

## Religious Critique

4:17—5:2; Jas 1:19

### **Hearing, Sacrificing, and Speaking at Worship 4:17—5:2**

1 Sam 15:22;  
Prov 15:7f; Hos 6:6

17 Watch your step  
when you go to the house of God.  
Enter in order to listen,  
and not, as the fools do, in order to deliver a sacrifice.  
They do not even perceive  
how to do evil.

5:1 Don't be too fast with your mouth;  
and in your heart don't burn  
to make a speech in the presence of God.

2 God is in heaven,  
you are on the earth,  
so let your words be few.

Dreams come with a multiplicity of business;  
and the voice of a fool with a multiplicity of words.

10:14; Prov 10:19

4:17 Another possible translation: "in order to give a sacrificial banquet."

### **Overview of 4:17—5:6**

In 4:17 there is suddenly introduced the second person singular imperative form of a wisdom admonition, and it predominates until 5:6. Equally abrupt is the introduction of a new subject matter: it deals with religious behavior, and it warns rather than commands. It is not the behavior of sinners or lawbreakers that is criticized, but rather that of the *kēsîlîm*, the uneducated, the "fools" (4:17; 5:2, 3). It seems to be concerned with religious busybodies, with the typical goings-on of popular piety, where the line is not drawn between upper and lower class, but rather within Qoheleth's own circle of well-off readers (see 4:17 alternative translation; 5:2).

Concretely, 4:17 deals with the practice of sacrifice (either the numerous sacrifices, or sacrificial celebrations that unfolded in festive banquets, which Qoheleth contrasts with “listening”); 5:1 deals with wordy prayers (which in ancient cultures were always spoken aloud and publicly); 5:3-4 deals with the tendency to make a vow apropos of every need (and then later not to fulfill it); 5:5 deals with the abuse of rites of atonement for unintentional sins (*šġgāgā*, “inadvertence”; see the law in Num 15:22-31) through which one could easily hide from oneself the fact that real guilt had occurred, involving divine punishment (v. 5 seems to consider as a new and serious sin this declaration that only an “oversight” had been made). Possibly in 5:2 and 6 under the key words “dreams” and “words” there is a hidden reference to another element of popular religion, speech: oracles, ecstatic utterances, and prophecies. It might even include a reference to apocalyptic, which was then at its beginnings.

Qoheleth’s positive advice about religious behavior is prepared in 5:1b: “God is in heaven, you are on earth”—a withdrawal, therefore, from an attitude toward God that has lost its distance from the recognition of the Wholly Other, or is in some way collegial with God. It comes to expression in the very last words of 5:6, which is a strikingly abrupt line, following upon a line that the reader must feel has been stretched to an unusual length by the insertion of “puffs of breath” in the middle of a normal word sequence: “then fear God.” With this, we are suddenly drawn back into the center of Qoheleth’s thought (see 3:14).

This fear of God is not limited to special religious activities, or able to be expressed through them alone. Rather, when life is freed from inauthenticity, it is the hidden essence of each moment of normal living. Whoever possesses it, moreover, is one who “knows.” With him every activity is bathed in the light of freedom. Only such a person would be even capable of “doing evil.” Fools, if they constantly, and properly, undertake atonement rituals for “oversights,” would certainly not be in a position to do evil (4:17b, which takes its meaning from 5:5).

In general, this is an unanswerable criticism of religiosity that is still perfectly valid in our day. It is not a solemn repudiation of any external form of religious worship, but only an instruction to behave well within this normal sphere of human existence. What alone matters is that the fear of God, which transcends any particular ritual act, must not be damaged. Thus this critique of religion in the central piece of the book (see the Introduction) according to its subject matter is akin to the last section, “Ethic.” Both offer advice, not to draw us away from the world,

but rather to root us more deeply in what is normal, albeit in the light of a wholly new knowledge.

The structure of the admonitory unit is artful. The sequence of 6 + 6 + 2 lines is repeated.

|       |         |                                 |             |
|-------|---------|---------------------------------|-------------|
| 4:17  | 6 lines | sacrifices                      | linkwords A |
| 5:1   | 6 lines | prayers                         | linkwords B |
| 5:2   | 2 lines | PROVERBLIKE SAYING ON DREAMS, 1 |             |
| 5:3-4 | 6 lines | swearing oaths                  | linkwords A |
| 5:5   | 6 lines | rites of inadvertence           | linkwords B |
| 5:6   | 2 lines | PROVERBLIKE SAYING ON DREAMS, 2 |             |

Each group of six corresponds to a theme (see above). The subject matter of 4:17 corresponds chiastically to that of 5:5, as does 5:1 and 5:3-4. Repeating linkwords, on the other hand, unite the groups of six in parallel correspondence: 4:17 to 5:3-4, and 5:1 to 5:5. The two groups of two offer proverblike foundations, each for the preceding twelve lines, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, they are related directly to one another: the second builds on the first, and at least 5:6 could suggest, without becoming too clear about it, that Qoheleth wanted to speak even further of visions and prophecies. Taken together, the admonitory unit contains  $2 \times 14 = 28 = 4 \times 7$  lines (see 3:2-8).

### **Notes on 4:17—5:2**

[4:17] “The house of God” must refer to the temple in Jerusalem. “Enter” then means walking through the temple courts.

### **Vows 5:3-6**

- 3 When you make a vow to God,  
don't delay in carrying it out.  
God takes no interest in a fool:  
Whatever you vow, carry it out.
- 4 It is better to vow nothing,  
than to vow and not carry it out.
- 5 Don't permit your mouth  
to bring your flesh down into sin.  
Never declare before the messenger:  
“It was an oversight.”  
Why should God rage about what you are saying,  
and destroy the actions of your hands?

5:3-6: Prov 20:25;

✓ Sir 18:22f;

Num 30:3;

Deut 23:22

+Num 15:25; Lev 4f

Num 15:22-31;

35:9-25

- 6 Rather, when dreams multiply, and puffs of breath and  
endless words,  
then fear God.

+12:13

### Notes on 5:3-6

[5:3-4] Menander offers the advice, “When you swear an oath to God, do not believe that he forgets it” (*Sententia* 347). But here Qoheleth is also supported by a text from his own tradition (Deut 23:22-24). He follows it verbatim in part. He changes only one thing: he transfers to v. 5 the statement of Deuteronomy that God would consider a vow made and not fulfilled to be a sin involving a guilt worthy of death, and thereby he connects it to the unallowable *šegāgā* declaration. In place of this statement he introduces the following, regarding the vow: “God takes no interest in a fool.” In a theological context, this cannot be dealing with the notion that a fool cannot find approval among humans. God is the subject of this remark. Whoever does not fill a vow forfeits divine approval. It is to be noted here that Qoheleth once again characterizes the sinner as a fool.

[5:5] “Sin” is probably meant in the sense of punishment for sin that God inflicts, because the mouth tries to talk its way out of it simply by declaring past behavior to be “oversight” or inadvertence. It affects the “flesh,” the body. Sickness is probably meant, if not death. Verse 5 shows that Qoheleth fully expects that God can act out of anger and punish (see 7:16-17). He also holds that God’s action is always perfect (3:11). What he denies throughout the book is only that humans can perceive the logic of divine action, and thereby get a handhold to manipulate their own future.

“The messenger” is generally taken to refer to the priest who collects the declarations of *šegāgā*, “oversight,” along with the corresponding sacrificial offerings.

## **Social Critique II**

### **The Power of Office and Greed 5:7-11**

- 3:16; 4:1;  
Exod 23:6-9;  
Mic 7:3
- 7 When you observe that the poor in the province are destitute, and justice and law-abiding thwarted, don't be surprised when interests work this way:  
    one higher up covers for another,  
    and others even higher up are behind both of them.
- 1:8; 4:8
- 8 But still it profits the land when a king takes care of its fields.
- 9 One who loves money  
    never has his fill of money;  
    and anyone who loves luxuries  
    never has sufficient income—that too is a breath.
- Prov 19:6; 6:2
- 10 When prosperity increases,  
    the numbers of those who eat it increase.  
    What benefit remains for the owner?  
    His eyes can only look.
- 6:9
- 11 Sweet is the sleep of the worker,  
    whether he has a little to eat or a lot.  
    The full belly of the wealthy man  
    does not let him rest in sleep.
- +2:23; 5:16

### **Overview of 5:7—6:10**

The second half of the social critique is characterized primarily by the theme of possession and wealth. The theme comes into full expression in 5:12—6:10, the second largest prose section of the book. In 5:7-11 it is prepared beforehand, but these verses serve at the same time as a frame for the central text, the critique of religion, 4:17—5:6. For this reason they also take up other themes, especially governance, and include a rather substantial text segment in the form of proverbs. The second-to-last section, 5:17-19, with its positive affirmation about happiness, corre-

sponds symmetrically to the second unit in the social critique section, 3:22; and it contains, as though incidentally, the theological statement that is perhaps the most important in the whole book.

### **Overview of 5:7-11**

The new theme—exploitation of the poor by the powerful—is connected back to the textual unit that preceded the “religious critique” insertion by its links to the themes of 3:16-22 (injustice in judgment) and 4:1-6 (exploitation). Whereas Qoheleth previously “observed,” in v. 7 he now speaks to the readers about their own observations. With the motif of “king” in v. 8, he picks up by association a thread from the last bit before the insertion (4:13-16). The mention of “poor” in v. 7 also recalls the young man in 4:14 “who had come naked into the world.” So it is clear that the “social critique” section resumes after it broke off in 4:17. It is about injustice and exploitation from above. But it is not only the powerful who are above. The wealthy are also there. The powerful are rich. So this unit provides a transition to what then follows, all of which is based on the opposition “poor—rich.”

### **Notes on 5:7-11**

[5:7-8] With respect to form, 5:7 continues the second person singular address of 4:17—5:6, which suggests that 4:17—5:6 was not secondarily inserted but originally intended to be there. The character of vv. 7-8 as continuation is further indicated in that the location in Jerusalem (“house of God,” 4:17) is now broadened to Judea (called “province” in 5:7 in an Alexandrian perspective).

