The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes with Specific Reference to Qoheleth's Claims to Knowledge

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THE INTERPRETATION OF ECCLESIASTES WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO QOHELETH'S CLAIMS TO KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the interpretation of Ecclesiastes with a specific focus on the epistemology of its author. Chapters 1 and 2 lay the groundwork for this thesis by examining Qoheleth's ideas about the world and humans' place in it. The use of three key terms – הבל, עמל, and יתרון - reveal a man with a very strong, negative, and pessimistic outlook that sets the tone for the whole book. Qoheleth's observations and reflections have suggested to some that he was an empiricist. These claims are described in chapter 3, where we also present a working definition of empiricism, and a short survey of epistemological theory.

Chapters 4 and 5 explore the epistemic claims Qoheleth makes about God. We found that Qoheleth's very substantial theological claims could not have been derived from an empirical grounding; rather, we concluded that his theology was not only non-experiential, but also counter-experiential. Qoheleth's use of three crucial experiential verbs ראה, ידע, and מצא are examined in chapters 6 -10. Despite the *prima facie* experiential potential of these verbs, our interpretation of the evidence did not, in the main, endorse the claim that Qoheleth was an empiricist. However, it was acknowledged that the description 'empiricist' was only partly justified with reference to Qoheleth's personal experiments recounted in chapter 2.

Chapter 11 briefly surveyed some facets of Qoheleth's argumentation that I submit strengthen my thesis that Qoheleth does not warrant the appellation 'empiricist'. I argued that the early material in the book revealed a man with a very large ego whose dogmatic assertions on many issues lacked the necessary supporting evidence. Finally, in the conclusion, I succinctly drew all the strands of my arguments together, and on this basis I advanced the case that in epistemological terms, Qoheleth is better understood as a foundationalist, rather than an empiricist.

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Abbreviations

AAR	*American Academy of Religion*
AB	Analecta Biblica
ABR	*American Biblical Repository*
ABR	*Australia Biblical Review*
AEL	*Ancient Egyptian Literature.* M. Lichtheim. 3 vols. Berkeley, 1971-1980
ANES	*Ancient Near Eastern Studies*
ANET	*Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. Edited by J. B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. Princeton, 1969
AOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentary
ARAB	Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia. D. D. Luckenbill. 2 vols. Chicago, 1926-27
ATD	Das Alte Testament Deutsch
AUSS	*Andrews University Seminary Studies*
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
BDB	*A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. eds. F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, Oxford: Clarendon, 1907
BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium
BI	*Biblical Interpretation*
Bib	*Biblica*
BKAT	Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament
BN	*Biblische Notizen*
BR	*Biblical Reception*
BT	*The Bible Translator*
BTB	*Biblical Theology Bulletin*
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBR	*Currents in Biblical Research*
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CSR	*Christian Scholars Review*

CSR	*Christian Scholar's Review*
CTM	*Concordia Theological Monthly*
CTR	*Criswell Theological Review*
DBSJ	*Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal*
DL	*Davar Logos*
EC	*Ephemerides Carmeliticae*
ED	*Euntes docete*
EvQ	*Evangelical Quarterly*
ET	English translation
ETL	*Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*
Exp Tim	*Expository Times*
GKC	*Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*. Edited by E. Kautzsch. Translated by A. E. Cowley. 2nd edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1910.
HAR	*Harvard Annual Review*
HAT	Handbuch zum Alten Testament
HB	*Hebrew Studies*
Hen	*Henoch*
HUCA	*Hebrew Union College Annual*
Int	*Interpretation*
ITC	International Theological Commentary
ITS	*Indian Theological Studies*
Jastrow	Jastrow, M. *Dictionary of the Targumim. The Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*. 2 vols. London, 1886-1903
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JHStud	*Journal of Hebrew Studies*
Jian Dao	*Jian Dio*
JNES	*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JNSL	*Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages*
JQR	*Jewish Quarterly Review*
JR	*Journal of Religion*

JPSBC	*Jewish Publication Society Bible Commentary*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series*
JSQ	*Jewish Studies Quarterly*
JSS	*Journal of Semitic Studies*
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
Judaism	*Judaism*
KAT	Kommentar zum Alten Testament
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
OBC	Oxford Bible Commentary
OBO	Orbis biblicus et orientalis
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OLA	Oriental Lovaniensia Analecta
OLP	*Orientalia lovaniensia periodica*
Or	*Orientalia*
OTE	*Old Testament Essays*
OTG	Old Testament Guides
PIBA	*Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association*
PSB	*Princeton Seminary Bulletin*
RB	*Revue biblique*
RTR	*Reformed Theological Review*
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLSCS	Society of Biblical Literature Septuagint and Cognate Studies
SBT	*Studia Biblica et Theologica*
SJT	*Scottish Journal of Theology*
SJOT	*Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*
Syr	Syriac (Peshitta)
TB	*Tyndale Bulletin*

TBT	*The Bible Today*
TDOT	*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament.* Edited by G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren. Translated by J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and D. E. Green. 8 vols. Grand Rapids, 1974 -
Them	*Themelios*
THOTC	The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
VTSup	Vetus Testamentum Supplements
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die Alttestmentliche Wissenschaft*

Declaration

I confirm that no part of the material offered in this thesis has previously been submitted by me for a degree in this or any other University.

Statement of Copyright

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Introduction

There are three books in the Old Testament that are generally recognized as coming within the scope of Wisdom literature: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. Weighty issues are dealt with in Job such as the nature of God in the face of unmerited human suffering, while a more unquestioning orthodoxy epitomizes Proverbs. But as regards Ecclesiastes in its thought and outlook, the ethos and tone of the author's writing are far removed from the contents of any other book that can be found in the Hebrew Bible.

Ecclesiastes is arguably the most puzzling book in the Old Testament canon. There is, moreover, a most unusual aspect of the book. Rarely does a reader find a health warning in the Hebrew Scriptures, but there is one of sorts in this brief literary creation. In 12:12 the author declares: "Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh." Also in 6:11, Qoheleth, the main protagonist in the book, offers no consolation to the reader when he writes, "The more words, the more vanity, so how is one the better?"[1]

Notwithstanding these warnings, this short book continues to attract the scrutiny of an increasing number of commentators. Robert Scott once observed that "Ecclesiastes is the strangest book in the Bible, or at any rate the book whose presence in the sacred canons of Judaism and of Christianity is the most inexplicable."[2] He went on to say that the very strangeness of the work in its literary and religious context in the Bible is part of its fascination.[3] James Crenshaw has also described the book in similar language,[4] while another scholar, Elias Bickerman, also holds Ecclesiastes to be one of the strangest books in the Bible, alongside the trio of Jonah, Daniel, and Esther.[5] He writes, "Ecclesiastes has no known antecedents or spiritual posterity in Jewish thought.

[1] I propose to adopt the *Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (London: SPCK, 1989) translation. On occasion I may differ from this translation and adopt a different rendering; if so, I will draw attention to this where appropriate. Citations from the Hebrew text will be taken from the *Biblia Hebraica Quinta,* ed. A. Schenker, et al., (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2004).

[2] R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs: Ecclesiastes: Translation with an Introduction and Notes* (Anchor Bible 18; New York: Doubleday, 1965), 191.

[3] Scott, *Proverbs: Ecclesiastes*, 193.

[4] J. L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987; London: SCM, 1988), 23.

[5] E. Bickerman, *Four Strange Books in the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967).

To understand the book we cannot go to linear evidence in the Bible or to the Rabbinic mentality."[6]

In the late nineteenth century Edward Plumptre stated, "Among the many enigmas of the Old Testament the book of Ecclesiastes is pre-eminently enigmatic. It comes before us as the sphinx of Hebrew literature, with its unsolved riddles of history and life."[7] Commenting on 4:1-3, H. L. Ginsberg writes, "It is not a cheerful view of the world that greets us in these verses, nor indeed from the Book of Koheleth as a whole."[8] A more graphic comment can be found in Wheeler Robinson's observation, "The book has indeed the smell of the tomb about it."[9] More recently, Norman Whybray, adopting a more positive contrasting view, has assessed Qoheleth to be a "Preacher of Joy."[10] There also have been various disputations among commentators as to the peculiar nature of the book's language, especially in relation to dating the book. As Leong Seow has noted, "There is perhaps no other book in all of the Hebrew Bible where the language has received more attention than Ecclesiastes."[11]

Many more diverse responses in this vein could be cited from a variety of contemporary scholars but enough has been said to indicate that there are different opinions about the nature of this enigmatic literary creation. It is truly remarkable how a relatively small volume can attract so much contrary scholarly opinion; and even today, notwithstanding the vigorous interest that has emerged over the past forty to fifty years in this unique book, there remains a wide-range of interpretative issues that, as yet, lack

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[6] Bickerman, *Four Strange Books*, 142.

