

²Cone, p. 361.

³Bartholomew, p. 247.

⁴J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 1174.

"... even a wise person can be made a fool when money becomes involved."¹

Impatience and pride (v. 8), anger (v. 9), and dissatisfaction (v. 10) might also lure a person from the submissive attitude that is part of the way of wisdom.

"It has been said that 'the good old days' are the combination of a bad memory and a good imagination, and often this is true."²

7:11-12 Prosperity can also be a good thing, especially if the prosperous person behaves wisely. Note that the wise normally live longer than the foolish (v. 12b; cf. Exod. 20:12; Eph. 6:1-3).

"... wisdom is a shield against the hot rays of adversity."³

7:13-14 We cannot understand why God uses adversity and prosperity as He does. A man or woman of faith trusts God nonetheless. Therefore, we should enjoy the times of prosperity, and remember in the times of adversity that God is in control (Rom. 8:28).

"God balances our lives by giving us enough blessings to keep us happy and enough burdens to keep us humble."⁴

The clause "a person will not discover" or the equivalent is another structural marker in Ecclesiastes that indicates the end of a subsection in chapters 7 and 8 (cf. 7:14, 24, 28 twice; 8:17 thrice). Other key structural markers are the phrases "futility and striving after wind" (1:14; et al.) and "people do not know" (9:1; et al.).⁵

¹Longman, p. 185.

²Wiersbe, p. 514.

³Leupold, p. 159.

⁴Wiersbe, p. 515.

⁵See A. G. Wright, pp. 325-26.

2. Righteousness and wickedness 7:15-29

The point of this pericope is that even though the righteous sometimes do not receive a reward in this life and the wicked prosper, it is still better to live righteously.

"Proper evaluation of a man's character helps to explain the apparent inequalities in divine providence."¹

7:15-18 Solomon had observed many exceptions to the dogma of retribution (i.e., the belief that God always punishes the wicked with adversity and blesses the righteous with prosperity in this lifetime; v. 15; cf. Job). Therefore we should not conclude that by being righteous we can escape adversity (v. 16). The righteousness in view here seems to be self-righteousness (cf. Matt. 5:20; 23:1-36).²

"It is a fanatical, pharisaical righteousness, separated from God; for the 'fear of God' is in antithesis to it (vs. 18; ch. 5:3, 7; Matt. 6:1-7; 9:14; 23:23, 24; Rom. 10:3; I Tim. 4:3)."³

We should probably translate "ruin yourself" (v. 16, Heb. *tissomem*) "be appalled, astounded."

Neither should we conclude that because God does not consistently punish the wicked in this life, it is all right to sin (v. 17). One who fears God should avoid both of these extremes (v. 18). Solomon was not saying in these verses that a little wickedness and folly are good, the so-called "golden mean."⁴ Rather, he advocated living life in the light of God's judgment, but not falling into the trap of believing in rigid retribution. Even though Solomon was uncertain about the

¹Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes ...*, p. 78.

²R. N. Whybray, "Qoheleth the Immoralist? (Qoh 7:16-17)," in *Israelite Wisdom ...*, pp. 191-204; J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 1176; Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes ...*, p. 86.

³Jamieson, et al., p. 482.

⁴Murphy, pp. 70, 72-73.

time that God would judge, he was sure that God would judge righteously.¹

7:19-24 Righteousness does not always protect from adversity (vv. 15-16), but wisdom will help guard us against it (v. 19).

"Wisdom is not the knowledge of accumulated facts but the inner strength that comes from a God-instructed conscience."²

Wisdom is necessary because righteousness does not protect completely (v. 20). Solomon illustrated the fact—in verses 21 and 22—that no one is perfectly righteous. If you think you are perfect, just ask those closest to you if you are (v. 21). If people are honest with themselves, they will admit that they are not perfect (v. 22).

"In itself, 21 f. is excellent advice, since to take too seriously what people say of us is asking to get hurt, and in any case we have all said some wounding things in our time."³

Wisdom also has its limitations. It is not a completely reliable shield against adversity (vv. 23-24). Even Solomon with all his wisdom could not ward off all adversity. He did not have sufficient wisdom to do this, and no one else does either.

7:25-29 The connections between wisdom and righteousness on the one hand, and folly and wickedness on the other, are especially close in this pericope. As in Proverbs 1—9, Solomon personified folly as a woman (v. 26). As Solomon sought to understand wisdom (v. 25), he learned that the person who wants to please God will escape folly and wickedness, but the person who prefers to sin will not (v. 26). Folly is worse than death (v. 26).

¹For a more complete defense of this interpretation, see Wayne A. Brindle, "Righteousness and Wickedness in Ecclesiastes 7:15-18," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 23:3 (Autumn 1985):243-57.

²J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 1176.

³Kidner, p. 69.

The "man" in view in verse 28 is the person who is pleasing to God (v. 26). The Hebrew word for "man" here (*adam*) is generic, and refers to people, rather than males in contrast to females. Solomon meant in 28b that a person who is pleasing to God is extremely rare (cf. Job 9:3; 33:23). The reference to "woman" (v. 28c) is a way of expressing in parallelism (with "man") that no one really pleases God completely.