The problem of official authority is presented under two aspects: patronage (vv. 7b-8) and, later on, greed (v. 9). Qoheleth’s statement about patronage does not lead to a “breath” conclusion, but rather to a concrete evaluation of two agricultural policies: the ancient one and the one gradually imposed under the Ptolemaic bureaucracy. At most Qoheleth’s position may be suggested by the use of the word *hēpeš* (here translated “interests”), recalling the same word in v. 3, where it expresses what God favors and protects.

[5:7] Why can nothing be done to combat this exploitation and this system of justice favoring certain classes? Verse 7 explains that there is almost inevitably going to be a basic complicity among all of those on whom simple folk in the countryside are dependent. Beside the village

authorities, there are the officials of the Jewish temple authority and a bureaucracy reporting directly to the king. All three incessantly exercise various forms of control and collect tributes. The raising of taxes, either in the Greek system or the new Egyptian system, was contracted out to the rich local families who worked with the bureaucracy. Moreover, military and administrative emissaries traveled through the land with royal commissions and were permitted to approach private businesses as well. The interests of all the above were united in one aim: to take from the inhabitants as much as they could as rapidly as possible. Within this statewide system of exploitation, small farmers also carried on a struggle for independence against the owners of large tracts of land and the city merchants. The elites often played the role both of private competitors and at the same time of official tax collectors. Regarding the system of debt slavery, see the commentary to 4:1-6.

[5:8] Within this complex system of mutual protection, which could never be penetrated from below, v. 8 still sees a possibility of choice between two agricultural policies, one of which seems preferable. The ancient system in Israel of free farmers on their own land had been transforming itself, through the gradual enslavement of more and more individuals, into a system of relatively few large estates, whose city-dwelling owners cultivated them with the help of landless day laborers, of workers bonded in various degrees, and of full slaves; on the other hand the Ptolemaic authority was trying to impose in Judea, as elsewhere, a policy of turning as much of the cultivated land as possible into royal land (Greek *gē basilikē*). Royal land was cultivated by landless but free (*sōmata laika eleuthera*) contractual tenants (*geōrgoi basilikoi*), who could not be enslaved by private persons. A portion of the royal land was leased to high officials (*gē en aphesei*), who leased it further under similar conditions. The leaseholders were eventually obliged to contribute up to two-thirds of their harvest. Did Qoheleth see in this system more secure foundations than in the old, completely denatured system where eventually the enslavement of most of the people seemed inevitable?

Although certainty is not within reach, another possible interpretation must be considered. It is striking that v. 8 speaks of “profit” not for the farmers or the poor, but rather for the “land.” We can see in 10:16-17 that Qoheleth easily links the king and the prosperity of the land. But still the shift of perspective here is surprising. Is a voice other than Qoheleth’s introduced here? Would someone else be cited here, or would he himself present this familiar answer as an objection?

The problem is the total lack of an introductory phrase, or interrogatory particle, or other verbal indicator of such a change of voice. We are not yet in the stylistic realm of chaps. 7–8 where we would rightly expect such citation, on the basis of the introduction in 6:11-12. So we cannot be certain.

The objection would point out that, despite all the exploitation of the poor and all the injustice, still the policy of converting farmland into royal land is a positive development. In v. 9 Qoheleth then would interfere with this technical bureaucratic exchange by proposing a familiar proverb about the insatiable character of greed. This exposes the underlying motives and energies.

[5:9-11] As to literary form, v. 9 begins a series of sayings, though v. 9 at its end has the breath formula. A chiasmic structure of linkwords marks the unity of the whole:

|       |        |
|-------|--------|
| 5:9   | “fill” |
| 5:10  | “eat”  |
| 5:11a | “eat”  |
| 5:11b | “full” |

Each of the sayings plays within itself with word correspondences. The “breath” formula lends shape to the series: v. 9 describes the insatiability of greed; vv. 10-11 provide grounds for this assertion. Throughout, motifs and linkwords are set up that will recur in the immediately following prose analysis in 5:12—6:10, for example, “to eat” and “to fill,” the two structuring words of 5:9-11. Qoheleth 5:9-11 does, more or less, for 5:12—6:10 what 1:13—2:2 does for 2:3—3:15.

There are remarkably few parallels in Israel’s sayings tradition for 5:9-11. On the other hand, behind “those who love money” we can recognize the Greek *philargyros*, and behind “if they love luxuries” the *philoploutos*, of the Cynics.

[5:9] In any case, in v. 9 there is a formal proverb concerning greed, possibly a generally familiar one. It suggests simply that the leading classes, who are being discussed here, are greedy, and it then concludes with the “breath” formula, justifying this by a series of sayings that follow in familiar form. That is a new development of thinking, reaching to v. 11.

[5:11] Verse 11b may refer to overeating or to the anxieties attendant upon many possessions (see 2:33).

5:12—6:10; 2:20-23

**Bankruptcy 5:12-16**

- +2:17 12 Something evil happens, something like a disease, that I have observed under the sun: gathered wealth, placed for its owner in the bank, is lost in bankruptcy.
- 13 Through bad business dealings, this wealth was lost. The owner had fathered a son, but now there is nothing in his accounts. 14 As he came from his mother's womb—naked, as he came, so must he once again begin his life. There is nothing which he can ever draw from his possessions, which he had deposited in his account. 15 So this too is something evil, something like a disease. Just as he once came, so must he begin his life again. And what profit does he gain laboring for air? 16 Even more:
- Job 1:21 All of his days he will eat in darkness,
- +2:23 with constant vexation, and illness and depression.

**Overview of 5:12—6:10**

The following overview deals with the three remaining units of the social critique section. They belong very closely together. They form the second extended, coherent, prose text of the book. It can be considered a broad working out of 2:20-23. Both the content and some aspects of form show that this case is taken precisely from the anthropological section. "It happens" in 2:21 corresponds to 5:12 and 6:1 (otherwise only 8:14; 10:5). "Evil," which often occurs and weighs upon humankind in 2:17, 21, recurs then in 5:12, 15 (otherwise only 8:6; 10:5). In style, 5:12—6:10 is similar to the prose of 2:3—3:15, and here too, similarly, the first-person narrative recedes toward the end.

The text is organized by three "observations." The case of 2:20-23 (a person tires himself out, and someone else enjoys the fruit of all this labor, even while the first one is still alive) is twice worked out, in 5:12-16 and 6:1-2, with diverse connections each time: in one, the rich man is in the foreground, and everything is taken from him while he must work through his debts; the second time, another enjoys the fruits.

The second description of the case in 6:1-2 is theologically formulated, and it seems that for this reason it is preceded in 5:17-19 by a positive presentation of God's relation to human happiness. This inserted "observation" picks up the thought from 2:24 and 3:10-15 and develops it further. 5:17-19 and 6:1-2 are shaped by their formulation as image and counterimage.

The case of 6:1-2 is further developed in progressive and varied secondary cases, vv. 3-5 and 6-9, reaching to the fantastic in vv. 6-9.

Even when one enjoys a large family and long life (vv. 3-5), or even if a fantastically long life were allowed, still we are talking about a wise but poor person, and so all of that is no use unless some good fortune occurs. The two diverse examples are linked with a praise of being stillborn, vv. 3-5 (see the ironic praise in 4:2-3), and with a further discussion of death (vv. 7-8). A proverb concludes the last case (v. 9), and a saying the whole unit (v. 10).

In 5:12—6:10 we have the exact counterpart to the image of the successful drive to prosperity depicted in 2:3-10, which portrayed a serious possibility for the head of a rich Jewish family, even if it was raised to royal fantasy. Here the contrary is presented, and one does not have the power to choose between the two for oneself. Therefore Qoheleth must extend his reflection on unhappiness toward the certitude of death just as he did earlier in his reflection on happiness.

Despite 5:7-8, the social-critical reflections are all thoroughly in keeping with the theological-anthropological reflections of 1:12—3:15. The individual thoughts are not easily deciphered. As the basic concepts have already been coherently laid out earlier in the book, Qoheleth allows himself to be led by separate proverbs to one or other allusion or further illumination. To understand his pattern of speech, we need to recall how musicians work through variations on themes.

### **Notes on 5:12-16**

**[5:12-15]** Our translation follows the hypothesis that this section employs technical phrases from business and banking—phrases that are sometimes not known from other sources, but whose meaning can be surmised. The telltale clue that leads to this view is the technical meaning of *bēyādô*, which occurs twice here. Normally it means “in his hand”; but we have a Hebrew text from the same historical period that uses the phrase in a business context with the technical meaning “on his account.”

**[5:12]** After 2:17-21, “evil” can replace “breath,” giving it a sharper profile. Here, and in 5:15-16 and 6:2, this is further extended by the key word “disease.” When a rich man did not succeed in enjoying life, this was deemed to be a “disease” by the Cynics as well.

**[5:13]** The son is named in the description of the case, so as to indicate how normal the situation of this wealthy man is. That future appeared to

be assured. In the rest of the verse, and in vv. 14-16, nothing further is said about the son, but only about the wealthy man himself. The son motif remains important, because it will be picked up in 6:3 and further modified.

[5:14] Verse 14 extends the concluding observation of v. 13 by suggesting a concrete scenario. In contrast with Job 1:21, his “going” is not to be seen as his death. What we see is that his creditors who press their demands hold back all his possessions, even the clothes on his back.

[5:15-16] Verses 15-16 use motifs from vv. 12 and 14 to summarize everything, but one new and pointed element is added to the summary—a favorite figure of ancient rhetoric. We now are focused on the subsequent life of the impoverished rich man. He has to pay his debts, probably in debtors’ servitude, if he is not sold into slavery. The text, with aristocratic readers in mind, will no more than suggest this. Verse 16 begins with the same words as 2:23. Moreover, the word “vexation” in this closing verse recalls the same word in the closing verse 2:23.

### Happiness and God 5:17-19

- +2:10 17 Consider what I have observed—perfect happiness consists in this: to eat and drink and taste happiness through all one’s possessions for which one has labored under the sun during the few days of life that God has given one. For that is one’s portion.
- 6:2 18 Moreover, always, when God has given a person wealth and holdings, and has empowered one to consume them and maintain one’s portion and find joy in one’s possessions, the real divine gift consists in this, 19 that one will not much remember how few are the days of one’s life, because God continuously answers through the joy in one’s heart.