[7] E. Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes: Or, the Preacher, with Notes and Introduction* (The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1882), 7.

[8] H. L. Ginsberg, "The Quintessence of Koheleth," in *Biblical and Other Studies* (ed. Alexander Altmann; Philip W. Lown Institute of Advanced Judaic Studies, Studies and Texts 1; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 47-59, (at 56).

[9] H. W. Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 258.

[10] R. N. Whybray, "Preacher of Joy," *JSOT* 23 (1982): 87-98. Repr. pages 141-52 in *Wisdom: The Collected Articles of Norman Whybray* (SOTS Monograph Series. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

[11] C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*: *A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 18C; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 11. For a discussion of the language issue see Francesco Bianchi, "The Language of Qoheleth: A Bibliographical Survey," *ZAW* 105 (1993): 210-13; Daniel C. Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language: Re-evaluating its Nature and Date* (Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 3. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1988); Ian Young, *Diversity in Pre-Exilic Hebrew* (FAT 5. Tübingen: Mohr, 1993); Gleason L Archer, "The Linguistic Evidence for the Date of Ecclesiastes," *JETS* 12 (1969): 167-81.

scholarly consensus.

As we launch out on this voyage of discovery, it seems necessary at this stage to set out how the present interpretative enterprise is to proceed. In the remainder of this introduction I will attempt two things. First, I will briefly set out my views on some general matters relating to the book, such as authorship, provenance, and the nature of the book's contents. And secondly, I will indicate the nature of my methodology to be employed in this interpretative enterprise, along with a study outline.

(i) General background matters relating to Ecclesiastes

Concurring with the majority of commentators, my view is that this book was not written by King Solomon in the tenth century BCE but instead was the creation of an unknown author who, quite plausibly, lived sometime in the Greek period of the third century BCE.[12] The most likely place of the book's origin is Palestine. I regard the case advanced by Michael Fox that the entire work is essentially a literary unity as most convincing. While it is possible to have some reservations about the interpretation of some of the words in the Epilogue being the work of one person or several, nevertheless, in the main, I view the book as the creation of one mind, especially the monologue.[13]

Regarding the nature of the book's contents, it will be obvious to the careful reader of Ecclesiastes that it is largely written in the first person. However, the unit, 1:1-11 is written in the third person, that is, Qoheleth's words are reported by someone else. This section is usually referred to as the Prologue. But at 1:12, there is a notable shift to the use of the first person. The personality of Qoheleth now takes centre stage and he continues in the first person right down to 12:7 with only one significant exception – the intrusion of the third person in 7:27 by the words, "says Qoheleth." This interjection clearly reinforces the reader's attention that Qoheleth's words are being reported by an unnamed third person. This section, 1:12-12:7 is referred to as the Monologue. Finally, in 12:8-14 we have the Epilogue, which reverts to the third person; here someone, or some persons (editor/author) speaks *about* Qoheleth and his work.

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[12] The traditional attribution of Solomon as the author of Ecclesiastes has largely been abandoned in modern biblical scholarship. A very recent attempt to reverse this trend is found in Robert V. MaCabe, "Pondering the Authorship of Ecclesiastes," *DBSJ* 20 (2015): 3-20. For McCabe the entire book, including 1:1-2 and 12:8-14, is the work of Solomon. However, the overwhelming consensus is that the peculiarities of the Hebrew, and especially the presence of two Persian loan words, פרדסים = "gardens" (at 2:5) and, פתגם = "sentence," (at 8:11), point to a late date for the composition of the book.

[13] M. V. Fox, "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet," *HUC* 48 (1977): 83-106.

The overall shape of the book therefore has a tripartite structure: Prologue, Monologue and Epilogue. How the epilogue relates to the rest of the book is, in itself, an intriguing question but it is not an issue that will command our attention in this study due to the fact that our remit concerns the reported words of Qoheleth, these being confined to 1:2-11 and, more substantially, to his own words in the Monologue: 1:12-12:7.[14]

As to the genre of the book, there is a wide spectrum of opinion. William Brown has made the observation that "The work is a messy mixture of autobiographical references, theological reflections, philosophical musings, and proverbial instructions. Ecclesiastes is sui generis in the literary landscape."[15] Certainly on reading Ecclesiastes it is clear that there are numerous examples of characteristic genres that are also found in the Old Testament and ancient Near East wisdom literature. Indeed, as Norman Whybray has observed, from the point of view of style and literary form, one of the most remarkable features of the book is the variety of its material.[16] As far as James Crenshaw's assessment of the book's genre is concerned, he observes -

> Qohelet makes effective use of many sapiential forms which occur throughout the ancient Near East, but two set the tone of the book: reflection and royal instruction. The former stamps the conclusions with personal authenticity, while the latter maximizes the impact by attributing such findings to the wisest and richest of men. Who speaks here? One who has subjected all of reality to a test.[17]

Before moving to the next sub-section, I would like to stress that I am not concerned with situating Ecclesiastes within a theological hermeneutic, that is, I am not seeking to

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[14] According to C. Bartholomew, "Qoheleth in the Canon?! Current Trends in the Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," *Themelios* 24 (1999): 4-20, this issue is one of the most important questions in the interpretation of Ecclesiastes (at 13). In the view of M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), Ecc 12:9-12 is "manifestly an addendum to the book." (at 30). Others would identify two epilogues, usually vv. 9-11 and vv.12-14, see Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste* (Etudes Bibliques; Paris: Librairie Victor Lecoffre, 1912), 472-485; W. Zimmerli, *Das Buch des Predigers Salomo* (Das Alte Testament Deutsch 16/1 Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 248-251; K. Galling, "Der Prediger," Pages 73-125 in Ernst Würthwein, Kurt Galling, and Otto Plöger, *Die fünf Megilloth.* 2nd ed. Handbuch zum alten Testament 1/18. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, (Paul Siebeck), 1969, (at 123-25); A. Lauha, *Kohelet*, Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament 19. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 217-23; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 190; N. Lohfink, *Qoheleth: A Continental Commentary* (trans. S. McEvenue; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 142-44; R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1989), 169.

[15] W. P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes: Interpretation – A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2000), 17.

[16] R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (Reprinted 1997. OTG; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989), 32.

[17] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 35. One may agree that "reflection" is a prominent feature of Qoheleth's discourse, but to what extent the book exhibits "royal instruction" is a much-discussed issue. (See f/n. 56). An extended discussion can be found in Yee von Koh, *Royal Autobiography in the Book of Qoheleth* (BZAW 369. Berlin: de Gruyter), 2006.

determine the theological significance of Ecclesiastes *via* an inter-textual engagement with other parts of the Hebrew Bible, or the Christian Bible as a whole.[18] That might make for a very attractive if challenging enterprise, but it is not the project that I am pursuing. I simply wish to engage with the thought of this most unusual Old Testament sage, particularly regarding his epistemic claims, to determine whether or not he can be usually described as an empiricist, as some scholars have asserted.

(ii) Methodology and Outline of this Study

This study is not concerned with offering a textual commentary on the book as a whole, or even a specific section of it, *per se*: that has been admirably achieved elsewhere with an unprecedented choice of exegetical commentaries and monographs now available. But what it is concerned with is the examination and analysis of a very targeted subject: the epistemology of Qoheleth. We will be concerned with the nature and extent of Qoheleth's epistemic claims; that is to say, we want to carefully examine what Qoheleth claims to know, and how he came to acquire that knowledge. While there may be various approaches to achieving these objectives, I propose to pursue the following pathway.