"Solomon, in the word 'thousand,' alludes to his three hundred wives and seven hundred concubines. Among these it was not likely that he should find the fidelity which *one* true wife pays to *one* husband."¹

A paraphrase of verse 28b-c is, "I have found very few people who please God—no one at all really." The idea definitely is not literally that one out of 1,000 males pleases God, but no females at all do (cf. Prov. 12:4; 31:10; et al.). This is a good example of Hebrew parallelism that, if unobserved, can lead to a bizarre interpretation.

"This is one man's experience [i.e., the writer's], and he does not universalize it."²

"Some commentators have suggested that this woman whose heart is a snare and a trap (v. 26) is but the personification of that wickedness which is folly itself. She is the 'strange woman' of Proverbs 1-9. Perhaps this interpretation is the closest to what Solomon intended, for the topic is wisdom from 7:20 to 8:1."³

Who is responsible for the universal failure to please God? Solomon said people are, not God (v. 29). God made us upright in the sense of being able to choose to please or not please God. Nevertheless, we have all gone our own way in pursuit of "many schemes." The same Hebrew word translated "schemes" in verse 29 reads "explanation" in verses 25 and

¹Jamieson, et al., p. 483.

²Kidner, p. 72. Cf. Ps. 37:25.

³Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes ...*, p. 88. See also Murphy, p. 76.

27. The point is not that people have turned aside to sin, but that they have sought out many explanations. They have sought many explanations of what? In the context, Solomon was talking about God's plan. Failing to fully understand God's scheme of things, people have turned aside to their own explanations of these things.

3. The value and limitations of wisdom ch. 8

This chapter begins by lauding wisdom (v. 1), and it ends by showing that it has limitations (v. 17).

"At every turn this chapter will face us with our inability to call the tune and master our affairs. On one level after another we find ourselves pinned down, hunted down and disorientated."¹

The value of wisdom 8:1-9

In Solomon's day, the king had far-reaching power over his subjects, so it became imperative to avoid his wrath. We must keep this background in view because it lies behind what Solomon said in chapter 8.

- 8:1 A wise person understands things that a fool does not. Moreover, he or she is able to behave appropriately. One's facial and general appearances reflect wise behavior (cf. Num. 6:25; Prov. 7:13).
- 8:2-4 The wise person behaves appropriately in the presence of his king. He keeps his oath of allegiance that he has made before God (v. 2). He does not resign from his service (v. 3a) or join in a revolt against the king (v. 3b). Furthermore, he does not dispute the king's authority and sovereignty (v. 4).
- 8:5-7 The wise person also knows when and how to speak and act (v. 5). Often people suffer harm as a result of not knowing what will happen and when (vv. 6-7). Consequently, they misdirect their words and deeds.

¹Kidner, p. 74.

8:8-9 Verse 8 means that no one can escape the consequences of his or her own wickedness. The idea is that the king will punish him or her (v. 9). Thus it is important to have wisdom.

The limitations of wisdom 8:10-17

Wisdom can enable a person to avoid the king's wrath (vv. 2-9), but it cannot enable him or her to understand fully why God deals with people as He does (vv. 10-17).

8:10-14 There are two apparent inequities in verse 10: First, the wicked get an honorable burial. Second, people soon forget the godly. These verses provide instances of exceptions to the retribution doctrine.

8:15 In view of these contradictions, Solomon again recommended the enjoyment of life, not in a pleasure-mad way, but in the sense of enjoying the fruits of one's labor (cf. 2:24; 3:12-13; 5:18-19). This joy will make labor more palatable. We should receive each day's joys as God's good gifts and rejoice in them.

8:16-17 Solomon meant that even the wisest, most energetic person—Solomon himself—could not fully understand God's ways (cf. 7:14b; 28a; Matt. 9:34). This is a point he made since 6:10.

"Thus, since God has made the is, the ought, and the what will be unattainable to man through either the use of reason or experience, all that man can know of them is through that which God reveals. True understanding and resultant well-being, then, comes only from the beyond the sun perspective that God provides."¹

Baxter listed "the ten vanities" in the book: The vanity (or futility) of ...

human wisdom (2:15-16)

human labor (2:19-21)

human purpose (2:26)

human rivalry (4:4)

human avarice (4:7)

human fame (4:16)

¹Cone, p. 391.

human unsatiety (5:10)
 human coveting (6:9)
 human frivolity (7:6)
 human awards (8:10, 14)¹

C. MAN'S IGNORANCE OF THE FUTURE 9:1—11:6

The emphasis in this section of the book is on what man does not know because God has not revealed many things. Solomon also emphasized, however, that the remaining mystery in this subject (8:16-17) must not diminish human joy (9:1-9) or prevent us from working with all our might (9:10—11:6).² The subsections that follow begin "people do not know" or the equivalent (9:1, 12; 11:2; cf. 9:5; 10:14, 15; 11:5 twice, 6).