5:17 Literally: “the happiness that is beautiful,” or “the good fortune that is full.”

[5:17] “The perfect good.” Greek phrases lie behind this expression: the lyrical *kalon philon* and the phrase *agathon hoti kalon* that replaced it in more elevated philosophical speech following Plato. In the context of Qoheleth’s book, however, something different is primarily intended. The word “good,” which up to now has been used alone and usually translated as “happiness” in context (2:1, 3, 24; 3:12-13, 22), is here linked with the

word for “beautiful” or “perfect,” which has occurred only once before this, where it refers to God’s action (3:11). If something is now to be characterized as “the perfect good,” it is thereby suggested that in this “good” the divine action, along with that “perfection” which is hidden from humans (3:11), might be experienced. Through this phrase, v. 17 begins with theological dimensions, even if the word “God” does not occur until near the end, and there almost casually.

[5:18-19] Verses 18-19 move forward, whereas v. 17 had merely recapitulated the contents of 2:24; 3:12-13, 22. What is new is that the good, insofar as it is a gift of God, is now described phenomenologically. When someone is happy, the thought of death—precisely the point to which Qoheleth wants to bring his readers—retreats from their consciousness. It becomes rare. The good is, therefore, an ecstasy that unites consciousness around one point. What point? Here, unfortunately, we run into almost insuperable difficulties of interpretation. Many translations read: “because God leads them to focus on the joy in their heart.” This implies that the best part of joy is not the psychological phenomenon of joy itself (which may be no more than a physical pleasure, an explicable sense of bodily well-being), but rather the forgetting of self that an active person experiences while striving in quest of happiness. The translation we have adopted (“because God continuously answers through the joy in one’s heart”) would imply that the ecstasy of the good is given within the psychic phenomenon of “joy” itself—insofar as this is also a divine “answer,” something like “revelation.” This would mean that in joy itself that specific reality is grasped, in a nonconceptual way, which human reflection can reach only through the thought of death, and through the reasoning that leads to an inference of the perfection of God’s action. Granted the supreme value that the book of Qoheleth places on the thought of death and on the gift of joy, one is tempted to prefer this second interpretation. For then the ecstasy of the good does not serve to repress the terror that is entailed in thinking, but rather transforms it by absorbing it into itself. In joy, then, the conclusion of right thinking—namely the perfection and the eternity of divine action within all events—is directly communicated as revelation.

### Living without Joy 6:1-10

6:1 There happens one evil which I have observed under the sun, and it weighs heavily on individuals. 2 God gives someone so much

+2:17; 5:12; 8:6  
5:18

- 5:10; Lk 12:20  
Sir 14:4
- wealth, holdings, and honor that he lacks nothing of whatever his gullet desires, but God does not empower him to eat it, because a stranger eats it. That is a breath and it is an evil disease.
- 3 If someone has a hundred children and lives many years, so that his life is really long, and if his prosperity cannot serve to sate his gullet, even if no grave were awaiting him, I say: a stillborn child is better than that person. 4 Because:
- As a breath it came,  
into darkness it passes,  
in darkness its name remains covered.
- 4:6 5 Moreover, it has never observed or perceived the sun. So it is at rest, whereas he is not. 6 And if he lives two thousand years, but does not taste happiness, do not both pass to one and the same place? 7 All human labor is for the jaws of death, and its gullet is never satisfied. 8 What profit for the one who knows over the fool; or what for the poor, however perceptive, in making his way among the living?
- 3:20  
1:7f; Isa 5:14;  
Hab 2:5; Prov 27:20;  
30:16  
to 6:8; 2:13-15; 9:15
- 5:10; 11:9
- 9 Better to have something before your eyes  
than to have a hungry gullet.
- That too is a breath and an inspiration of air.
- 1:9; 3:14f; Gen 1:  
Amos 3:2; Jer 1:5
- 10 Whatever has occurred  
it was already called by name.  
It was also perceived  
that each one is only human,  
and that he cannot fight  
with someone stronger than himself.
- Job 9  
Wis 12:12

6:3 Another possible translation: "to fill his gullet, and in the end he receives no burial."

6:6 Another possible translation: "a thousand times a thousand years."

6:7 Literally: "All human labor is for one's mouth, and yet one's gullet is never satisfied."

### Notes on 6:1-10

[6:2] "Stranger": it may be that what is meant is no more than someone who is not a member of one's family; but usually *nokrî* refers to a foreigner. Non-Jews from neighboring areas, such as Ammonites in the east or Idumeans in the south (some of whom were Phoenician in origin) had also settled in Judah. Moreover, Greeks from the highest social classes in Alexandria had rights to fees in the province of Syria and Phoenicia, to which Judah also belonged, and these they later received as private property. So the Jews of Jerusalem's leading circles were no longer exclusively among themselves.

[6:3-5] See Euripides: “If someone strikes it rich, and has amassed a fortune, but never tries these good thing in his home, I would never say that he is fortunate.”<sup>1</sup>

[6:6-9] In this unreal case of one who just lives too long, the starting point is expressed only in v. 8, where it is added on as a general affirmation: it is presupposed that the subject is a person who is cultivated but poor. If you exclude this wrinkle, then the case is resolved at the end of 6:6, and the theme of death’s inevitability is attached, and in its perspective the educated and the uneducated are compared, recalling 2:13-15. This theme, by association, would be seized by a related theme in the same v. 8: the educated person who is also poor (see below on 9:15-16).

[6:6] The motif of “going” from 5:14-15, which there was considered as something within living, is now taken up again as leaving this life, dying. The “one place” is the region of the dead. The translation here makes this explicit in v. 7, where the Hebrew had only “*his* mouth.” The closing question in v. 6 has the rhythm of a lament for the dead.

[6:7] As the theme of good fortune has been treated throughout, from its beginning in 5:9-11, in images of hunger—eating—being filled, Qoheleth here describes death as the one who is the really ravenous, who really eats, who is really never sated.

[6:9] The feeling of closure results from the proverb form. Its meaning can be understood in very diverse ways, so that there reigns a distinct ambiguity. In the mentality of traditional wisdom, it can mean that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. Since it stands in the context of death as a hungering gullet, however, one might also understand: better living than being dead (see especially 9:4). On the other hand, 5:10 had given a negative tilt to seeing with one’s eyes. Should we then understand that even if we cannot but see the good fortune of others while we are laboring, this is still better than being dead?

This proverb that gave the impression of being the closure is followed by the “breath” formula, and, in a technique now becoming familiar, the definite closure to vv. 6-9 is brought in by a new saying in v. 10.

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<sup>1</sup> Fragment 198 from August Nauck, ed., *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, 2d ed., supplemented by Bruno Snell (Hildesheim: Olms, 1964).

**[6:10]** The passive verb forms make God the unnamed subject of what is said. “Acquire a name” in Near Eastern thought means: “come to being” (see 6:4). Should we understand, in the sense of cyclic theory, that every activity which one carries out has already been in existence before now (1:9-10; 3:14-15)? Or, in the sense of 3:1-9, does it say only that God has determined everything? In any case, limits to human existence are set for all humans. We cannot defend ourselves. Against whom? The text does not indicate who is meant by “someone more powerful.” God (see Job)? Death (see what precedes)? If God is meant, see Menander §187: *mē theomachei*, “Fight not against the gods,” from the lost play “The Eunuch.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Menander: The Principal Fragments*, trans. F. G. Allison, LCL (New York: Putnam, 1930) 352–53.

## **Deconstruction**

### **Introduction 6:11-12**

- 11 There happen many words that only multiply breath. Of what profit are they to a person? 12 For who perceives what is better for a person in their lifetime, during the few living days of one's breath, which one carries out like a shadow? And who can tell anyone what will occur afterward under the sun?

7:11f; 7:1-18; 8:17

7:15; 9:9

8:13; 1 Chr 29:15;  
Ps 39:6f; Job 14:1f  
3:22; 7:14; 8:7; 9:3;  
10:14

### **Overview of 6:11—9:6**

Whereas the pericope 3:16—6:10 had laid out the basic themes of the book's beginning on a wider basis of experience, and explored some of its aspects, there now ensues a debate with the very different intellectual universe of Qoheleth's readers and hearers. So this section may be described as an ideological critique. Every society constructs a symbolic worldview that constitutes its superstructure, and an educational system to communicate it to new generations so as to make them competent in living. For a bourgeois society, for example, this was classical education, and for some parts of our world it has been socialist humanism. In Israel, or at least for the upper class of Judah to which Qoheleth addressed himself, it was a body of teaching called "wisdom." This was communicated above all, though not exclusively, through sayings (cf. the Book of Proverbs). These dealt with the most varied human situations, but most of all they circled around wealth, human rights, and situations at court.

The praise of knowledge and education played a major role in assuring the self-legitimation of the educational establishment and in motivating students. Great emphasis was given to the quality of one's speaking and self-control, the power of good repute, the destructive influence of gossip and calumny. One thesis, presenting itself as the experi-

ence of many generations, carried a lot of weight: education and knowledge assured a long life (it was clear that one must die at some point; but dying too soon was to be feared). Moreover, there was the underlying principle that whatever one does turns back upon oneself in a consistent deed-consequence relationship (in this regard, divine retribution was only one special mechanism): good behavior brings good fortune, and bad behavior brings ill. This view of reality seemed plausible, and prepared a young person for life ahead, in a world of equally entitled farmers and of small towns with a manageable style of life, where mutual support was the basic rule within the clan and the local community. In Qoheleth's unpredictable world such a view no longer sufficed, and this led Qoheleth, who was open to decisive influences from Greek culture, to design a new view of reality. He could, however, gain acceptance for the new only after he had explicitly deconstructed the old. For this reason, the next section of the book is set up with the following pattern: a typical element of traditional teaching, usually in the form of a familiar proverb, is cited and then deconstructed.

After the tension of the long prose essay, 5:12—6:10, the text resumes in a loose form. Qoheleth simply comments on proverbs by means of other proverbs. Then, first briefly in 7:10, but ever more broadly from 7:13 on, the answers come in prose as well. In the final unit (beginning in 8:16) we have only prose, and the presupposed proverb is indicated only by suggestion (8:17). The criticism of traditional teaching is naturally based, for the most part, on arguments developed earlier in the book. However, there is no lack of new observations and reflections, as in 7:25ff.