One of the major topics in the book concerns Qoheleth's references to God. There are over 50 references to the generic divine name in the text. That without doubt represents a major focus in Qoheleth's exposition of reality. One might conclude, therefore, that there are two main protagonists in the book: Qoheleth and God. But there is a very significant third element: mankind. In fact references to אדם/איש exceed those to the deity. God and mankind thus sit in symbiotic relationship for it is rare for Qoheleth to talk about God without referencing mankind at the same time. He has quite significant ideas and comments to make about divinity and humanity, as will become evident as this study proceeds.

And finally, Qoheleth presents himself as a man who has made observations and reflected much on the nature of human life "under the sun." He makes great claims about what he knows; but he also pulls no punches when he categorically asserts the manifold nature of human limitations. He certainly has plenty to say about how his fellow humans behave, and how they should behave in various contexts. Briefly put, in

[18] A recent excursion into this area of interest can be found in Katharine Dell and W. Kynes, eds. *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextuallly* (LHBOTS 587; London and New York: Bloomsbury: T & T Clark), 2014. This is an interesting volume of essays. For a review of this volume see J. L Crenshaw, *JTS* 66 (2015): 710-714. He says the fruit gained from this approach may be meagre, "but the gardener in me thinks the enjoyment of blossoms is nearly as satisfying as tasting the ripe fruit."

general terms then, we are concerned with Qoheleth's theology, his anthropology, and his sociology, i.e., his understanding of human society.

After we examine the extensive theological assertions that Qoheleth presents to his readers, we shall then move to examine what Qoheleth claims to know in his employment of three crucial verbs that have rich experiential potential: ראה = "to see", ידע = "to know", and מצא = "to find." Examining all this material will be a substantial exercise for it will be found to cover most of the contents of the book. In pursuing this strategy I believe we will be in a good position to ascertain the nature of Qoheleth's epistemology.

I should, however, indicate that I have found no evidence in Ecclesiastes to suggest that Qoheleth was an epistemologist *per se*, nor is there any explicit epistemology claimed in the monologue. That said, any writer who makes a diverse range of epistemic claims, as Qoheleth does, has some underlying theory of knowledge, even though he does not give expression to it. However, I do not want to fast-forward Qoheleth into the present century and present him as a modern-day epistemologist; but what I think would be valuable is to offer some understanding of contemporary epistemological theory [see chapter 3.4 to 3.6 for this], which may enable us to present a nuanced understanding of the nature of Qoheleth's claims to knowledge.

PART 1. QOHELETH'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD

Chapter 1: Qoheleth's World and His Quests

1.1 Introduction to Qoheleth's World

At the very commencement of this thesis I think that it is most important to come to some understanding of Qoheleth's underlying assumptions and outlook on the world for it is, I believe, the most natural and obvious way to lay the foundations of this study. In presenting an exploration of Qoheleth's understanding of the world, I do not have in mind an attempt to identify the genesis of his vision of reality by investigating the social, economic, and historical conditions that may have been influential in its creation. Various methodological approaches applied to the interpretation of Ecclesiastes have undoubtedly their own justification and validity, but the path I wish to pursue in this context is not a materialist explanation of what Qoheleth's world may have been like. Rather, it is much more appropriate for my purpose to explore the worldview of Qoheleth derived from the words attributed to him in the book. In following this line of enquiry I believe that his understanding of the world has a direct causative bearing on his extensive knowledge claims that will be examined later.

In the current chapter I propose to examine the contents of the first two chapters of Ecclesiastes which I believe will prove to be a most fruitful exercise due to the fact that they contain a plethora of key words and phrases that exemplify Qoheleth's world outlook. Indeed, the one term that reverberates throughout the entire book is the very puzzling term הבל, which is dramatically introduced to the reader by a fivefold superlative in 1:2. This term is of such signal importance in Qoheleth's exposition that we will devote chapter 2 of this study to it, along with other related terms. Its importance in the interpretation of the book and in elucidating Qoheleth's attitude to the world at large is difficult to over estimate. To complete Part 1 of this thesis, in chapter 3 I will, (i) outline the claims of a variety of scholars who, to varying degrees, believe that Qoheleth employed an empiricist methodology, and (ii) discuss issues relating to a definition of empiricism, and to epistemological theory more generally.

Opening the door into Qoheleth's world is best achieved by exploring the opening verses of the book; for it is here that we have immediately revealed Qoheleth's view of the world. These verses form part of the larger literary unit, 1:1-3:15, which

contains the longest continuous deliberations of the learned sage, setting the tone for the whole book.[19]

The opening declaration appears to be a fairly straightforward superscription, one that yields no immediate clues to the surprises that are to follow. The only unusual feature of this superscription is the use of the term קהלת, which does not attract a scholarly consensus as to its exact meaning. Sometimes the term appears with the definite article (7:27 [as emended], 12:8) that suggests that it is a title, but here in v. 1 the absence of an article might have encouraged original readers to view the term as a name.

Whatever the case, at the very beginning of the book there is ambiguity surrounding the identity of the book's protagonist. The reader is informed that the words of Qoheleth are the words of a son of David, but with no certainty as to his identity. Up to this point we know little about the character of Qoheleth; in fact the grammatical oddity of the name creates a certain air of mystery about him. As noted by Gary Salyer, " 'Qoheleth' has both a personal and public meaning. It designates at once both an individual identity and a public office whose precise function remains clouded in lexical and historical obscurity."[20]

Immediately following the superscription, the author flags up Qoheleth's cosmic *hebel* theme in verse 2 in compelling terms: הבל הבלים אמר קהלת הבל הבלים הכל הבל. These are the first quoted words of Qoheleth by a third party, i.e., the frame-narrator, and they leave a negative impression on the psyche of the reader. One wonders how an all-embracing dogmatic statement is to be followed by such an outburst. The natural expectation is that an explanation will instantly follow to support and validate the thesis advanced in such forthright terms. But as Pauline Viviano points out,

> . . . the reader is drawn into the text by the extreme nature of the opening statement that all is vanity . . . The reader wants to know why, to know how, the author came to such a conclusion. The author does not proceed by answering any of these questions; rather he asks a rhetorical question: 'What profit has anyone from all the labor which one toils at under the sun?'[21]

This rhetorical question in verse 3 pushes the aura of negativity to extremes:

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[19] Diethelm Michel, *Untersuchungen zur Eigenart des Buches Qohelet* (BZAW 183; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989) suggests (at 2) that the first part of the monologue, 1:1-3:15, sets out Qohelet's ideas and substantially addresses the issues thus raised.

[20] Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric: Private Insight and Public Debate in Ecclesiastes* (JSOTSup 327; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 246.

[21] P. Viviano, "The Book of Ecclesiastes: A Literary Approach," *BT* 22 (1984): 81.

מה־יתרון לאדם בכל־עמלו שיעמל תחת השמש

What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?

The expected answer is nothing, and so it will be throughout the book. The identity of the arena in which humans live out their lives is communicated to the reader by repetitive ingenuity in one of Qoheleth's favoured and most graphic phrases, תחת השמש, "under the sun." It occurs no less than twenty-nine times and is unique in biblical literature.[22] This phrase, crucially placed in the programmatic question, reinforces the universal sweep of the thematic statement in verse 2. Qoheleth's extensive use of this phrase points us to the main area of activity for human beings. It evokes the oppressive heat of the human workplace in the ancient Near East and its widespread use throughout the book is most likely intended by the learned sage to distinguish the created world of the living from the heavens and the world of the dead (שאל). As Michael Fox has commented, ". . . most of the facts that Qohelet observes "under the sun" can hardly be imagined to exist in any other domain but human life,"[23] an observation strongly reinforced by Qoheleth himself when he distinguished the divine and human domains in 4:17 [ET 5:1] ". . . for God is in heaven and you upon earth;"

It is most significant that in this opening question Qoheleth frontloads two other key words for the reader's attention: יתרון = "profit, advantage," and עמל = "work, toil." We will not explore their importance at the moment as their significance in the lexicon of Qoheleth will become apparent as this chapter, and the next, unfolds. Considering that in 1:2 there is a fivefold use of the הבל leitmotif, and in 1:3 we have the use of יתרון, עמל, and the phrase תחת השמש, it will not be surprising to observe that repetition of key words and phrases by Qoheleth represents a notable use of this literary device to telling effect.