"Before the positive emphasis of the final three chapters can emerge, we have to make sure that we shall be building on nothing short of hard reality. In case we should be cherishing some comforting illusions, chapter 9 confronts us with the little that we know, then with the vast extent of what we cannot handle: in particular, with death, the ups and downs of fortune, and the erratic favours of the crowd."³

1. The future of the righteous on earth 9:1-10

9:1 "All this" refers to the general pattern of God's inconsistent retribution that Solomon had discussed. Even though he could not predict whether a given person would experience prosperity or adversity, he believed all people are in God's hand. He sovereignly controls individual destiny, and He may manifest either apparent love or apparent hate toward anyone in this life.

"Every possible thing may befall a man—what actually meets him is the determination and providence of God."⁴

¹Baxter, 3:163.

²Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes ...*, p. 92.

³Kidner, p. 80.

⁴Delitzsch, p. 356.

9:2-3 In the sense just explained, all share the same fate. No one knows what God may send him or her. "Clean" (v. 2) means ritually clean. Because we do not know what our fate will be, we may yield to temptation to sin (v. 3). Everyone experiences both love and hate in this life, though in differing proportion, and everyone eventually dies.

9:4-6 However, the inequities in life and the certainty of death should not make us give up on living. Life is better than death, because where there is life there is hope.¹

In the ancient Near East, people despised wild dogs and they honored lions (v. 4). Solomon's point was that it is better to be alive and have no honor, than dead and receive honor, because the living also has consciousness and hope. The living can enjoy life, but the dead cannot. According to Roland Murphy, this is the only time in the book that this note of hope is sounded.²

"The dead do not know anything" (v. 5) does not mean they are insensible. Later revelation indicates that the dead are aware of their feelings, the past, other people, and other things (cf. Matt. 25:46; Luke 16:19-31; et al.). In the context, this sentence means the dead have no capacity to enjoy life as the living can.

"This is where the idea of a 'soul sleep' arises (see also v. 10 [and 12:7])."³

Verses 4-6 do not contradict 4:2-3, where Solomon said that the dead are better off than the living. A person who is suffering oppression may feel it is preferable to be dead (4:1), but when a person is dead his opportunities for earthly enjoyment do not exist (9:4-6).

"Verses 1-6 are an anguished reflection on the finality of death as the destiny of every person.

¹Leupold, p. 211.

²Murphy, p. 91.

³McGee, 3:129.

As so often with Qohelet, he begins with an orthodox statement and then subverts it."¹

9:7-9 Again Solomon recommended the present enjoyment of the good things that God allows us to experience in life (cf. 2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-19). This was his conclusion—since our future on the earth is uncertain, and since after we die we cannot enjoy these things. In particular, we should enjoy food and drink (v. 7), clean clothing and perfume (v. 8), and marital companionship (v. 9), among other of life's legitimate pleasures. This list includes some luxuries as well as the necessities of life (cf. 5:19).

"God has already approved your works" (v. 7) means that such enjoyment is God's will for us. This encouraging word does not contradict the fact that we are the stewards of all that God entrusts to us. However, this verse should help us realize that it is not sinful to take pleasure in what God has given us—even some luxuries. We need to balance gratefulness and generosity, keeping some things and giving away others. This balance is not easy, but it is important.

9:10 Solomon's second recommendation was diligent work (cf. John 9:4). He viewed work as a privilege that the dead do not have. Probably our present toil connected with the curse on nature is in view here. We will be active in service in heaven, for example, but this will not be toilsome work as we know it now (Rev. 22:3). If you think work is not a blessing, spend some time talking with someone who has been out of work for a long time and has been looking for it.

"This is the world of service; that to come is the world of recompence [*sic*]. This is the world of probation and preparation for eternity. Harvest-days are busy days; and we must make hay while the sun shines. Serving God and working out our

¹Bartholomew, p. 299.

salvation must be done with *all that is within us*, and all [that is within us is] little enough."¹

2. The future of the wise on earth 9:11—10:11

Solomon's emphasis in 9:1-10 was on the fact that a righteous person could not be more certain of his or her earthly future than the wicked. In 9:11—10:11, his point was that the wise cannot be more sure of his or her earthly future than the fool. Solomon returned from the "ought," in the preceding section, to the "is," in the following one.²

9:11-12 Wisdom does not guarantee a good job or a prosperous future. Likewise, sometimes the fastest runner does not win a foot race, and the stronger army does not win a battle. Usually the best succeed, but not always. The reason for this is that everyone is subject to misfortune that we cannot anticipate or control (v. 12).

"Duties are ours; events, God's."³

9:13-16 Clearly, in this illustration, wisdom is better than strength, but even so it does not guarantee a reward (cf. Judg. 9:53; 2 Sam. 20). People generally do not value wisdom as highly as wealth, even though wisdom is really worth more than wealth.

9:17—10:1 Just a little folly can decrease the value of wisdom. For example, a wise person can end his opportunity to provide wisdom to others by giving foolish advice just once. This, too, is unfortunate, but it is a fact of life. The theme expressed in 9:17-18 is elaborated in 10:1-20.⁴

"A man may commit one sin, and this can destroy a lifetime of virtue."⁵

¹Henry, p. 805.

²Cone, p. 397.

³Jamieson, et al., p. 485.

⁴See Graham S. Ogden, "Qoheleth IX 17—X 20: Variations on the Theme of Wisdom's Strength and Vulnerability," *Vetus Testamentum* 30 (1980):27-37, reprinted in *Reflecting with ...*, pp. 331-40; and Cone's philosophical parallel: Platonic aristocracy, p. 399.