It may be that the dialogical character of the unit has led to its increased use of "you" as a form of address. The pericope begins with a kind of motto in 6:11-12. In 7:23-25 there is, as it were, a brief pause with a glance backward and a glance forward. From 8:5 on the text offers once again a coherent development of argument. One can differ about the closure of the section (after 8:16? or after 9:6? cf. also the discussion of 9:7—12:7); nevertheless, 8:16—9:6 does seem to be still another dispute with traditional teaching.

One can identify ten units in all, in each of which a typical thesis of the wisdom tradition is refuted. Before the first and the sixth introductions there are summaries and previews.

- 6:11-12      Introduction
- 1. 7:1-4      Fame
- 2. 7:5-7      Knowledge

3. 7:8-10                      Caution and Conservatism
4. 7:11-18                  Is Knowledge a Means to a Long Life?
5. 7:19-22                  Does Knowledge Yield Protection?
- 7:23-25              Retrospect and Preview
6. 7:26—8:1a              Knowledge: Traditional and Inductive
7. 8:1b-4                    Being Counselor of a King
8. 8:5-12a                  The One Who Knows and the Ignorant—Their Fate, I
9. 8:12b-15                The One Who Knows and the Ignorant—Their Fate, II
10. 8:16—9:6              The Limits of Knowledge

It is clear that the whole section breaks cleanly into two halves, though the halves differ as to length. In the translation, a cited tradition and its critique are taken to form a unit. A dash is used to separate the two.

For Qoheleth's approach in this section, and again in the final ethical section of the book, it is important to note that he is not trying to determine what is always and everywhere good for humankind as such, but rather what is good for each individual in his or her life. A similar sharpening of focus is repeated in 7:15 and 9:9. State ideologies of a Marxist type can attempt to sweep away this kind of focused argumentation, but their answers to the questions of the individual people are never satisfactory.

As for content, rhetorical questions are used to express skepticism about the capacity of traditional wisdom education to analyze reality and to provide reliable insights about human behavior.

Compare Pindar, "Olympian Odes" 7.24: "But countless are the snares that hang around the minds of men, and there is no means of finding out what is best for a man to light on, not only now, but also in the end."<sup>1</sup>

### **Notes on 6:11-12**

[6:11-12] Verses 11-12 form an introduction to 7:1—9:6.

[6:11] "Words," that is, sayings as they are cited and deconstructed in 7:1ff. "What profit" is picked up in 7:11-12.

[6:12] "Better" refers to the common proverb form "Better A than B (because . . .)," which in 7:1-14 plays the role of marking traditional

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<sup>1</sup> *The Odes of Pindar*, trans. John Sandys, LCL (New York: Putnam, 1930) 73.

sayings and opposed sayings. In 7:1-10 there are seven such sayings, in v. 11 there follows an eighth with a more complex structure.

Individual word groups refer ahead to texts as far as chap. 8, as above in 1:12—2:2; 2:12; 5:9-13, that is, “days of breath” in 7:14-15; “will occur” in 8:7; “like a shadow” in 8:13; “under the sun” in 8:14; “carry out . . . under the sun” in 8:16-17 (see 9:3).

### Fame 7:1-4

- 7:1 Better a name esteemed than scented creams—  
and the day one dies than the day one was born;  
2 better go to a hall of grieving  
than go to a festive hall.  
Since this is the end of all humans,  
let those who still live lay it to heart.  
3 Better vexation than laughter,  
for by a troubled face are hearts headed aright.  
4 The heart of those who know is in a hall of grieving,  
the heart of fools in a hall of joy.

Prov 22:1;  
Sir 41:11-13

7:2-3; 11:9—12:7

Sir 7:36;  
2 Cor 7:10f

### Overview of 7:1-4

A very subtle use of language is at play here. When traditional wisdom texts had lined up proverbs one after the other in apparently casual or playful order, still it often linked them together, and not only through association of contents, but also at the level of repetition of words, assonances, rhymes, and so on. Such a linked series of proverbs is to be seen up to v. 12. In v. 14 the key word “afterward” closes a first circle back to 6:12.

Verse 2 and vv. 3-4, for example, are constructed in parallel: “Better . . . Better. . .” At the same time, the outer lines form, through a chiasmic correspondence of key words (“hall of grieving,” “festive hall” / “hall of grieving,” “hall of joy”), a frame containing the inner lines, each of which ends with “heart.” Then, almost imperceptibly, v. 4 introduces a pair of concepts (“one who knows” / “fool”) that cannot help but invite the proverb in v. 5.

Many other strands of this linguistic web can be seen even in the English translation. As a result, the form of language here arouses the expectation of a lovely old-fashioned tapestry of sayings. But precisely this expectation is systematically upset at the level of content. In a variety of sequences the traditional statements are proven to be off-center, meaningless, and false, either by subtle shifts of perspective or by direct oppositions.

This realistic tearing up of conventional knowledge is, moreover, reflected also in the form of discourse. Gradually bits of prose appear within the chain of proverbs. From about v. 13 on, prose overgrows the linking of proverbs. From v. 14 it uses a typical prosaic phrase (“I have observed”) to take over explicitly the form of discourse.

### Notes on 7:1-4

[7:1] The saying cited in v. 1a (in Hebrew a heavy play on words: *ṭôb šēm miššemen ṭôb*) may well have comforted a poor man who suffered from the realization that feasting was beyond his reach, since he had no money even for the ornaments and perfumed oils appropriate to festivity. He possessed a higher good: his good reputation (“name”), which he had won even without money, purely through his virtue and his personal role in the community. The same saying may also have found application in the same milieu when, at a burial, spices were lacking for anointing the corpse—his reputation (“name”) was more important. Here Qoheleth’s witty continuation is casually tacked on in v. 1b, without even repeating the word “better,” as though it were an obvious conclusion. He takes the saying literally. With razor-sharp wit he cuts to the insight that this supposedly great benefit of reputation accrues at death, whereas it is totally absent at birth. Thence comes v. 1b.

[7:2-4] The following three verses then draw further conclusions. They proceed on several levels. Nothing is said that cannot be drawn out of v. 1a. But no one would have formulated such conclusions before now. It is all both irony and derision. The pretty saying is dragged on *ad absurdum*. Yet a deeper seriousness remains because, as though by accident, Qoheleth has ended up in the middle of one of his major themes: life must be understood from the perspective of death.

Moreover, the reader of the book up to this point knows full well that Qoheleth has no desire to fix lines of grief on our face, but rather to move us to joy in the face of death. Everything is both right and false at the same time. But Qoheleth wants this dialectical play to go further. He has already placed in v. 4 the hooks upon which he can hang his next wisdom citation.

### Knowledge 7:5-7

- 5 It is better to listen to the criticism of one who knows,  
than to become fans of the song of fools.

Prov 13:1; 15:32

6 For, like the crackling of thorns under the pot,  
so is the laughter of a fool.—

But that too is a breath, because:

Exod 23:8;  
Deut 16:19

7 Blackmail dulls the wit of the wise  
and a bribe leads understanding astray.

7:5b Another possible translation: “than that someone listens when the ignorant serenade him.”

### **Notes on 7:5-7**

[7:5-6] The previous unit can be understood merely as a criticism of folk wisdom. The worldwide learning of the cultured classes would be something else. Verses 5-6 cite a proverb that contains the self-praise of the culture of higher society. It betrays a consciousness of class. Doubtless the original readers could detect this on the basis of the rather exaggerated pomposity of its wordplay (*šîr*, “song”—*šîrîm*, “thorns”—*šîr*; “pot”—*kēsîl*, “fool”). Qoheleth raises an explicit objection to this by the “breath” phrase.

[7:7] The objection is then argued in v. 7 by another proverb, possibly a traditional saying. Ordinary people came in contact with the cultured precisely as representatives of an authority or as ministers of the law. In this contact they also experienced the results of blackmail and of bribes. The susceptibility of the cultured classes to such pressure lays bare their moralizing maxim and shows it as ideology. Here Qoheleth does not react only on the level of theory, but he examines praxis as well.

### **Caution and Conservatism 7:8-10**

1 Kgs 20:11  
Prov 24:20  
Prov 22:24

8 Better the outcome of anything than its beginning;  
better an air of caution than an air of impatience.

9 Don't be blown about in an air of your vexation;  
For vexation is at home in the belly of fools.—

1:11; 7:23

10 Do not ask:

How came it about that earlier times  
were better than present times?

For such a question will not make you appear knowledgeable.

### **Notes on 7:8-10**

[7:8-9] The citation in 7:8-9 is recognizable as such by its form. This has most to do with the sounds of words, and cannot be heard in English translation. Verses 8-9 offer, as content, a central theme of the educational tra-



- +3:11; +6:12;  
Job 2:10; Sir 11:14
- 3:16f; 8:14; 9:1f;  
Ps 73:12-14;  
Job 21:7
- to 7:16f; Sir 7:5-8;  
32:4
- 2:15; Lk 18:9-14
- 3:2; Prov 10:27
- +12:13
- 14 On a happy day, take part in the happiness; and on a bad day, take note: God has made the latter just as he made the former, so that humans can find out nothing about what comes afterward.
- 15 In my days of breath I have observed both cases: it happens that a law-abiding person, despite the law-abiding, comes to a bad end; it happens that a lawless person, despite the lawlessness, has a long life. 16 Don't be altogether too law-abiding and don't profit too much from what you know: why should you destroy yourself? 17 Don't be utterly lawless, or become totally ignorant: why should you die before it is time? 18 It is best you hold on to the one without losing your grip on the other. A God-fearer, in any case, will escape both dangers.

### Notes on 7:11-18

[7:11-12] The fourth citation, picking up the word “knowledge,” is created with the following complicated structure:

- 11a “A is as good as B
- 11b or rather even better.”
- 12a Supporting argument for 11a
- 12b Supporting argument for 11b

Verses 11-12 are so filled with Qoheleth's favorite words that, one might think, only the sentence “In the shadow of knowledge, in the shadow of money” existed before Qoheleth. Qoheleth may have then extended it, but in such a manner as to express the self—self-understanding of the traditional education system. The horizon of its known universe offered the same protection (“shadow”) as inherited wealth. But what is more, on this basis, a person can live in keeping with this vital wisdom in such a way that the law of deed-consequence relationship will not bring on an early death, but allow one to enjoy a full lifetime.