1.3 Ecclesiastes 1: 4 - 7

Consequent upon Qoheleth's forthright announcement of his cosmic הבל theme (verse

[22] The phrase is of course known in other Semitic literature. Earlier Semitic parallels are, the Elamite inscription of the twelfth century BCE; the Phoenician inscriptions of Tabnit from the sixth century BCE, and Eshmunazar, from the fifth century BCE. It is also mentioned in the Gilgamesh Epic, "Only the gods [live] forever under the sun. As for mankind, numbered are their days; whatever they achieve is but wind." (Akkadian version from the neo-Assyrian period). Cited in Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes,* 60.

[23] Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 165.

2) and the rhetorical יתרון question (verse 3),[24] the author immediately responds to these negative tones by presenting to the readers his own distinctive understanding of the relationship which obtains between people and the world. Salyer aptly observes: "After inviting the reader through the doorway to Qoheleth's consciousness in 1:2-3, the frame-narrator proceeds to give a short guided tour of the narrator's world in 1:4-11."[25] Qoheleth begins the tour with these memorable words in 1:4.

> A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.

The term דור (generation) has occasioned some debate among commentators. The issue is: does דור refer to the cycles of nature or to the passing of human generations? Most commentators adopt the latter position. Ogden, however, argues for the former. He writes,

> The contrast in 1:4 is not between the natural order as permanent and mankind as transient, as generations moving across a permanent world; it is between the ebb and flow of nature, its perennial and cyclic movement on the one hand, and on the other, a world-order which remains fixed and immutable. [26]

Norman Whybray also takes the view that דור appears to have a cyclical connotation.[27] His approach is not surprising due to the fact that he believes Qoheleth to be a "Preacher of Joy."[28] Thus he tends towards giving a positive interpretation of 1:1-11, as does Ogden. For example, Whybray asserts that the word הבל does not occur in verses 4-11 and remarks that, "Nature is observed without such comment." From the context of 1:1-11, and the book as a whole, however, it is very difficult to view Qoheleth extolling the "Wonders of Nature."[29] According to James Crenshaw, "The word *dôr*, an

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[24] There is some discussion as to whether verse 3 is a rhetorical question. It seems clear that it is. Fox, *A Rereading*, 165, points out that a negative answer is implicit in the choice of the term דור to designate human activities, and the negativism of הבל and יתרון in verse 2.

[25] Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric,* 262.

[26] Ogden, "The Interpretation of *Dôr* in Ecclesiastes 1: 4," *JSOT* 34 (1986): 91-92, esp. 92. See M. Fox, "Qohelet 1:4," *JSOT* 40 (1988): 109, who responds by saying that דור never means "cycle" in Hebrew. D. N. Freedman and J. Lundbom, *TDOT* 3: 174, however, positively confirm that any reference to eras in the word דור is firmly based on the notion of human generations.

[27] R. N. Whybray, "Ecclesiastes 1: 5-7 and the Wonders of Nature," *JSOT* 13 (1988): 105-12; repr. pages 233-39 in *Reflecting With Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (ed. Roy B. Zuck, Grand Rapids: Baker Books), 1994.

[28] Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," 87-98.

[29] N. Lohfink, *Qoheleth,* affirms (at 40) that, "The poem praises the cosmos as glorious and eternal in this image of cyclic return."

appropriate choice because of its ambiguity, suggests both nature and people. The primary sense here is probably the former: the generations of natural phenomena."[30] But as noted above, it is unlikely that there is any ambiguity in the term.

Immediately following verse 4, in verses 5-7 there is a list of natural phenomena. The general sense of this verse is clear. The sun goes down and thus hastens (pants) to the place where it rises. Since in pre-scientific times the movement of the sun was held to be cyclical (so here), one might expect that this would apply to the other listed phenomena – the wind, and the streams flowing to the sea. The nature of these activities has a certain monotony that is brought to the reader's attention by the dense repetition of words: "generation" (verse 4), "sun" (verse 5), "wind" (verse 6), "streams" (verse 7), and "sea" (verse 7). Moreover, the verb הלך = (to go) occurs no less than six times in verses 4-7; סבב = "to go round" is found in verse 6, and a few other verbs appear twice. The plethora of participles, fifteen in all, is staggering in this short passage. As Crenshaw has noted, "The breadth of nuance is remarkable, for הולך yields the following senses: die (verse 4), blow (verse 6 twice), flow (verse 7, twice)."[31]

Many interpreters, ancient and modern, have adopted the cyclical view of the natural phenomena depicted in verses 5-7. According to this interpretation the prologue is viewed as an analogy between the passing of human generations and cycles of nature. Typical of this approach is Murphy's comment, "The point of their constant repetition, which serves as an analogue to aimless and futile experience." [32] Stuart Weeks, however, advances an alternative view:

> Qoheleth is concerned here neither with human ephemerality *per se*, nor with some cyclical aspect to human existence, but with the fact that each human life is too short to observe the true character of the world (physical and human), while each human memory is too short for humanity as a whole to accumulate such an understanding.[33]

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[30] J. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 62. Doug Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes* (LHBOTS 431; New York: T & T Clark International, 2006), at 59, adopts this "two meanings" approach to דור, which leads to claim that this "lends immense irony to the observation that the stage on which the human drama is played outlasts the actors themselves."

[31] J. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 65. Arian J. C. Verheij, "Words Speaking For Themselves: On the Poetics of Qohelet 1:4-7," in *Give Ear to My Words: Psalms and Other Poetry in and Around the Hebrew Bible: Essays in Honour of Professor N. A. van Uchelen* (ed. Janet Dyk; Amsterdam: Societas Hebraica Amstelodamensis, 1996), 183-8, considers how the contents of 1:4-7 are reflected by its form. He concludes (at 188) that, "The writer shows great ingenuity in manipulating his language to this effect. Morphology, phonology, syntax and the lexicon in this poem create a world of words that resembles the world of things as Qohelet sees it: a world of continuous movement."

[32] Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (WBC 23a; Dallas: Word, 1992), 9.

[33] Weeks, Unpublished script on *Ecclesiastes*.

This interpretation, I suggest, fits in much better, not only with the immediate context, but with Qoheleth's outlook on life throughout the book. Regarding the interpretation of the ensuing verses, Weeks holds that the relationship between verses 5 and 6a poses difficulties for the cyclical view. In the Hebrew text of verse 6a there is no explicit subject in the first half of the verse; each of the two clauses begins with a participle, הולך = (goes) and סובב = (goes round) respectively. In verse 5, the sun rises, goes down, and hurries (pants) back to the place where it rises. But in verse 6 the subject of the verse (the wind) is delayed (five participles appear before הרוח = (the wind), which could give the immediate impression to the reader that the subject is the sun.[34]

On balance, Weeks recognizes that there is a certain ambiguity, deliberate or not, regarding the interpretation of verses 5 and 6, and so prefers not to force one subject or the other on verse 6a.[35] But in assessing the meaning of verses 5-7, he maintains that consideration must be given to verse 8. Here, discussion has focused on the first clause, particularly the meaning of כל-הדברים יגעים = (All words/things are weary).[36] Bearing the close proximity of the term הדברים with its cognate verb לדבר (verse 8a), Weeks turns verse 8a into a rhetorical question thus,

> When all words are worn out, can one no longer speak?
> An eye will not be too sated for seeing, nor an ear filled with listening.

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[34] According to L. Wilson, "Artful Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes 1:1-11. A Wisdom Technique?" in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. by Antoon Schoors, *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (BETL 136: Leuven: University Press and Uitgeverij Peeters, 1998), 357-65, this unexpected reference to the wind as subject is " . . . an example of deliberate, purposeful, artful ambiguity." (at 358). In similar vein, E. M. Good, "The Unfilled Sea: Style and Meaning in Ecclesiastes 1:2-11," in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (ed. J. G. Gammie et al.; New York: Scholars Press, 1978), 59-73.