⁵Laurin, p. 592.

"One night on the town can mean a lifetime in the darkness of disease or even death. ... A mother spends twenty-one years teaching a son to be wise, and some girl will come along and make a fool out of him in five minutes."¹

"You are a preacher, whoever you are. It may be in a very small circle, but you are affecting someone."²

"The more delicate the perfume, the more easily spoiled is the ointment. Common oil is not so liable to injury. So the higher a man's religious character is, the more hurt is caused by a sinful folly in him."³

Bartholomew believed that Qohelet's point was that "wisdom is exceedingly vulnerable to folly, and for Qohelet this makes its value questionable."⁴

10:2-7 A wise person may also lose his opportunity to give counsel through the error of someone else—for example, one of the rulers he has been advising. "The right" and "the left" (v. 2) are not the political right and left: conservatism and liberalism. They are the place of protection and the place of danger, or, to put it another way: the correct way and the incorrect way (cf. Ps. 16:8; 110:5; 121:5).⁵

"... in the languages of the Scriptures the 'right hand' suggests that which is honorable, mighty, associated with the oath, even with God and His work, so that, as in other languages, 'right hand' becomes synonymous with that which is right, good, honorable (cf. Luke 1:11). Of necessity, the left hand becomes associated with that which is

¹McGee, 3:132. Paragraph division omitted.

²Ibid., 3:131.

³Jamieson, et al., p. 485.

⁴Bartholomew, p. 321.

⁵Cf. Delitzsch, p. 373; Murphy, p. 101.

evil, perverse, sinister, morally repellant (cf. Matt. 25:41)."¹

The "road" (v. 3) is not a literal highway but the fool's metaphorical way of life. The wise man does not quit his job when his boss gets angry with him. He maintains his composure and so gives the impression, rightly or wrongly, that his boss did not need to be angry.

"The lesson is that the self-controlled person who has less rank is really more powerful than the out-of-control supposed superior."²

Unfortunately, one's good work does not always receive the praise it deserves. Sometimes the promotion goes to the less qualified person because of the supervisor's caprice or folly. Consequently, the ruler's illogical decision nullifies the better worker's wisdom (vv. 5-7).

"To work hard, save your money, and study late do not always mean that you will become a success. The fool next door may inherit a million dollars."³

"Things are simply not always what we think they ought to be (9:11); but God is still in control, and He works His good purposes through events we do not understand."⁴

10:8-11 Improper timing can also nullify wisdom. Four different situations illustrate the fact that though wisdom is valuable in a variety of everyday tasks (vv. 8-10), one can lose its advantage if the timing is not right (v. 11).

"The sum of these four clauses [in vv. 8-9] is certainly not merely that he who undertakes a dangerous matter exposes himself to danger; the

¹Leupold, p. 232.

²Hubbard, p. 213.

³McGee, 3:133.

⁴*The Nelson ...*, p. 1093.

author means to say, in this series of proverbs which treat of the distinction between wisdom and folly, that the wise man is everywhere conscious of his danger, and guards against it."¹

"If we meet with knotty pieces of timber, men of perverse and ungovernable spirits, and we think to master them by force and violence, the attempt may turn to our own damage."²

"A young man told me the other day that God had called him to preach, and he wanted to take a short course to prepare himself. I said, 'Young man, don't do that. Sharpen your hoe. Sharpen your sword. Don't go out untrained. Take the time for sharpening.'"³

3. The folly of criticism in view of the uncertain future **10:12-20**

Since we do not know what our earthly future holds (vv. 12-15), even though governmental officials may prove reprehensible (vv. 16-19), it is not wise to criticize them (v. 20).

10:12-15 These proverbs deal with the wise and unwise use of the tongue. Generally, wise people speak graciously, but fools destroy themselves by the way they speak. The fool continues to talk even though neither he nor anyone else can tell what the future holds. The picture here seems to be of the fool making dogmatic statements about the future. The fool also does not even perceive what is most obvious. He is so shortsighted that he sees no value in his work (v. 15a). "How to go to a city" is a figure of speech such as "when to come in out of the rain" (v. 15b). The point is that the fool is a jerk.

¹Delitzsch, p. 379.

²Henry, p. 806.

³McGee, 3:133.

"Roads to the various cities [in Israel] were marked and easy to follow."¹

10:16-19 These proverbs show what bad effects can come from unqualified, irresponsible leadership (cf. Isa. 5:11; Acts 2:15).

"It should be recalled that the flat roofs in Palestine were covered with lime, which eventually cracked and allowed rain to seep in (cf. Prov 19:13; 27:15), since no run-off was provided [v. 18]."²

Verse 19 reflects the bad attitudes of the profligate leaders.

"... the point is not that every man has his price but that every gift has its use—and silver, in the form of money, is the most versatile of all."³

10:20 In spite of such bad leadership, Solomon urged restraint. If you complain, those in authority may eliminate you. Corrupt officials often have supporters in the most private places who take the names and words of complainers back to their masters. As the old saying goes, "Walls have ears."