With the expression “see the sun” in the sense of “to live,” a Homeric phrase that had become commonplace in Greek poetry is here stamped upon the Hebrew language. In Hebrew one would expect the expression “to see the light.” As we will see, it is probably not unintentional that the introduction of the teaching of deed-consequence relationship occurs in a text formulated by Qoheleth himself. His colleagues, whose belief in this regard he will present, would probably have included God in their formulation of it. Without saying it in so many words, he here denies them the right to do so.

[7:13-14] The cited saying is first brought into question by reference to earlier reasoning. Twice we are told to take “note,” and twice God's

dition in the ancient Near East. The type of situation is behavior at court, or in the presence of exalted patrons. As it is a mistake to count one's chickens before they hatch (v. 8a), it is a mistake to show one's weapons too early. The ideal is a cautious person, biding one's time, controlling oneself, only at the end seizing the initiative at the right moment (v. 8b). One must remain aware of the general group dynamics, and not allow oneself to be controlled by personal feelings (v. 9). Qoheleth then reacts once again in an unexpected manner. He asks: What kind of person is developed by this kind of education? His study seemingly has shown him that it will be a conservative person, one who lauds time past and has contempt for the present. If the conjectures developed in the Introduction concerning Qoheleth are on target, he may have had in mind many of his colleagues from the temple school in Jerusalem; he had broken out of that circle. His reaction here is against this type of person. He does this, in any case, in a very elegant manner, making the transition almost imperceptibly.

**[7:10]** He merely extends the proverb a bit further in v. 10. The warning in v. 9 was connected back to v. 8b. Now he adds a warning, parallel in form to v. 9, which chiastically links back to v. 8a. Verse 8a could be literally translated: “The later of a thing is better than its beginning.” Therefore, Qoheleth argues, how can we say that earlier times were better? The tradition has been taken at its word, and confronted with an offspring that contradicts it. An educated person demonstrates, by the very textbooks of his education, that he is uneducated. Right away the reader of this v. 10, which incidentally has broken out of meter and surrounds the saying by free prose, recalls 1:11. There it was suggested how one might get the idea that new things happen, that is, that the times deteriorate. 7:24 will touch on the same topic.

Qoheleth is coming gradually to the end of the skirmish: he begins to refer back to his earlier argumentation. This he will do quite openly when it comes to the following citation.

## Is Knowledge a Means to a Long Life? 7:11-18

- |    |                                                                                                                                                                    |                                   |
|----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 11 | Knowledge is as good as an inheritance,<br>and is even more profitable for those who see the sun;                                                                  | Prov 16:16                        |
| 12 | for one who shelters in the shadow of knowledge,<br>is also in the shadow of money;<br>but the profit from perception is<br>that knowledge keeps its owner alive.— |                                   |
| 13 | But note the actions of God: for:<br>Who can make straight what he has bent?                                                                                       | Prov 3:1-2, 13-18<br>3:14<br>1:15 |

- +3:11; +6:12;  
Job 2:10; Sir 11:14
- 3:16f; 8:14; 9:1f;  
Ps 73:12-14;  
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With the expression “see the sun” in the sense of “to live,” a Homeric phrase that had become commonplace in Greek poetry is here stamped upon the Hebrew language. In Hebrew one would expect the expression “to see the light.” As we will see, it is probably not unintentional that the introduction of the teaching of deed-consequence relationship occurs in a text formulated by Qoheleth himself. His colleagues, whose belief in this regard he will present, would probably have included God in their formulation of it. Without saying it in so many words, he here denies them the right to do so.

[7:13-14] The cited saying is first brought into question by reference to earlier reasoning. Twice we are told to take “note,” and twice God's

action is mentioned (in the Hebrew the same root is used for “actions” and “has made”). The reference is to the saying in 1:15 and the theological reasoning in 3:11-14. That this ends in 3:14 with the motif of the “fear of God” implicitly extends the reference to 7:18. What is remarkable about this radical questioning of the whole world perspective of wisdom is that now, against a teaching that is consciously formulated in inner-worldly terms, Qoheleth himself “theologically” takes to the field. In the name of God’s freedom and unlimited power, he puts in question a way of thinking that claims to comprehend reality. Since all human activity is at the same time a divine activity beyond human ken, no future event can be calculated, especially not the time after one’s own death. We can do no more than accept each moment, just as it is given us by God. In v. 14, for the first time in the book, what in 3:14 was called the “fear of God” is concretely defined: to allow oneself to fall into the happiness offered us, but also to know that God is at work in misfortune, and therefore to accept it.

Greek lyric poetry offers the same advice, but not with the same theological refinement and motive. For example the seventh-century B.C.E. lyricist Archilochos wrote: “not over-proud in victory, nor in defeat oppressed. In your rejoicing let your joy, in hardship your despairs be tempered: understand the pattern shaping men’s affairs.”<sup>2</sup>

[7:15] The theology is given a foundation in experience, which, at least in individual cases, shows the exact opposite of the affirmed law of deed-consequence relationship. That theory was valid in the closed and simple world of farms and small towns in the past. Moreover, even in the third century it may still often have made sense, insofar as change does not come to everything at the same time as society evolves. But it did not always ring true, because the far more obtrusive and very different Hellenistic international society undermined its presuppositions on all sides. So the attitudes and expectations regarding the future implied by this theory often did not pan out, and this led to a collapse of their plausibility among those who were alert.

In formulating the opposed thesis, Qoheleth introduces here, where he is dealing not only with theory but also with praxis, a new pair of concepts. Beside “those who know”—“fool” there appear *ṣaddīq*—*rāṣāʿ*, translated here “law-abiding” and “lawless.” The pairing of these words arises in some contexts such as a court of law. However, it had long since been adopted to characterize the relation of persons to the divine order.

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<sup>2</sup> §128 in M. L. West, ed., *Greek Lyric Poetry* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993) 11.

Both the King James and Douai versions translate “just” and “wicked,” and the NRSV has “righteous” and “wicked.” Cf. also 8:5, where we have not *šaddîq*, but *šômēr mišwâ*, literally “one who cares for the commandment.”

**[7:16-17]** In a fictive admonition, Qoheleth presents the situation ironically. From his experience he concludes in v. 15 that whoever holds on to the law ruins him- or herself; but whoever fails to hold on to it dies prematurely: this on the basis of the traditional wisdom theory. With the same logic, simply in reverse, the opposite naturally could also be proven. The thought is playful but the message serious and subtly formulated. All who remain true exclusively to the old ways, and so interiorize its worldview that they cannot go beyond it, will be overwhelmed by fears that leave them paralyzed and speechless when it turns out that the world is different. On the other hand, all who, in the face of social change and its concomitant reduction of plausibility, believe that their actions are now free from any obligation and their thoughts no longer obliged to hold to any worldview will in any case stumble and fall apart. Here one might think immediately of God’s punishment. See the commentary to 5:5. Qoheleth could not describe all this in the categories of a sociology of knowledge. But he had observed what these mean. What can one do, then, in such a situation of radical change?

**[7:18]** To hold on to one bit of advice (that of v. 16), and not let the other go (that of v. 17)—this does not mean either paradoxical action or an often cited “golden mean,” but rather something like a sociological eclecticism, which alone is adapted to a situation where various social systems and worldviews are mixed together at the same time. A concrete, historical human being does not live according to an eternal and unchangeable moral law but rather according to an ethic qualified by concrete relationships, which can be replaced by another. In this case, during the period of transition some areas may develop where ethical guidance is lacking, whereas in some others the former ethic still holds true, and in still others a new ethic has taken hold. To handle this correctly requires the eclecticism of v. 18a. But what determines the choice? Qoheleth says: the fear of God (v. 18b). What can carry it off then is precisely that way of understanding the world in an ultimate perspective that he has worked out, and that way of decision-making in each instance based on what has just taken place in view of the ultimate reality (cf. the acceptance of the moment in v. 14). That does not mean that this situation ethics should be

something enduring and normal. Qoheleth himself, at the end of his book, will begin to develop a new concrete wisdom ethic. But in the transitional situation, which is the context of his thought, it alone makes sense.

### Does Knowledge Yield Protection? 7:19-22

- 19 For one who knows, knowledge is a protection more powerful than the ten rulers who have dominated the city.—
- 20 And yet there has never been a human on earth who was so law-abiding that he did what was right, without ever sinning. 21 And don't listen to everything people say. For you will never hear someone under you speak critically of you, 22 and yet you clearly perceive that you have often spoken critically of others.
- 9:16; Prov 21:22; 24:5  
1 Kgs 8:46; Ps 14:3; Job 15:14-16; Rom 1:8-3:20; 5:12; 1 John 1:8

### Notes on 7:19-22

[7:19-22] “The city” may be Jerusalem. It is true that before 175 B.C.E. Jerusalem was not, strictly speaking, a polis. It is possible, however, that at some point earlier, in imitation of the polity of a proper polis, there were *deka protōi* (ten first men) at the head of the *gerousia*, whose power had subsequently become legendary. Or else, perhaps, that system of government well known from other cities has become proverbial in Jerusalem, precisely because it did not exist there.

In the context the citation represents traditional wisdom. Qoheleth reacts by denying that the law-abiding (which he here makes equivalent to the educated or knowledgeable) are ever completely such. Those who believe it are deluding themselves. More precisely, it is the delusion concerning the truth of what dependents say to the person they depend on. Basically he here, once again, uncovers an area in which circumstances have shifted without being noticed. A huge household with many slaves, dependents, clients, and possibly a whole hierarchy of social levels is an obstacle to openness. But the change is not noticed, and individuals continue to act as though they were living in the old-style united family where trust reigned and everybody really knew everybody else.

### Knowledge: Traditional and Inductive 7:23-25

- 23 In all ways I tried having knowledge. I said: I will study to become learned. But knowledge remained distant for me.
- 24 Distant whatever has occurred, and deep in the depths—who could ever find it?
- 1:9, 11; +3:11; 7:10

- || 1:17; 8:16  
 7:27, 29  
 8:8, 10, 14; 10:13
- 25 So I turned, that is, my mind turned me, around. I wanted to perceive through exploration and search out what that knowledge is which is reckoned from specific observations. Moreover, I wanted to perceive whether lawlessness was connected with a lack of learning and ignorance with delusion.