[35] Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism* (LHBOTS 541; New York: T&T Clark International, 2012), at 49. For the time-honoured exegesis that vv. 5-6 represent a literary unit whose subject is the sun, see Sara Japhet, " 'Goes to the South and turns to the North' (Ecclesiastes 1:6): The Sources and History of Exegetical Traditions," *JSQ* 1 (1993/94): 289-322.

[36] The term דברים can refer to "words" and "things," but it only means "words" in the other contexts in which it occurs in Qoheleth. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, states (at 66) that," The translation "words" may be too restrictive for Qohelet frequently uses vocabulary that connotes two different meanings at the same time." He further remarks that the argument that all other uses of the plural דברים in Ecclesiastes connoting "words," including 1:8, is "persuasive only for interpreters who posit absolute consistency of linguistic usage to the author." Very few scholars would hold to "absolute consistency of linguistic usage" for any biblical author. Crenshaw's preference for the rendering "things" is more in keeping with his understanding of Qoheleth's negative vision of the world. In any case, the rendering "words" for דברים fits in much better with the immediate context where the emphasis is on speaking (words), hearing and seeing. Regarding the term יגעים = "wearisome," Graham Ogden *Qoheleth* (2nd ed. Readings: A New Bible Commentary. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007) denies (at 37) that the term has negative connotations. He suggests that the root יגע 12:12 speaks of the fruit of one*'s* labour, and on that basis a positive rendering is also appropriate for יגעים in 1:8. This is very doubtful in the context of 1:2-11.

On this translation, Qoheleth is not merely concluding his discussion from natural phenomena: "These human actions – speaking, seeing, and hearing- similarly reach no conclusion, but they are quite definitely not cyclical. Taken altogether, then, verses 5 to 8 offer a list of activities characterized not by circularity or repetition, but by their common lack of completion and consummation."[37]

1.4 Ecclesiastes 1: 9-11

Qoheleth now, in verse 9, appears to move the discussion in a new direction.

> What has been is what will be,
> and what has been done, is what will be done;
> there is nothing new under the sun.

These observations do not flow naturally from the subject matter in verses 5-8. It seems more persuasive to understand verses 9-11 in conjunction with verse 6 regarding the claim that the world is constant.

Verses 9-11 can be interpreted as an attack on the wisdom tradition on two counts. First, Qoheleth claims that no one is able to speak due to the inadequacies of human memory (verse 11). But the more important aspect to these verses is the claim that there is nothing new under the sun (verse 9b). The implication of this statement is that, since there is nothing new under the sun, humans are seriously limited in their knowledge of what will happen in the future due to the unpredictability of events. Hence, knowing the right time to speak and act is highly problematic. The inability to know what will happen despite all the appearance of routine is a crucial issue for Qoheleth that is reiterated throughout the book.

Qoheleth's understanding of history seems out of kilter with Hebrew historiography thus putting himself on a collision course with Israel's prophets who proclaimed that God was going to do new things for his people. As David Hubbard has noted, Qoheleth's attitude completely ignores the concept of redemptive (salvation) history that we find in the eighth century prophets.[38] Mic 6:5 reminded the Israelites of Yahweh's past deliverances so that, "you may know the saving acts of the Lord." Qoheleth's claim that there is nothing new runs counter to Deutero-Isaiah's insight, "Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them" (Isa 42:9). And again, in 43:19, "Behold, I am

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[37] Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 52.

[38] D. Hubbard, *Beyond Futility* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 20-21. It should, however, be noted that the concept salvation-history is also absent in Job and Proverbs.

doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" Other prophets, *circa* the exilic period, also announced the impending awareness of newness. Ezek (18:31; 36:26) speaks of a new heart and new spirit; Jeremiah announces a new thing on earth (31:22) and a new covenant (31:31). Trito-Isaiah's eschatological vision was for a new heaven and a new earth that would endure forever (66:22).

The possibility of radical newness does not come within the purview of Qoheleth. For him, "there is nothing new under the sun," and "there is no remembrance of former things, nor those who come after," all of which resonates with his view in verse 4 that generations go and come: "Just as verse 4 sets the passing of generations beside the lasting constancy of the world, so these verses (9-11) now assert the inadequacy of human memory, perhaps cumulative human memory, when confronted by the vast spans of the world's existence."[39]

1.5 Qoheleth's Quests: Introduction

After the very impersonal style of the poem on nature, 1:3-11, it is clear that verse 12 points to the beginnings of a new literary unit. There is truly a sea change in both mood and person compared with the preceding section. "From its focus upon the world in general the text now focalizes on the experience of the world by an individual person."[40] With the agility of a weathervane, the reader is immediately catapulted into the private experience of Qoheleth by these attention-grabbing words: הייתי מלך על-ישראל בירושלם׃ אני קהלת = "I Qoheleth, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem." With this grand opening of Qoheleth's royal credentials we are presented with the notion of a "royal" experiment, for only a king would be in a position to carry out such an all-embracing enterprise.[41] Thus begins the most striking and original monologue to be found in the Hebrew Bible. From this point onwards we are transported into the very private and personal world of a highly unusual sage.

1.6 Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:3

There is a consensus of opinion that the section, 1:12-2:26 presents the reader with a

[39] Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 54.

[40] Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 271.

[41] Seow, *Ecclesiastes,* points out (at 144) that Qoheleth's self-presentation is reminiscent of the introduction of kings in royal inscriptions throughout the ancient Near East. He views it as a type of royal propaganda, thereby giving much added weight and authority to what is to follow. See also T. Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1991). He affirms (at 215) that this type of introduction, "I, —— King of," is a well known autobiographical tradition in the Near East.

fictional royal autobiography, a genre well attested in the ancient Near East.[42] This royal setting initially ensures that the speaker will be given rapt attention. The natural expectation of the reader is that the king will relate extraordinary achievements, the anticipated conclusion being that he will have attained a high level of success and personal satisfaction in the process. But a different tone emerges in the verses that ensue.

Instantly, Qoheleth sets out his agenda. He informs his readership that he is launching out on an investigation in vv 13-15. [43]

> **13** [I]. . . applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with.
> **14** I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is *hebel* and a chasing after wind.[44]
> **15** What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.

The language of vv 13-14a clearly demonstrates the intensity of Qoheleth's quest. In addition, the ambit of his aspiring endeavours has a universal sweep. As James Crenshaw has noted, "Qoheleth undertakes an impossible task: the exploration of everything within human experience. This scope extends far beyond the modest pursuits of earlier sages."[45] Indeed, his investigations concern "all that is done under heaven" (על כל־אשר נעשה תחת השמים). But the nature of his claim goes much further than this for he specifically states that he, personally, has seen all the deeds (everything) that are done under the sun (ראיתי את־כל־המעשים שנעשו תחת השמש), v 14a. As Alexander A. Fischer puts it, verses 13-15 are absorbed with "die Gesamtheit menschlichen Tuns" = "The totality of human activity."[46] No other writer in the Hebrew Bible makes such a dogmatic claim as this.

The initial verb ונתתי = "I gave/applied," governs the ensuing two infinitives,

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[42] The presentation of Qoheleth to his readership has parallels in the ancient Near East. For example, "I am Mesha son of Chemosh-[Yat], king of Moab," in J. B. Pritchard, ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (3d ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 320; "I am Yehawmilk, king of Byblos," idem, 656; and "I am Sennacherib, king of Assyria," in D. D. Luckenbill, ed.; *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* Vol 2; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1926-27; repr., 1989, 193.

[43] H. W. Hertzberg, *Der Prediger* (KAT 17/4; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1963), 81, refers to 1:12-15 as "Das Programm"; H. Louis Ginsberg, *Studies in Koheleth* (Texts and Studies of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America 17; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950), 4. This view is only partial correct, I suggest, as Qoheleth proceeds to further elaboration on his enterprise in 1:16-2:26. There is also a further nuanced edge to Qoheleth's agenda (programme) in 7:23-29.

[44] I am leaving this term untranslated for the moment. The meaning and significance of this prominent term in the book will be considered in the next chapter.

[45] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 72. So also A. A. Fischer, "Beobachtungen zur Komposition von Kohelet 1:3-3:15," *ZAW* 103 (1991): 72-86, at 76.