Was Solomon saying that people should submit to governmental corruption and oppression without ever speaking out? The practices of Jesus, the prophets, and the apostles cast doubt on this interpretation. Probably Solomon had conditions in view in which there was no possibility that speaking out would produce any change for the better. In this section of verses he was addressing the fact that wise people may lose their influence because of the actions of others (10:12-20). His point was: do not endanger your future unnecessarily. He was not speaking about how to affect change in a crooked government (cf. Isa. 5:11-12; Amos 6:4-6; 2 Pet. 2:13-19).

¹Leupold, p. 248.

²Murphy, p. 105.

³Kidner, p. 95.

"Everything that has been said about wisdom and folly points again to the main lesson of Ecclesiastes: the need to face life as it really is, and take our life day by day from the hand of a sovereign God."¹

4. Wise behavior in view of the uncertain future 11:1-6

"At last the Teacher is approaching the climax of his book. We cannot see God's whole plan, and there is nothing in this world that we can build on so as to find satisfaction or the key to the meaning of things. Yet we are to fulfill God's purpose by accepting our daily lot in life as from him and by thus pleasing him make each day a good day. But how can we please him when there is so much we cannot understand? The Teacher has already shown that certain things stand out as right or wrong, and a sensible conscience will see these as an indication of what God desires. This section gives further wise advice in the light of an uncertain future. We must use common sense in sensible planning and in eliminating as many of the uncertainties as we can."²

Ignorance of the future should lead to diligent work, not despair.

11:1 Casting one's bread on the water probably refers to commercial transactions involving the transportation of commodities by ship, not to charitable acts.³

"... Eastern bread has for the most part the form of cakes, and is thin (especially as is prepared hastily for guests, ... Gen. xviii. 6, xix. 3); so that when thrown into the water, it remains on the surface (like a chip of wood, Hos. X. 7), and is carried away by the stream."⁴

¹Eaton, p. 138.

²J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," pp. 1188-89.

³Ibid., p. 1189. Leupold, pp. 256-57, argued for charitable acts.

⁴Delitzsch, pp. 391-92.

If you follow the advice in this verse literally, you will experience disappointment. It probably refers to buying and selling.

A third interpretation is that casting bread on the water represents a senseless act. Even though the bread dissolves, such an act may have unexpected consequences, because we cannot know the future.¹

Another view is that "The verse is not about foreign investments, but liberality."²

11:2 This proverb advocates diversifying your investments, rather than putting all of your resources in one place.

"*'Seven or eight'* is a Hebrew numerical formula called X, X + 1. It occurs frequently in Proverbs (chaps. 6, 30) and in the first two chapters of Amos. Here it is not to be taken literally but means 'plenty and more than plenty,' 'the widest possible diversification within the guidelines of prudence. ...' Seven means 'plenty,' and eight means, 'Go a bit beyond that.'"³

11:3-4 Do not wait until conditions are perfect before you go to work, but labor diligently even though conditions may appear foreboding.⁴ After all, God controls these conditions, and we cannot tell whether good or bad conditions will materialize. McGee understood this saying differently:

"It is best to have a clear understanding of a situation at the very beginning before you launch a venture because, after it begins, it is very difficult to make any change."⁵

¹Murphy, pp. 106-7.

²Seow, p. 335.

³Hubbard, p. 227.

⁴Cf. Delitzsch, p. 396.

⁵McGee, 3:135.

- 11:5 "Few parents understand precisely how a baby is formed, but most follow the rules of common sense for the welfare of the mother and the unborn child. This is exactly the application that the Teacher makes here to the plan of God. Indeed, it illustrates the whole theme of the book. We cannot understand all the ways God works to fulfill his plan, but we can follow God's rules for daily living and thus help bring God's purpose to birth."¹
- 11:6 Since the future is in God's hands, the wise person proceeds with his work diligently, hoping his efforts will yield fruit, as they usually do.

"The key to this section is found in v. 6b—one simply does not know what God is going to do in the future."²

"Put in a nutshell the *theme* of the passage is this: we should use wisdom boldly and carefully, cannily yet humbly, taking joy from life while remembering that our days of joy are limited by the certainty of death."³

"Despite human ignorance about reality and especially about what is going to happen, one cannot remain inactive. Paralysis is out of the question."⁴

IV. THE WAY OF WISDOM 11:7—12:14

In 1:12—6:9 Solomon demonstrated that all work is ultimately futile for two reasons: It does not yield anything really permanent under the sun, and we can never be sure that we will enjoy the fruits of our labor before we die. In 6:10—11:6 he pointed out that we can never be sure which of our efforts will succeed, because we do not know God's plans or what the

¹J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 1189.

²Bartholomew, p. 335.

³Hubbard, p. 225.

⁴Murphy, p. 110.

future holds. In 11:7—12:14, he emphasized how to live acceptably before God in view of these realities.

"The Teacher has discussed how we should act in view of the uncertainties of life. We must recognize the certainties but must plan in such a way as not to be thrown off balance when the unexpected happens. Now the Teacher goes on to speak of the certainty of growing up and growing old."¹

A. JOYFUL AND RESPONSIBLE LIVING 11:7—12:7

Solomon had already advocated the enjoyment of life and responsible living in several of the preceding sections (2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-10). Now he stressed these points.