### **Overview of 7:23—8:1a**

This unit, introductory to the second half of the deconstruction section (sixth within a series of ten) is built in a more complicated manner than the others. Verses 23-25, in reference to all that precedes, are both a recall and a summation, and in v. 25 also an announcement of what is to come, in the habitual allusive style that we have seen in 1:12—2:2; 2:12; 5:9-11; 6:11-12. At the same time vv. 23-25a present the problem that will be treated throughout 7:23—8:1a: whether inductive knowledge, based on experience and observation, might possibly be set up differently and prove more successful than the traditional wisdom inheritance, based on learning proverbs. On the basis of a concrete test case, the advantage of an inductive approach is shown (vv. 27-28), and yet at the same time it becomes clear that humans will abuse it (v. 29). The test case is drawn from a traditional proverb concerning women (v. 26), which constitutes the citation from tradition that is usually addressed in the context. Thus the text deals concretely with the theme “women” at the same time. The several levels of the text do not make it simple, and so we can understand why v. 27 explicitly takes its distance, and Qoheleth, the “leader of the assembly,” is recalled as speaker, and why, at the end, 8:1a expressly draws attention to the difficulty of the text. The unit picks up a problem that came to the fore in Greek education after the separation of empirical knowledge and philosophy. However, it is not pursued further in this book.

### **Notes on 7:23-25**

[7:23] The “two ways” refer to the two methods specifically indicated in v. 23 and v. 25: studying the tradition, and acquiring knowledge through observation. Since 7:1 the two ways have constantly been paired—and in that sense this refers back. In 7:23—8:1a the comparison is carried out in an especially self-reflective manner, and in that sense it refers forward. “Distant” means out of reach. Traditional knowledge—as has already been established—is not real knowledge.

[7:24] Verse 24 is not simply a proverbial confirmation, but rather it gives the grounds for v. 23. For this is not about the unreachableness of knowl-

edge as wisdom tried to mediate it (above all a life knowledge enabling one to control the future), but rather the unreachableness (“distant” and “deep”) of the past. That is the reason—we should add—why the experiential bases for the inherited proverbial wisdom can never be checked. On this repeating topic, see especially 3:11; 7:10; 8:16-17. Only that knowledge is meaningful which rests on what now can be checked. The point is addressed now in v. 25a.

[7:25] Verse 25 is a repetition of 1:17, extending and clarifying it, and it refers, as does 1:17, to developments that lie ahead. Decisive are the elements that have been added to what we read in 1:17:

|        |                             |                      |
|--------|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| v. 25a | <i>ḥešbôn</i> , “reckoning” | key word in 7:23—8:1 |
| v. 25b | “lawlessness”               | key word in 8:5-15   |

Later 8:16 will pick up v. 25a again. While v. 25b functions as an announcement and goes no further (cf. 2:12b), v. 25a leads on, with its announcement of the shift of knowledge through memorizing proverbs to inductive knowledge, to the concrete development that begins with the introduction of a proverb in v. 26. The idea of an inner connection between ignorance and illusion is not recalled anywhere else in Qoheleth. Possibly it was blowing in the wind from the Stoa: *pantes aphrones mainousin*, “the unwise are all mad.”<sup>3</sup>

### Knowledge: Traditional and Inductive 7:26—8:1a

- |    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                    |
|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 26 | Again and again I find the claim that womankind is stronger than death. Because:<br>She is a ring of siege towers,<br>and her heart a net,<br>her arms are ropes.<br>One blessed in the eyes of God can escape from her;<br>one whose life has failed is taken by her.                                              | Song 8:6f<br>Prov 2:16-19; 5:2-6;<br>6:24-35<br><br>2:26; Prov 22:14;<br>Sir 26:23 |
| 27 | But look at what, in observation after observation, I have found out, said Qoheleth, until I eventually found the final reckoning;<br>28 or, more precisely, how I constantly searched and found nothing:<br>Among a thousand I could find one human only;<br>but the one I found, among them all, was not a woman. | 1:2; 12:8<br><br>Sir 6:6                                                           |

<sup>3</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. 7, trans. R. D. Hicks, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1950) 124.

29 Look at the one thing I found out:

God made human beings straightforward,

but they have gone searching for all sorts of reckonings.

2:14; Prov 16:13f 8:1a Who then is the one who knows? Who perceives the sense of a proverb?

7:29 “reckonings”: the underlying word (*hiššēbônôt*) has also another meaning: “siege machines.”

8:1a Read with Aquila, Symmachus (LXX): *mī kōh hākām*: MT: “Who acts like a wise man? Like one who perceives the sense of a proverb / the explanation of a (difficult) thing?” If one follows the MT, the two questions form the beginning of the following section.

### Notes on 7:26—8:1a

[7:26] The saying about women is presented first in indirect discourse, and then, from “because” on, in direct discourse. Qoheleth “finds” this saying. “To find” is one of the motifs that the text plays upon from v. 24 through v. 29; another is the contrasted word, “to search.” The original proverb would have consisted only of the first four lines. It would have been comparable to Song 8:6, a proverb of astonishment at the power of love and the mystery of being able to bring new life into the world. The continuation that we read in the last two lines has, of course, changed everything. Now it is a saying typical of male culture. This is the type of thing one says when a classmate from the old school, a member of a sport team, or a military buddy is going to get married. And it gets a laugh. Such antiwoman talk could readily be spread from the special male youth culture of the ancient Greek world. Semonides, at the end of his poem “On Women,” had similarly used the image of a rope: “Yes, this [i.e., woman] is the greatest plague that Zeus has made, and he has bound us to them with a fetter which cannot be broken.”<sup>4</sup>

The word at the beginning of the proverb (*mar*), here translated “strong,” now, because of the continuation, secondarily reactivates also its other possible meaning, “bitter.” It is difficult to determine whether Qoheleth found this saying already in this mutated form, or he himself formulated an interpretive addition, in order to take a first step toward discrediting it. But the actual dispute begins only in v. 27.

[7:27-28] Qoheleth takes the first line of the proverb naively at its word: if women were more powerful than death, then women should not die. However, experience refutes this: Qoheleth makes out that he has exam-

<sup>4</sup> Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *Females of the Species: Semonides on Women* (Park Ridge, N.J.: Noyes, 1975) 54.

ined the life history of one thousand persons, and not one woman was still alive beyond a certain time. It may well seem to us that such a refutation of a profound and age-long experience is unworthy and cheap. But it is completely possible that Qoheleth consciously presents himself as being this naive. The saying touches on his central theme, death. The saying plays on it, mystifying it. That is not serious and it serves only to spread a clouded image that obstructs our view of reality, and behind which the circumstances of a bygone age can live on. Anyone who realizes that a woman exists no differently in view of death than a man, and in no way shares in some numinous glamour of death, gives women back to themselves.

[7:29] The inductive way to knowledge has proven its worth in a concrete example. Is it, therefore, to be recommended in all situations? New dangers show their faces. The words have already picked them up, and Qoheleth plays with the two meanings of the plural *ḥiššēbōnôt*, “account” or “reckoning,” and also “siege towers” (i.e., the highest technical achievements of the military industry of that era). The proverb had said that the woman was a “ring of siege towers.” How innocent! The new way of knowledge has made an end of such death metaphors. But, against the will of God as creator, it has been used by humans to introduce real untimely death ever more powerfully into his creation. Archimedes, for example, was a contemporary of Qoheleth, had a residence in Alexandria as well, and maintained his connections with it. He was the inventor of the marine propeller and of many apparatuses based on windlasses, pulleys, and levers. He died in 212 B.C.E., in a war.

### Being Counselor of a King 8:1b-4

- |      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                       |
|------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 8:1b | The knowledge of a man makes his face radiant,<br>and his stony features soften.—                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Sir 13:26             |
| 2    | But I (to the contrary): Be attentive to the orders of the king,<br>because of the oath you swore before a god. 3 Do not withdraw<br>hastily from his presence, and do not insist on something if it<br>threatens to have an evil ending. For whatever he finds interesting<br>he will carry out. 4 Since behind the word of the king there is<br>power, who can ask him: What are you doing? | 10:4<br><br>Prov 20:2 |

### Notes on 8:1b-4

[8:1b] The construction of war machines took place in the milieu of royal courts. While dreaming of the best scenarios for the future, the students

of ancient wisdom, in their schools, speculated about a brilliant career at the royal court. Moreover, 8:1a can be understood to mean: “Who is a good advisor in difficult matters?” which also is a speculation for the royal court. Thus the next citation provides a proverb that places before the student’s eyes the most sublime educational goal (v. 1b). Obviously it has been taken from a larger literary structure. In it, “his face” was not that of the knowing advisor, but rather that of the advice-seeking king. The phrase “radiant face” is applied, in the Old Testament, to God when he turns with favor upon humans (basic text: Num 6:25). Thus royal pleasure illuminates the king’s visage, when one who knows offers him advice. Even if the readers did not know the original context of the citation, or even if the original meaning intended the wise man himself as the one whose wisdom illuminated his face, Qoheleth’s reply makes clear that the saying is about an advisor at the royal court.

Even though in Alexandria only people from the very top levels of Jewish society had access to the royal court (e.g., Joseph the Tobiad), and even these were certainly not official advisors, still the temple school in Qoheleth’s time must have prepared its students through many ancient proverbs for court scenarios, just as if there were still a king in Jerusalem. Qoheleth goes along with this fiction, but he is thinking about the situation in Alexandria.

[8:2-4] Qoheleth dares describe the raw truth, contrary as it is to the ideals of the school, concerning the profession of royal advisors. He clothes the description in a well-meant word of advice. The courtier must hide his view and his ideals and bend before whomever has the power. Since he has sworn himself to loyalty, this is even the way it should be. Or, could it be that the reference to a loyalty oath indicates that insubordination could entail confiscation of all goods and the death penalty? The text is, at the same time, a brutal demythologizing of Ptolemaic divine kingship. The royal splendor (shining out in names such as “Savior,” “Benefactor,” “Divine Revelation”) is reduced to what lies behind it: naked power.