[46] Fischer, "Beobachtungen," at 76.

לדרוש = "to seek," and ולתור = "to explore/spy." George Barton states that "search" and "explore" are synonyms that refer to different methods of investigation. "Search," he holds, means to investigate the roots of a matter, and "explore" points to investigations of a subject on all sides.[47] Crenshaw explains the distinction by observing that the first verb indicates the length and breadth of the search, while the second adds the inner depth dimension, the penetration beyond the surface of reality.[48] Whatever the merits of the distinction, certainly the coupling of these two infinitives strongly suggests the comprehensive nature and earnestness of Qoheleth's enterprise.

There is a strong sense of verbal continuity between these verses and 1:2-3. The emphatic הבל theme in v 2 is picked up in v 14b (הכל הבל), and the human activity referred to in v 3 (בכל-עמלו) is echoed in v 13, which focuses on all human activity under heaven (על כל-אשר נעשה תחת השמים). The negative outcome of the rhetorical question in v 3 is confirmed in v 14 in which Qoheleth concludes that human work is but הבל and a chasing after wind. It seems that for Qoheleth, human work is directly linked to irredeemable loss, which represents for him a gigantic deficit (יתרון).

A further point of interest is that Qoheleth ostensibly sets out in his investigations with a clear methodology (בחכמה) – by wisdom, a stance associated with the inherited traditions of earlier sages with their emphasis on observation and reflection. Also significant is the fact that in v 13 we have the first mention of God, who is not the object of Qoheleth's praise and adoration but the giver (נתן) of "an unhappy business" (ענין רע). James A. Loader comments,

> . . . all that is done on earth is an unhappy business with which God burdens men and is therefore meaningless. A more negative judgment of human labor is hardly possible . . . man is inescapably doomed to toil at his senseless and vexing labor because God has laid it on him.[49]

The negative view of human toil in these verses is further endorsed by the aphorism cited in v 15. What the exact reference here is difficult to determine, but emendation of the text is unnecessary, as some commentators have suggested. The essential point is that in Qoheleth's opinion certain tasks in life are insoluble, whether one's highly acclaimed wisdom is applied or not. The last line could indicate that there is little point

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[47] Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912), at 78. So also R. Gordis, *Koheleth: The Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes*. 3d aug. ed. New York: Schocken, 1968), at 209.

[48] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 72.

[49] Loader, *Ecclesiastes: A Practical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 25.

in planning to spend if a method of execution is not available.[50]

One might suspect that Qoheleth would now push forward to offer a defence of his negative conclusions relating to all human activity; instead, he moves into a more reflective mode in vv 16-18 and adopts a very introverted perspective by talking to himself (דברתי אני עם־לבי).

> **16** I said to myself, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge."
> **17** And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a chasing after wind.
> **18** For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase in knowledge increase in pain.[51]

The wording here suggests that Qoheleth is moving into a more intellectual frame of mind, there being a noticeable shift from his wording in v 13a, where wisdom is his methodological tool - בחכמה = "by wisdom," to the desirable acquisition and possession of חכמה *per se*, in v 17a.

Qoheleth's interest now moves from the subject of human activity to an exploration of wisdom and its associated counterparts – הוללות ושכלות = "madness and folly." (v 17). There is no restraint shown here by the sage. His claims in v 16 could not be described as measured; indeed, his acclaimed superiority relating to his wisdom and knowledge, over all who preceded him in Jerusalem, is tantamount to a virtual claim of omniscience. Qoheleth seems to be seeking meaning and purpose in life as well as יתרון, but not withstanding his self - proclaimed status as a sage, his conclusion remains negative. This time he omits the descriptive term הבל, but he still comes to the decisive conclusion that there is no advantage accruing from his great experience of wisdom and knowledge.

The seemingly arbitrary introduction of "madness" and "folly" in verse 17 is, at first glance, most unusual. It does appear paradoxical, even contradictory, that a man with such a self-propelling ego, who claims to possess such an exalted level of achievement as a wise man, would embark on an enterprise to explore wisdom, *and* madness and folly. Perhaps as Qoheleth thought about wisdom and knowledge he

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[50] It is instructive to observe Qoheleth's outlook on life with that of the Egyptian educational text, *The Instruction of Ani*, which refers to pedagogical issues. The main character offers the assertion that a crooked stick can be corrected, an observation notably more positive than Qoheleth's claim. As Weeks, *Ecclesiastes* (OBC; ed. J. Barton and J. Muddiman; Oxford: OUP, 2001), at 424, puts it, this text ". . . does emphasize Qoheleth's distance from more optimistic ideas of human effectiveness." Optimism in Qoheleth's outlook appears to be in short supply, as we will observe at various stages in this study.

[51] The noun מכאוב = "pain" (BDB, 456) is a more accurate rendering (so Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 51).

wanted to keep the alternative counterparts in view in order to thoroughly maximize his enterprise. Loader's assessment is - "Qoheleth takes to folly in order to see if something positive may be said of it – having just established that such a thing cannot be said of wisdom."[52]

Verse 18 is cast in the form of an aphorism (cf. v 15). The asservative כי links this verse to the previous ones by way of supporting evidence. This saying seems like a warning from a teacher to a student that learning and intellectual discovery cannot be achieved without some effort and pain (even corporal punishment).[53] However, Qoheleth puts a different interpretation of the adage. Pain and vexation are brought about *by* wisdom and knowledge. Whether this is a quotation or written by Qoheleth is impossible to say, but what is clear is that those who strive to attain more wisdom and knowledge will face mental anguish and pain.

Despite Qoheleth's confession of failure in his quest for wisdom and knowledge, he moves on to another investigation. On this occasion, it is neither human work, nor wisdom and knowledge that attract his attention but the human sensations of pleasure that are now pushed to the forefront of our attention. He writes at the beginning of chapter 2:-

> **1** I said to myself, "Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself." But again, this also was *hebel.*
> **2** I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?"

With these words Qoheleth completes his trilogy of investigations into human work, human wisdom and now, human pleasure. In all these areas, Qoheleth reaches a negative conclusion, though his negative response in these two verses is expressed more explicitly about pleasure and laughter. In brief, for Qoheleth, all are without meaning or value. Immediately following this very pessimistic evaluation of pleasure, Qoheleth appears to set out on another investigation in 2:3.

> **3** I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine – my mind still guiding me with wisdom – and how to lay hold on folly, until I might see what was good for mortals to do under heaven during the few days of their life.

Though the meaning of this verse is obscure in the Hebrew, the general thrust of the meaning points to a new investigation. Up to this point Qoheleth appears to be carrying

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[52] Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979), 40.

[53] Michel, *Untersuchungen*, interprets this verse as a warning rather than as an encouragement, which may have been its original meaning in an educational context. As Michel would have it, "Ohne Fleiß kein Preis . . . Eine Fülle von Wissen und Kenntnis macht nicht glücklich und zufrieden, sondern führt zu Kummer und Leiden an der Welt!" (At 14): "No pain no gain … A wealth of knowledge does not make you happy and satisfied, but leads to grief and suffering in the world."

out a cerebral conversation about his investigations as indicated by the terminology –

"I applied my mind to seek and to search . . ." 1:13,

"I said to myself . . ." 1:16; 2:1,

"I applied my mind to know . . ." 1:17,

"I searched with my mind. . ." 2:3.

Given the very private nature of Qoheleth's investigations, which is indicated by the pleonastic use of the personal pronoun אני in each of these projects 1:12-15, 16-18, 2:1-2, and the dominant use of the personal pronoun generally in this chapter, the impression that emerges is that of a man self-absorbed with no engagement with his contemporaries. In this respect it is hugely significant that the verb שמע = "to hear, listen" is never used by Qoheleth of himself as he reflects on life under the sun. To listen to others implies that as one listens, one learns and acquires knowledge. But for Qoheleth, he prefers to declare what he knows (ידע), what he sees (ראה), and what he finds (מצא). [Epistemologically speaking, these verbs are, potentially, of crucial importance in the book, and their role in Qoheleth's epistemic claims will occupy our attention in later chapters].