1. Joyful living 11:7-10

11:7-8 "Having by many excellent precepts taught us how to live well, the preacher comes now to teach us how to die well."²

The first reason we should enjoy life now is that we cannot do so after we die. As Christians we realize that life beyond the grave will be much better for believers than life on this earth. Solomon would not have disputed this had he known what we do as a result of revelation given after his lifetime. For Solomon, the future after death was unclear, enigmatic, and therefore vaporous (Heb. *hebel*, "futility" in v. 8) in this sense (cf. 8:10, 14).

Solomon's advice to enjoy life is still good for today, since our earthly experience is indeed short, and we will never return this way again. Even though the future is bright for the believer, the relative futility of our work and the uncertainty of our future on the earth still make joyful living a wise choice.

¹J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 1190.

²Henry, p. 808.

11:9-10 The second reason to enjoy life is that youth is fleeting.¹ Solomon balanced his counsel to the youth, to follow his or her impulses and wholesome desires, with a reminder that God will judge us all eventually. Solomon probably thought of God's judgments before death (cf. 2:24-26; 7:17).

"The most noxious worm that gnaws at the root of joy in evil times is 'vexation,' 'fretfulness' (*ka'as*) over existing circumstances."²

"To older people it may seem to be too risky to advise a young person to walk in the ways of his heart and the sight of his eyes. Yet the advice is coupled with a reminder of responsibility before God. This is not to take away with one hand what is given with the other because a sense of responsibility belongs to youth just as vitality does."³

In all his writings, Solomon never advocated sinful self-indulgence—only the enjoyment of life's legitimate pleasures and good gifts.

2. Responsible living 12:1-7

This pericope expands the ideas Solomon introduced in 11:7-10, by focusing on advancing old age and death.⁴ These ideas are: the ultimate frustration, and the epitome of impermanence, that we can experience. Whereas most interpreters have interpreted the poem that follows as an allegory describing old age, there have been other interpretations: both literal and symbolical.⁵

Some believe that the poem is a description of a winter's day as a metaphor of old age. Others take it as describing an individual's reaction to a fearful

¹See Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes ...*, p. 116.

²Leupold, p. 271.

³J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 1191.

⁴See Barry C. Davis, "Ecclesiastes 12:1-8—Death, an Impetus for Life," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:591 (July-September 1991):298-318.

⁵See Bartholomew, pp. 346-53; *The Nelson ...*, p. 1094.

thunderstorm. Others understand it as a figure of a ruined house that represents the failure of human efforts. And still others believe it uses the decay of a house to describe death and human frailty.

"... the really critical issue is the nature of the language in vv 2-6. Is it merely symbolical, describing the reality of old age under several different metaphors? Or is it properly allegorical, so that each detail in the description has a transferred meaning? Or is it a mixture of both with the allegory appearing only in vv 3-4a?"¹

Most conservative interpreters, including myself, have opted for a metaphorical understanding of this section, which Murphy called "literal."²

The basic imperative 12:1

Again, Solomon began with a clear statement of his point, and then proceeded to prove and illustrate its truth in the verses that follow. "Remember" means to live your life with what you know about God clearly in view, not just to remember that there is a God (cf. 11:9-10; 12:13; Deut. 8:18; Ps. 119:55). "Creator" references God as the One to whom we are responsible, because we are His creatures (cf. v. 7; Gen. 2:7; 3:19). The "evil days" are the days of old age and death (cf. 11:10; 12:2-5).³ Thus Solomon urged consideration of the beginning ("Creator") and the end ("the evil days") of life.

"In view of the fact that nothing under the sun can satisfy the human heart, Solomon says, 'Get back to God.'"⁴

"How can we expect God should help us when we are old, if we will not serve him when we are young?"⁵

Our lives pass quickly, as the following poem says:

"When as a child, I laughed and wept, Time crept;
When as a youth, I dreamed and talked, Time walked;

¹Murphy, p. 115.

²Ibid.

³For a study of Qoheleth's view of youth and old age, see James L. Crenshaw, "Youth and Old Age in Qoheleth," *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1986):1-12.

⁴McGee, 3:137.

⁵Henry, p. 809.

When I became a full grown man, Time ran;
When older still I daily grew, Time flew;
Soon I shall find in traveling on, Time gone."¹

The coming of old age 12:2-5

Verses 2-7 are full of figures of speech that picture old age and death.² Some interpreters believed the writer was describing the aging process,³ and others believed death is the emphasis.⁴ Perhaps old age leading to death is the best option.⁵

12:2-3 Solomon likened the evil days first to an approaching rainstorm (v. 2) that is fearful and uncertain (cf. 11:7-8). The Hebrews regarded any decline in a person's essential energy as a sign that death was beginning to set in (cf. 1 Kings 1:1-4; Ps. 18:4-5; 88:3-5).

"The house" is probably a figure of speech for the inhabitant of a house (i.e., a person). The "watchmen" of the house (v. 3) probably refer to one's arms and hands, and the "strong men" to the legs. The "grinders" are probably the teeth, and "those who look through windows" the eyes.⁶

12:4 "The doors to the street" are probably the lips that are shut because of the absence of teeth in the mouth: "the grinding mill." Another view is that they are the ears.⁷ The writer alluded to the inability of old people to sleep soundly, as well as to their loss of hearing.