### The One Who Knows and the Ignorant—Their Fate, I 8:5-12a

5 One attentive to the law will have no occasion to perceive evil,

a knowing mind perceives when the time is right.—

6 Nevertheless:

There happens a right time for every interest,  
and:

8:5-6: 3:1  
to 8:5: Prov 19:16;  
Sir 15:15; 37:12

- Human evil is often heavy upon a person. 2:17; 6:1
- and:
- 7 One does not perceive what will occur, +6:12
- and:
- How it will occur, who will tell that?
- 8 There is no human who has power over the air, Prov 30:4  
 so that he might lock up the air.  
 There is no power over the day of death. 9:12  
 There is no day off in a war.  
 Even a crime will not win freedom for the criminal.
- 9 I observed all of this while I was examining all the actions that  
 were being carried out under the sun, during a period when one  
 man was using power over another in order to bring evil upon him.
- 10 That is when I observed that lawless people were given burial, +1:13  
 whereas others who had acted justly would come to the sanctuary Job 21:27-34  
 and go away only to be soon forgotten in the city. That too is a  
 breath. 11 For:
- Where no punishment is enacted,  
 evil action is soon afoot,
- For this reason, there arises in the human heart a desire to do  
 evil. 12a For:
- A sinner can do evil a hundred times 9:1  
 and afterward live long.

8:8 Other possible translations: "There is no escape in war" or "In war there is no negotiating";  
 "Lawlessness does not spare those who set it in motion."

### **Overview of 8:5-15**

The debate is resumed against the basic wisdom theory regarding the principle of deed-consequence relationship (cf. 7:11-18). It consists of two citations (v. 5 and vv. 12b, 13) and two critiques of them (vv. 6-12a and 14-15). In the first part it remains ambiguous whether we have a continuation of the theme "fate of advisors to the court," or the more encompassing theme "fate of humans in the world." God is not brought into the picture, at least not openly (contrasting with 7:13-18). In the second citation, on the other hand, the basic wisdom theory is openly presented, and in its religious garb. Qoheleth had had the ideology that he opposed speak until now in a perfectly secular mode, without naming God. That does not correspond to the image we draw from the book of Proverbs, for example. Apparently Qoheleth would not concede to his enemies the right to involve God in what they had to say. Of God one had to speak in another way. Only now, at the climax of the debate, does he allow them to wrap

themselves in the divine mantle. His answer in v. 14 is all the more secular: a pointing, once again, to the refutation through experience of all the old theories. Only in v. 15, when he speaks of joy, does he himself speak of God once again.

### **Notes on 8:5-12a**

**[8:5]** “One who is attentive to the law” is like a resumption of v. 2; the “evil” recalls the “evil ending” to an advisory session that v. 3 considered. The citation touches on the same realm as 7:8-9. The professional courtier always says only yes, and thus maintains himself in the king’s favor, until he perceives that the time is ripe for him to give the advice that furthers his own ends. But “law” could also be the “law of God”: Israel’s law, which frequently is so named. Beneath the sly strategy of courtly life there glimmers a world principle: obedience to the law protects one from an evil fate, and the worldly knowledge of the cultured helps them to deal successfully at the right time.

**[8:6-7]** Qoheleth reacts once again (as in 7:13) by offering citations from his own text that refer back to earlier argumentation: compare v. 6 with 2:17; 3:1; 6:1. The two parts of the verse, 6a and 6b, correspond chiastically to the two parts of v. 5a and 5b. Verse 7 adopts the key word “perceive” from v. 5 and asserts that humans cannot reckon the future, a theme he had developed long before, but now seizing upon a new formulation (only partially preempted in 6:12). So the citation, understood in its all-encompassing sense, has long been radically refuted, but also when applied narrowly to strategy within the royal court. Further, in v. 6a Qoheleth’s self-citation recalls v. 3b, because the same Hebrew root *hēpeš* recurs (translated “interest[ing]”).

**[8:8]** Verse 8 provides arguments for v. 7, in a block of four sayings that describe experience. The basic idea is that whatever humans cannot control, whatever is set in motion from somewhere else (finally from God), these things humans cannot foresee in advance. *Rûah* is “air” or “wind,” but it is also “breath.” When “breath” leaves us we die (Ps 146:4). The second proverb, concerning the point of death, is a statement parallel to at least the secondary meaning of the first. The meaning of the third and fourth sayings is elusive, because we are no longer certain about the translation of some words. But they must have meant, one way or another, that death cannot be avoided, and no one can ward it off. The opacity of the future is, then, essentially the darkness surrounding the moment of our own death.

[8:9] Here Qoheleth himself reveals that there are two levels of meaning in his last explanations: his experience occurred in a society characterized by the domination of some people over others, to the detriment of the dominated ones, and yet his horizon was more universal. The complicated use of passive formulations (“the action,” “was being enacted”) suggests a veiled discourse about God’s ruling over the world. For the key word “power,” an Aramaic root is used (*šlt*), which was used for the titles of high officials in the province.

The concrete example that now follows took place in *the* city, in Jerusalem, the place of the sanctuary. Thus that man who “was using power over another in order to harm him” may have been the one who at that time ruled in Jerusalem. We can understand why the formulation is not more explicit. This is explicit enough. Qoheleth will come back to this man in 10:1-7. See the commentary to 9:7—12:7. Here it is clearly the one responsible for, or at least who allows, the situation that 10:10-12 alludes to rather than describes, as we can again well understand.

[8:10] Here, no doubt, reference is made to persons and events familiar to the original readers.

[8:11-12a] Apparently losing himself in the description and analysis of a society characterized by evil (3 times “do evil”; the last of the 7 occurrences of *raʿ*, “evil” or “harm,” in 8:1-15), he ends it all with a fully grounded denial of the law of deed-consequence relationship, and this now in terms of the religious category “sinner” (v. 12a). This brings into play the last citation, formulated in fully abstract theoretical terms in vv. 12b-13, and the opposed position similarly formulated in v. 14.

### **The One Who Knows and the Ignorant—Their Fate, II 8:12b-15**

8:12b-15; 3:16-22

12b Of course I recall the saying:

8:12f; Ps 37:17-20;  
Prov 10:27

Those who fear God will prosper,  
because they fear before him;

13 The lawless will not prosper,  
and their life, like a shadow, does not last,  
because they do not fear before God.—

+6:12

14 However, it has happened that things have been carried out upon  
the earth that are a breath:

7:15; Ps 73:2-12

there are law-abiding people  
to whom things happen  
as though their action were of a lawless person;

Jer 12:14

and there are lawless people  
to whom things happen  
as though their action were of a law-abiding person.

+2:10 From this I concluded that this too is a breath, 15 and I praised joy: for there is no happiness for a person under the sun except to eat and drink and be joyful, should this come to accompany a person in their labor during the days of life that God has given them under the sun.

### **Notes on 8:12b-15**

**[8:12b-13]** Here in this citation (and only here and in the second epilogue, 12:13) is the “fear of God” used, not in Qoheleth’s own understanding of it, but in a sense derived from the religious worldview of wisdom that Qoheleth is challenging, where it means the faithful observance of the rules of conduct for society that God has provided in advance. It claims a clear causal link between the fear of God and well-being and long life.

**[8:15]** This verse is to be read in the light of 7:14, where the idea occurs in a similar position within an analogous structure of affirmation, and in the light of 2:24-25; 3:13; 5:18, where happiness is presented as a gift of God, otherwise beyond human reach. After the citation of vv. 12-13, the expression “fear of God” could only sound strange and false. So Qoheleth here, when concluding his answer to the citation, seizes on the most unique element of his conception of “fear of God” that corresponds to his image of the opacity of worldly events and of God’s freedom, and he celebrates it: the acceptance of joy when it is given. The word translated here “accompany” does not otherwise occur in the Qal stem. It appears to have an original meaning of “bind,” or “crown.” It could be that it intends to suggest a custom of crowning with flowers the participants in a festivity (“should this circle our head like a crown out of our possessions during the days that God has given us under the sun”).

### **God, Death, and the Limits of Knowledge 8:16—9:6**

1:8, +13, 17; 2:23;  
3:10  
+3:11; 6:12; 7:25;  
11:5; Sir 18:5

16-17 When I had set my mind to perceive what knowledge really is, and to observe what business is really carried out on earth, then I observed, as to the whole of the action of God, that even if their eyes never close in sleep, humans cannot find out what action is being carried out under the sun. Thus humans really labor in search of this but find nothing. Even if one who knows claims to

perceive it, he cannot find it. 9:1 For I have thought about all this and examined it, and concluded: those who are law-abiding and knowing, their actions are nevertheless in the hands of God. Such a person never perceives whether he is loved or scorned; both possibilities are standing before him. 2 Both—for everybody. The same fate awaits the law-abiding and the lawless, the good, the pure and the impure, those who offer sacrifice and those who do not. It comes to the good as to the sinner, to those who swear oaths as to those who are cautious about oaths. 3 What is evil, in all that has been carried out under the sun, is that one and the same fate awaits all. Moreover, in humans the heart is full of evil, and their spirit is seized by delusion during their lifetime—and afterward, as they are about to join the dead, 4 which one would be exempted? For all the living, there happens to remain trust. For:

9:1f; 7:15

2:24

3:8

+2:14

7:15

8:11; Gen 6:5; 8:21

+6:12

- A living dog is better than a dead lion.
- 5 And: The living perceive that they will die; but the dead perceive nothing at all. Moreover, they receive no further reward, because their memory has been forgotten. 6 Love, hate, and envy toward them have already disappeared. In all eternity they will never again own a portion of anything that is carried out under the sun.

+1:11; 3:8; 4:4

+2:10

9:4 Read with *Ketib* and the pointing: *yibbāhēr*; *Qere*: “and afterward they join the dead. Whoever is classified among all the living, they have a hope.”