In the immediate context of Qoheleth's agenda, however, the vocabulary used undoubtedly points to an experiential dimension. What is quite remarkable in this chapter is the dominance of the use of the first person pronoun by Qoheleth.[54] With these verses, then, we enter the deeply personal, existential reality of Qoheleth's concrete experiences, which points to an experiential tone that is new to wisdom literature.[55]

1.7 Ecclesiastes 2:4-11

Chapter 2: 4-8 form a catalogue of pleasurable projects: creating great works like building projects; making reservoirs for irrigating vineyards, gardens and parks, and planting a variety of fruit trees. Qoheleth also acquired male and female slaves, and accumulated substantial herds and flocks of animals. His success in searching and gathering silver and gold, and the treasures of kings and provinces (these being the

[54] For an assessment see Bo Isaksson, *Studies in the Language of Qoheleth: Emphasis on the Verbal System* (Studia Semetica Upsaliensia 10; Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 1987), 163 -71. The chart on page 167 reveals the immense concentration of the personal pronoun in chapter 2.

[55] So Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 177.

symbols of monarchial power)[56] presented him with the ability to acquire male and female singers, and "man's delight" – many concubines.[57]

Verses 9-11 form a kind of summary to Qoheleth's intensive experiment with pleasure. All of this diverse activity, he claimed, excelled the achievements of his predecessors in Jerusalem (v 9a).

> So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem.

This monumental claim to greatness echoes his superior claims made in 1:16 where emphasis was laid on his great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And he confirms in v 9b that, "… my wisdom remained with me," despite his excursion into a full-blooded appropriation of pleasure. Verse 10 drives home to the reader the all-embracing nature of his intense engagement with pleasure.

> **10** Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil.

Qoheleth unquestionably found pleasure in this experiment; it was his portion, reward (חלק) from all his toil.[58] Qoheleth's experiment with pleasure was in his own words, a very intensive affair. But his words, "I kept my heart from no pleasure," directly contravenes the admonition in Numbers 15:39 when Moses told the people to keep the commandments and "not follow the lust of your own hearts and your own eyes." This did not appear to be a limiting factor controlling Qoheleth's conduct. In any case, he viewed his experiment as a success for it gave him שמחה = "pleasure, joy."

There is a positive feel to verse 10 as well as a total commitment on Qoheleth's part to get the most from his experiment in pleasure. Qoheleth's purpose in v 3b, cited above, was to determine "what was good for mortals to do under heaven during the few

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[56] To what extent the royal persona extends in the first two chapters is a question that invites scholarly discussion. Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, suggests (at 61) that "Qohelet does not seem to recount the establishment of his business in terms that are deliberately evocative of Solomon, and 2:4-8 is, at best, muted in its references to kingship more generally." Weeks is therefore more inclined to see Qoheleth as a business-man than a king (esp. at 62). But why cannot Qoheleth be viewed as a king *and* a business-man? There is nothing inherently contradictory in being viewed as both.

[57] The meaning of שדה ושדות is uncertain. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, translates "-a mistress, many mistresses." (At 69). Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, suggests (at 131-2) that the terms may be related to a Postbiblical Hebrew term *šiddâ* = "chest, box." The construction is a singular noun followed by the same noun in the plural, and while the phrase is obscure, the context determines the meaning. Most scholars agree that the phrase, only found here in the Hebrew Bible, refers to sensual gratification in the context of these verses.

[58] The term חלק is another of Qoheleth's key words. It is found in 2:10, 21; 3:22; 5:17-18 [ET 5:18-19]; 9:6, 9. Some scholars view חלק as distinct in meaning from יתרון. For example, D. Michel, *Untersuchungen*, holds (at 19-20) חלק as referring to something that is momentary, while יתרו is something permanent. For him, חלק is time (עת), - יתרון is עולם (at 20).

days of their life." Now that the experiment has come to an end he delivers his considered judgment with unhesitating candour.

> **11** Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was *hebel* and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

As E. H. Plumptre puts it, "There was no real "profit" that could take its place among his permanent possessions, no surplus to his credit on the balance-sheet of life."[59] In his decisively negative response, Qoheleth draws on several of his crucial word/phrases: הכל הבל, תחת השמש, רעות רוח, and יתרון. Another of Qoheleth's prominent key words עמל, is used four times in verses 10 and 11.[60]

1.8 Ecclesiastes 2: 12-23

Qoheleth has already, if ever so briefly, touched on the topic of wisdom, madness and folly in 1:17, and came to a negative judgment by using one of his key phrases ורעות רוח = "a chasing after wind." His intense and comprehensive experiment with pleasure fared no better (2:1-11). Qoheleth, one might say, "had it all, saw it all, and did it all;" yet, with this experiment of self-gratification, a firm and negative conclusion is forcefully confirmed. In his own words, והנה הכל הבל ורעות רוח ואין יתרון תחת השמש (2:11).

Coming to verse 12, the opening phrase ופניתי אני = "So I turned . . ." echoes the opening phrase of the previous verse, ופניתי אני, thus providing verbal continuity. Notably, both phrases have the pleonastic use of the first person **אני**, which tends to emphasize Qoheleth's seriousness in his intent and outlook. Verse 12 announces the topics that are to follow: 12a raises the issue of wisdom and folly (vv 13-17); 12b, raises the problem of succession.[61] The contents of verses 13-14a reflect the language of tradition wisdom literature as found in Proverbs and Job.

> **13** Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness,
> **14a** The wise have eyes in their head, but fools walk in darkness.

But immediately Qoheleth begins the process of deconstructing this aphorism. He writes,

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[59] E. H. Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes*, 118.

[60] The use of עמל in the book has, in the main, negative connotations. There are thirty-five occurrences of עמל in various forms in Ecclesiastes: twenty-two as nouns and thirteen as verbs.

[61] The meaning of v 12b is far from clear. The intricacies of the debate need not concern us here, but suffice to say that the reference to the "king" suggests succession problems after Solomon's demise.

> **14b** Yet I perceived that the same fate befalls all of them.
> **15** Then I said to myself, "What happens to the fool, will happen to me also; why then have I been very wise?" And I said to myself that this also is vanity.

It is at this point that the reader becomes conscious of the first clear sign of tension in the book. According to Fox, 2:13-14a "is a superlative affirmation of the superiority of wisdom over folly.[62] Yet vv 14b-15 yield a sober recognition of the ultimate equality of circumstance: - the leveling effect of death on the wise and the foolish alike. Hence, what use is wisdom? And there is also the fact that vv 13-14a sits ill at ease with Qoheleth's comments in 2:11 where he painfully concluded that all his deeds amounted to הבל, like chasing after wind, with no lasting gain achieved under the sun. As we shall observe later, this is not the only tension in the thought of this sensitive sage.

In verse 16 Qoheleth goes on to say that there is no enduring remembrance of either the wise or foolish persons, which echoes the reference at 1:11 where he states that there will not be any remembrance of people yet to come, by those who come after them. Tersely stated, the wise man and the fool have two things in common: all will die, and all will be forgotten. Qoheleth drives these reflections home by floating the question, "How can the wise die just like fools?" (v 16b). The depth of his desperation is powerfully expressed in the next verse.

> **17** So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is הבל and a chasing after wind.

Qoheleth's despair appears to deepen. Not only does he hate life, he states that he hates all his toil because he has to leave it to someone else (v18).

In the segment vv 18-23 it becomes very clear just what is eating away at his mind. Qoheleth is deeply troubled because he has no choice in respect of leaving his property to those who come after him.

> **19** - and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is הבל.

This anguish of Qoheleth's spirit reflects something of a response to his initial programmatic question in 1:3, the implication of that important question being that there is no permanent or lasting gain accruing from all his labours under the sun.

But there is another disturbing cause of concern for the unhappy sage in that he is still fixated on this pressing problem of toil (עמל). Thus with his characteristic phrase, וסבותי אני, which indicates a new direction, he writes:

> **20** So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun.

[62] Fox, *A Rereading*, 183.