¹Anonymous, quoted in McGee, 3:139.

²See G. A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, pp. 186-91; Harry Torcszyner, "The Riddle in the Bible," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 1 (1924):125-49; Michael Leahy, "The Meaning of Ecclesiastes 12:1-5," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 19 (1952):297-300, reprinted in *Reflecting with ...*, pp. 375-79; and Michael V. Fox, "Aging and Death in Qoheleth 12," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 42 (1988):55-77, reprinted in *Reflecting with ...*, pp. 381-99.

³E.g., Crenshaw, "Youth and ..."; Eaton.

⁴E.g., Hubbard, Ogden.

⁵Murphy, p. 121.

⁶Ibid., p. 118; Jamieson, et al., p. 487.

⁷Longman, p. 271; Leupold, p. 279.

12:5 Aged individuals become more fearful of heights, traffic, and travel. The "almond tree" blossoms white like the hair of an old person, and the hair falls off as he or she ages, like the almond tree casts its white flowers. An elderly person is less sprightly in his or her movements. The "caper berry"—apparently an appetite stimulant, not an aphrodisiac¹—is a poor translation that the Septuagint introduced. The text should read "and desire fails," which gives the same meaning, namely, all desires die down. Man's "dark house" (rather than "eternal home") is a reference to the grave: Sheol.²

The coming of death 12:6-7

12:6 Solomon described the end of life, first, as the extinguishing of a light. The "golden bowl" is a bowl that holds a flame. When the "silver cord" that holds it breaks, the bowl crashes to the floor and the light goes out. Gold and silver express the great value of life.

The second description of death is water that one can no longer draw out of a well.

The "wording gives us a picture of the ruined apparatus plus the wheel as they have crashed down into the old cistern. So man breaks down and falls into a pit also."³

Whereas the first figure emphasizes the value or preciousness of life, the second one stresses its fragile nature. The pitcher would have been clay.

Another interpretation understands the "silver cord" to represent the spinal cord, the "golden bowl" the brain, the "pitcher" the heart, and the "wheel" the circulatory system."⁴

¹Delitzsch, p. 417.

²For reasons why "dark house" is the preferable translation of the Hebrew *bet olam*, see Ronald F. Youngblood, "Qoheleth's 'Dark House' (Eccles. 12:5)," in *A Tribute to Gleason Archer*, pp. 211-27, also reprinted in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29:4 (December 1986), pp. 397-410.

³Leupold, p. 286.

⁴See *The Nelson ...*, p. 1095.

"The description of old age and of death is furnished, not to demonstrate what a vain thing life is, but to show the need of making haste to remember the Creator."¹

12:7 This verse describes the reversal of the process by which God originally created man (Gen. 2:7; cf. Gen. 3:19; Job 34:14-15; Ps. 104:29-30).

"Man is a strange sort of creature, a ray of heaven united to a clod of earth; at death these are separated, and each goes to the place whence it came."²

"This speaks of the continuance of existence for the spirit, despite the failing of the flesh. The awareness of this reality speaks to the importance of recognizing the eternal significance of all activity through the proper perspective of and relation to God. Such awareness is innate (3:11) if we will but listen, and represents a marvelous contrast to the naturalistic under the sun viewpoint that can boast no certainty about anything."³

Here is a good prayer for the elderly:

"Thou knowest, Lord, I'm growing older.
My fire of youth begins to smolder;
I somehow tend to reminisce
And speak of good old days I miss.
I am more moody, bossy, and
Think folk should jump at my command.
Help me, Lord, to conceal my aches
And realize my own mistakes.
Keep me sweet, silent, sane, serene,

¹Leupold, p. 292.

²Henry, p. 809.

³Cone, p. 416.

Instead of crusty, sour, and mean."¹

B. THE CONCLUDING SUMMARY 12:8-14

In conclusion, and as the end of an *inclusio*, Solomon repeated his original thesis (v. 8; cf. 1:2) and his counsel in view of life's realities (vv. 13-14). In between these statements, he set forth his source of authority for writing what we have in Ecclesiastes (vv. 9-12). Consequently, some commentators take verse 8 as the end of the body of Ecclesiastes and consider verses 9-14 as an epilogue.²

12:8 All human work (1:12—6:9) and wisdom (6:10—11:6) are ultimately ephemeral (i.e., lacking ability to produce anything of ultimate substance or lasting worth in this life).

12:9-12 "Probably it was an editor under the guiding hand of God who wrote these evaluations of Solomon [in v. 9 and perhaps v. 10], much as Joshua or some other editor wrote an evaluation of Moses under the influence of God's Spirit (Deut. 34)."³

The phrase "the words of the wise" (v. 11) or the equivalent, appears only four times in the Bible: Prov. 1:6; 22:17; Eccles. 9:17; 12:11. The phrase "these collections" refers to other collections of wise sayings (e.g., Job and Proverbs). Ultimately all wisdom comes from God. "Goads" (v. 11) are prodding sticks, and people who master this wisdom literature are similar to "driven nails" in that they are stable and secure. The "one Shepherd" in view could be Solomon, Moses, or, most likely, God (cf. Prov. 2:6).