### Overview of 8:16—9:6

The tenth unit of the ideology deconstruction section is its conclusion (cf. the forward-referring key words in 6:12; 7:25, and the recapitulation of the principle that what one does turns back upon oneself), and at the same time a conscious reformulation of the main points of the anthropology/theology section to which the deconstruction section holds a symmetrical position in the overall composition of the book (cf. 1:8-13, 17; 2:23; 3:10-11; 6:12; 7:25; 11:5; Sir 18:5). Its main key word is “perceive” (especially at the beginning in 8:16—9:1, and toward the end in 9:5). One might say that the text sets one theory of knowledge against another theory of knowledge. The citation out of Israel’s cultural past, which is to be expected but is only suggested here in indirect discourse, is expressed in 8:17: the claim of theoreticians until now that they possess authentic knowledge of the whole of the world event. Qoheleth had already excluded this possibility in 3:11, and here he emphatically rejects it. Compare the sixth-century B.C.E. Greek poet Theognis: “We mortals have

no knowledge, only vain belief; the gods fix everything to suit themselves.”<sup>5</sup>

The professional zeal found among wisdom teachers, however admirable it may be (8:16-17), proves to be fruitless. It does not reach the objective that is sought by the study of the last principles of the universe: that one might really know concerning oneself whether one is loved or scorned by God (9:1). That could happen only if we could establish laws governing God’s reaction to this or that human action, that is, if there were an observable deed-consequence relationship. For then one could predict God’s reactions to the present situation (would it be favorable or scornful?). With this, the decisive characteristic of Qoheleth’s theory of knowledge becomes clear: its profound “agnosticism.”

Yet human knowledge is uniquely significant. This becomes evident when the living are compared to the dead, who cease from knowing. In 9:2-4 Qoheleth offers a summation of his former discussions about the equality of all in the face of death (cf. 2:14-17; 3:18; 6:6-10; 7:2, 28; 8:8), in that it is not better for the good than for the bad (with special reference to 8:11-12). Then, in 9:4-6, this is extended into a contrast between life and death. Superficially it appears to be concerned with the darkness surrounding death. But equally stressed is that the light in living becomes visible against the darkness. The three dominant concepts are “trust,” “perceive,” and “reward,” which concern the personal relationship between humans. The essential discovery that constitutes us as fully human is when we realize that we are that being which is headed toward death. This is not, as a commentator suggests, gallows humor, but a recall of all that was worked out in the anthropology/theology section, the journey of the spirit in existence, in which through the “fear of God” it remains present to the ultimate mystery. At the end there occurs the key word “portion,” which is denied to the dead. That word links to the text concerning “joy” that follows in 9:7. The “perception” that is truly given to humans frees them to be filled with joy before God. For this is the “share” allotted to humans (9:9).

### **Notes on 8:16—9:6**

[8:17] This verse is very important in understanding the whole book, because it makes the action of God equivalent to the activity “that is carried on under the sun,” something that was to be surmised in any case from the use of passive formulations in many other texts. What is espe-

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<sup>5</sup> §§133-42 in West, ed., *Greek Lyric Poetry*, 67.

cially meant is all human activity. This then is at the same time always divine activity. Yet precisely in this dimension it is impenetrable for humans, above all when we ask about the “all” of divine activity.

[9:1] The logical structure is: first comes the thesis—that even people who seem to be in the best position, the conscientious and educated, have no control over their fate, but rather God controls it. The basis for this thesis is given: first it is observed to be universally true (for all people) that no one knows how God stands in relation to him or her. Then a conclusion is drawn: what is true for all is equally true for this group of the law-abiding and educated. The specific form of the deduction—from what is valid for all to an enclosed group—is pointed out again at the beginning of v. 2.

[9:2] There then follows a rhetorical complement of associated pairs: if in all cases it remains open how God will direct the following destiny, yet at the same time in all cases one thing is certain: the final destiny of inevitable death. The opposed groups whose lot is death are lined up according to various points of view. The categories are drawn from religion: conformity or nonconformity to the various expectations of Jewish society in regard to religion. One wonders, however, how far the negative items are understood to be individuals with deviant attitudes; or was it becoming evident that opposed groups were slowly forming and constituting themselves? Perhaps even groups among whose new mentors Qoheleth himself was numbered. The counsels regarding religion in 4:17—5:6, in any case, might well suggest that people in his circles would take a rather cautious stand regarding the offering of sacrifice and the swearing of oaths.

[9:3-4] The *Ketib* text is certainly preferable, because, regarding a later orthodoxy that believed in the punishment for evil at least in the next world, it seems to exclude this as well. The *Qere* text smooths over the complication, and can only be a “corrected” text.

[9:4] “Trust”: the word (*biṭṭāhôn*) is elsewhere found only in 2 Kgs 18:19 (= Isa 36:4), though within one of the most important OT texts dealing with “trust” (= faith in the NT sense) in Yahweh (i.e., 2 Kgs 18:19). The key word in that passage is the verb *bṭh*, which corresponds to the noun under discussion. Does it here really mean—as most commentators opine—no more than the hope that things can go well as long as one lives, at least from time to time? Many parallels from Greek pessimism

could suggest this. Compare, for example, Euripides, *The Trojan Women* 634–35: “Death cannot be what Life is, child; the cup of Death is empty, and Life hath always hope.”<sup>6</sup>

But even if the motif originated there, perhaps something more was intended from the Hebrew word: the possibility, which humans enjoy only before death, to lead one’s life in an attitude of trust. In this case, did it mean to live in an attitude of trust only within the web of human relationships (as the consideration of love, hate, and envy in vv. 5–6 might suggest), or did it mean precisely to depend on God, even though a person does not know whether she or he is loved or scorned by God, but because we know that there is nothing which is not “a breath” aside from him, and that he always acts “perfectly” even though humans cannot perceive it (3:13)? The question is not easily answered. But, despite all his fine sense of words, whenever Qoheleth gets to the most delicate point, he always remains brief and does no more than hint. Thus “trust” is perhaps meant as a new word for “fear of God,” at least for those who can read. For others it can always yield a more superficial meaning, one that also is in keeping with the thought of the author.

The sentence concerning trust is rapidly terminated with a proverb, a trick of style familiar to the reader from 1:13—2:2. In order to understand the proverb fully one must note that in the ancient Near East the dog was one of the most despised of animals, while the lion was held to be king of the beasts.

[9:5] To know that we will die is the achievement that, above all, the book of Qoheleth desires for its readers. That is the way that leads to the highest grade of insight possible to humans, which places us before mystery, and holds us in mystery. The value of such human knowledge is to be fully grasped only when profiled against what death brings: the annihilation of consciousness.

The use of the word “reward” does not, at first glance, seem to make sense. However, “reward” (*śākār*) provides a wordplay with “memory” (*zākār*). This presupposes—probably according to the popular culture that supported the cult of the dead—a correspondence between what advantage can still accrue to the dead and what the living do in respect of the dead. They counted on some form of continuing communication. Insofar as the dead are thought about on earth, they go on receiving some force of life and consciousness in their diminished underworld existence.

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted from Gilbert Murray, in *The Complete Greek Drama*, ed. Whitney J. Oates and Eugene O’Neill Jr., 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1938) 1:984.

One will take all the more thought for a dead person as he or she has done good things during their earthly life. Thus will they, in fact, be “rewarded” for their life even after death. This theory, however, leads *ad absurdum* on its own. The memory of earlier times and persons rapidly disappears among humans (cf. 2:11, 16). For this reason, Qoheleth considers the dead at the moment when their memory, which at first had continued a short while, has disappeared. Their “reward” then too is gone, for they no longer possess consciousness. Only then are they really dead. The popular theory that is presupposed here, which allows for a somewhat slow and delayed loss of consciousness, may not seem so wrong in the light of much parapsychological data. It is important to be clear that this has nothing to do with theories of an immortal soul or with hope of a divine awakening, and giving a new life, for those who are already dead. In respect to such notions, if ever they crossed his mind, Qoheleth has only the “Who knows” of 3:21. But here he sets the limits of all attempts to soften the effects of death by reference to brief remaining possibilities of postmortem communication, by drawing attention to what soon definitively occurs. The dead lose what characterizes the living, and what really constitutes consciousness, namely interpersonal communication. Over time, this is something related to the living.

[9:6] Verse 6 treats interpersonal communications as a reality that is carried out under the sun, but no longer extends to the dead. The key words that are lined up there are connected by rhyme to “their memory” (*zīkrām*), and doubtless belong by content to “memory” as well: *gam ’ahābātām*, *gam śin’ātām*, *gam qin’ātām*. Their “love,” “hate,” and “envy” are key words, which (through 3:8; 4:4) refer to earlier extended contexts, and in this way to the whole complexity of interpersonal dealing. When one reflects on this interpersonal life, one glimpses the limit that is called death. This leads to the fear of God, and—if my interpretation of 9:9 is correct—also to trust. Again that enables one to live properly. One can take hold of joy as the God-given lot in life, and then, when occasion arises, take powerful action. These are the decisive positions presented in the framework of the book’s concluding section that follows.

## **Ethic**

### **Joy and Decisiveness 9:7-10**

- +2:10      7 Go ahead, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a happy heart, for God long ago determined your activity as he desired. 8 Always wear clean clothes, and care for your head with hair creams. 9 Experience life with a woman you love, all the days of your life of breath that he has given you under the sun, all your days of breath. For that is your portion of life, and of the possessions for which you labor under the sun.
- Prov 5:18f
- ✓ John 9:4      10 Everything that your hand finds worth doing, do it, as long as you have the strength! For there is neither action, nor accounting, nor perception, nor knowledge in the netherworld to which you are going.

### ***Overview of 9:7—12:8***

At the end, the book leads anew into considerations of living and acting. It concludes, one might say, with an ethic. From the ethical field, religious behavior has already been dealt with in 4:17—5:6, in order to give the book a center. Here at the end of the book an ethic is developed that is directed rather at secular areas of living.

There is a problem in characterizing the beginning and the end of this ethical section. Most of the text consists of a series of sayings linked primarily by association—more or less the section 9:11—11:3. Yet this thematically elusive material appears to be held together by a framework that contains the main directives. Its opening section prepares the ground for developments in the closing section. Joy in living, the theme of the closing poem and its introduction in 11:7—12:8, was also the theme of 9:7-9—that seems to be a frame. Tenacious effort, the theme of 11:4-6, was also commanded in 9:10—that would be another, inner frame. Thus there would result a framing of the last section of the book, and it would begin following 9:6.