"Beyond this" (v. 12) evidently refers to beyond the wisdom literature that God has revealed, in view of verse 11. Solomon warned his disciple that looking elsewhere in other books for divine wisdom would only wear him out.

¹Anonymous, quoted in McGee, 3:139.

²E.g., Murphy, p. 124.

³*The Nelson ...*, p. 1095.

"After the exhortation to the right use of the sacred Scriptures, follows a warning against the study of the literature of the world."¹

"Writing was well established as a hallmark of civilization from about 3500 BC onwards."²

This verse does not say that all study is tiring, though that is true. It means that study of books—other than what God has revealed—in order to learn true wisdom, is an endless, wearisome occupation. This is not to say we should avoid reading books other than the Bible, or that other books do not impart wisdom. It is saying that the main place to look when you want to find true wisdom is God's Word.

12:13-14 Solomon's concluding statement reiterated what he said earlier (2:24-26; 7:15-18; 11:9-10; 12:1) and elsewhere (Prov. 1:7; cf. Job 28:28). Trust and obedience are what everyone owes God—in view of future judgment.

"Though a future judgment after death is indeed the solution to the enigma Solomon had observed in the unequal distribution of justice in human history (cf. 7:15; 8:14), no evidence suggests that Solomon believed in [i.e., was aware of] such a judgment. Life after death was as enigmatic to him (cf. 11:8) as the unequal distribution of justice. His emphasis was on *this life* ('under the sun') and its opportunities for service (cf. 9:10; 12:1-7) and enjoyment (cf. 2:24-26; 3:12, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:7-10); he thought life after death offered no such opportunities (cf. 9:5-6, 10). Therefore he did not comment on any differences *after* death between the righteous and the wicked, the wise and the fools, man and beast."³

¹Hengstenberg, p. 265.

²Eaton, p. 155.

³Glenn, pp. 1006-7.

With the greater light of revelation—that we who live after God completed His special revelation in Scripture enjoy—it is even more important for us to follow Solomon's counsel. We should be content to leave the enigmas of life in God's hands. We should also follow Solomon's wise counsel to enjoy life, as God enables us to do so, and to serve God acceptably while we can.¹

"What is the 'profit' of living? What does a man get for all his work? He gets the living God! And his whole profit consists of fearing Him and obeying His Word."²

Why did the wisest man who ever lived make such a mess of his life? It was not because he was unintelligent or lacked wisdom. It was because of the choices he made. Compare Saul and David, the kings of Israel and Judah, and the restoration Jews. We may possess much wisdom yet fail because we choose not to use it. The key to success is volitional more than mental—choices more than brains. We have to choose to follow all this good advice.

¹See Greg W. Parsons, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Ecclesiastes," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160:638 (April-June 2003):159-73; 160:639 (July-September 2003):283-304..

²Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes ...*, p. 125.

Conclusion

The Book of Ecclesiastes contains an argument that is very difficult to unfold because the ideas that connect succeeding portions of the text are not always easy to discover. This has led many a commentator to despair, as the following quotation illustrates:

"A connected and orderly argument, an elaborate arrangement of parts, is as little to be looked for here as in the special portion of the Book of Proverbs which begins with chapter X., or as in the alphabetical Psalms."¹

One of the keys to staying with Solomon in his reasoning is to understand the perspective from which he spoke. Phrases such as "under the sun" and "advantage"—plus remembering how much special revelation Solomon had—are absolutely crucial to understanding what he was and was not saying. The recurrence of other key phrases such as "futility and striving after wind," "futilities of futilities," "does not know," "cannot discover," and "you do not know" also help us. They note the movements of his thought from one section and emphasis to another. The accurate understanding of key terms such as "futility," "wise," "foolish," "prosperity," "adversity," "righteous," and "wicked" also clarify Solomon's thought.

"Qoheleth's intent in his writing is to pass judgment on man's misguided endeavors at mastering life by pointing out its limits and mysteries. He would prefer that man replace such false and illusory hopes with a confidence based on the joy of creation as God's gift."²

What Solomon observed about life is still as true today as it was when he lived. Neither the progress of revelation nor the progress of civilization has proved the preacher's inspired book false or his advice bad.

This book needs more popular exposition than it has received, because it exposes the error of contemporary man's ways so effectively. Bible teachers and preachers have neglected it because it is difficult to understand and expound. Nevertheless most people in our day live in a

¹Hengstenberg, p. 15. See also Delitzsch, p. 188.

²Johnston, p. 26.

superficial world of unreality, which Ecclesiastes cuts right through. Part of our difficulty in understanding the book is that we, too, think this way and assume Solomon was speaking on this level. However, he was dealing with the more fundamental issues of human existence that not many people think or talk about today.

"Strange as the remark may seem to some, we do not hesitate to say that if there is one book more than another in the Old Testament which we would like to send for special consideration to millions of our fellow-countrymen today, it is Ecclesiastes. And though it may sound still stranger, if there is one Old Testament book more than another which many *Christians* of today need to read and pray over, it is Ecclesiastes."¹

¹Baxter, 3:167-68.

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