The deeply troubling aspect that now surfaces in Qoheleth's mind is that, despite the wisdom, knowledge, and skill he exercised over a lifetime of toil, the fruits of his work will inexorably pass to someone "who did not toil for it" (v 21b). This despairing realization immediately elicits another *hebel* refrain. גם־זה הבל ורעה רבה׃ = "This also is הבל and a great evil."

In vv 22-23 the pain and grief is palpable; it is as if, on further reflection, Qoheleth can hardly bear the thought of the lack of permanence which is attached to all his material achievements.

> **22** What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun?
> **23** For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is הבל.

This rhetorical question echoes the first one to occur in the book: "What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? (1:3)." But here in v 22 Qoheleth omits his favourite term יתרון (profit, advantage) using the more ambiguous הוה which has the basic sense of "fall" or "happen."

Verses 22-23 deliver a resounding negative assessment, which is communicated to the reader by the specific vocabulary employed. Thus we find the key word עמל is used twice in v 22 along with the term וברעיון (רעיון) meaning "striving, longing." Qoheleth's much used phrase, תחת השמש = "under the sun." is also found in verse 22 (cf. verses 17, 18, 19, 20, 22). During the toil of daylight hours there is מכאבים וכעס = "pain and vexation" (cf. 1:18 where כי ברב חכמה רב־כעס = "For in much wisdom is much vexation"). And at night there is no mental refreshment from the turmoil of the day, which for Qoheleth has only one consequence: insomnia (v 23b). Thus Qoheleth comes to a resigned inevitability about his toil, once more having recourse to his cosmic theme" - גם־זה הבל הוא.

1:9 Ecclesiastes 2:24-26

Verse 24 opens with the form אין־טוב = "There is nothing better than . . ." which occurs on three further occasions in the book, 3:12, 22; and 8:15.[63] In this superlative manner Qoheleth sets up his response to the programmatic question in 1:3,[64] a question that we

[63] For a discussion of the function of this form see G. Ogden, "Qoheleth's Use Of The "Nothing Is Better" – Form," *JBL* 98 (1979): 339-50; ———, "The "Better"-Proverb (Tôb-Spruch), Rhetorical Criticism, and Qoheleth," *JBL* 96 (1977): 489-505.

[64] According to W. Zimmerli, *Die Weisheit des Predigers Salomo* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1936), the programmatic question in 1:3 is a fundamental question in the wisdom tradition as a whole (at 18). W. Johnstone, " 'The Preacher' as Scientist," *SJT* 20 (1967): 210-21, follows a similar line (at 215). "It seems to me that the problem at issue in the book is stated in 1.3, 'what profit is there for man in all his

noted is echoed in 2:22.[65] Given the positive language of this Tôb-Spruch literary device, the reader now expects something of an upbeat response after a journey of despondency with Qoheleth's discourse (1:2-2:23). By this "nothing is better than" form, Qoheleth initiates the first of a sevenfold call to enjoyment: והראה את־נפשו טוב בעמלו = literally, "should see for himself good in his toil."[66]

As one reads 1:3-2:23 we observe the emergence of radical pessimism; now at v 24 we have a veritable ode to joy.

> **24** There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God;
> **25** for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?
> **26** For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is הבל and a chasing after wind.[67]

When the depressing contents of 1:3-2:23 are carefully considered, the Tôb-Spruch form in 24 is a most unexpected opening to what is Qoheleth's first major summary of the preceding material. Unquestionably, Qoheleth's discourse at v 24 takes off in a different direction. As Salyer has it, "The chief effect of the call to enjoyment in 2:24-26 is to engender a reversal of argumentative direction for the reader."[68]

However, any attempt to understand these verses must first acknowledge their theological setting. As noted earlier, God first appears in the book at 1:13 as the giver of an unhappy business (ענין רע), after which Qoheleth's thoughts follow a pattern of negativity. That negativity is now reversed at v 24. The ability to eat, drink, and to enjoy one's toil is explicitly said to be "from the hand of God" (v 24b).[69]

We noted earlier Qoheleth's attachment to wisdom and knowledge (1:13, 16-17)

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work which he does under the sun?', i.e. what lasting advantage does one derive from the labour and toil of life? The following 31 sections form a series of observations of aspects of life, made in the search for permanent profit within it." So also H. L. Ginsberg, *Studies in Koheleth*, 4.

[65] Regarding the place of the rhetorical device in wisdom literature as a pedagogical device, G. Ogden, "Qoheleth's Use," says (at 342) that its purpose is that of "eliciting agreement with the conclusion reached as a consequence of certain empirical observations."

[66] The other joy passages are found at 3:12-13, 22; 5:17-19 [ET 18-20]; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:8-10.

[67] The phrase "apart from him" in v 25 has occasioned some debate. The MT has ממני חוץ = "apart from me." As Fox, *A Rereading*, 189, has commented, the phrase should read "except for him," meaning except for God. The MT has Qoheleth saying that no one will eat or drink other than himself. This would both be irrelevant and untrue in the context. This rendering is supported by LXX, Syr, SyrH, and some Hebrew MSS. Also the meaning of the verb יחוש is disputed, as it has a wide semantic range. For full discussion see F. Ellermeier, "Das Verbum חוש in Koh. 2:25," *ZAW* 75 (1963): 197-217; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 139-41. The two main options are "to enjoy" or "to worry." The normal sense found elsewhere is "to hasten," but the context favours the former meaning, "to enjoy."

[68] Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 293.

[69] The theme of "God as Giver" is a very important one for Qoheleth as we shall see in chapter 4.

but he found them to be the source of vexation and sorrow (1:18). Now, God gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy to mankind (vv 25b -26). The important term בוב occurs 52 times in the book. According to A. Schoors, "Its most striking connotation is that of "enjoyable" in connection with Qoh's advice to enjoy the good things of life."[70] Schoors goes on to observe that ". . . בוב never refers to an absolute good but always means "good for the human being."[71] However, in the light of the opening words of v 26, a qualification of this assessment is called for. The gifts of wisdom, knowledge, and joy are not available to everyone as God only apportions these gifts to those who please him (לטוב לפני האלהים). But to the sinner (ולחוטא) God gives "the work of gathering and heaping." Verse 26 makes it abundantly clear that those who please God are those who are already favoured by God (cf. 9:7), but the sinners are not pleasing to him.

This verse is difficult to interpret, especially concerning the meaning to be assigned to חוטא. Some scholars regard the noun as meaning "to miss the mark."[72] Others, like Whybray, prefer the more common translation "sinner."[73] Given that this translation, "sinner" is found at 7:20, 26; 8:12; 9:2 (9:18 may be uncertain) it seems reasonable to accept this rendering. If this view is adopted it implies that Qoheleth accepts the traditional view of divine reward and punishment, a point of view which grates with the thought of 2:21 where the act/consequence principle of just reward is not in force.

Tremper Longman favours a non-moral meaning for חוטא and emphasizes the context to determine his interpretation. Because he cannot see congruity of thought between 2:21 and 2:26 he replaces the term "sinner" by "one who is offensive."[74] But if we compare the immediate context, the issue in v 21 is totally different from that obtaining in 2:26. In v 21 the issue is the problem of succession to property. Qoheleth's angst is that the person who comes to own his property after his (Qoheleth's) demise

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[70] Schoors, *The Preacher Sought*, *to Find Pleasing Words. A Study of the Language of Qoheleth.* Part 2, Vocabulary (OLA 143; Leuven: Peeters and Department of Oosterse Studies, 2004), 44.

[71] Schoors, *The Preacher Sought,* Part 2, at 44. This term occurs four times in vv 24-26.

[72] So Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 141, who claims that the term "is not a religious category in the wisdom tradition." So also Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 26; H. L. Ginsberg, "Structure and Contents of the Book of Koheleth," in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (ed. M. Noth and D. Winton Thomas; SVT 3; Leiden: Brill, 1955), 139, prefers the terms "pleasing to God" and "displeasing," or "lucky" and "unlucky" as opposed to "righteous" and "wicked."; Fox, *A Rereading*, 189-91.

[73] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 54-5.

[74] Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 1998, at 109.

has had no hand in toiling for it. The text states that Qoheleth "must leave all" to another who comes after him. But the fact is that he does not actually leave anything, rather, he is "taken from" his lifetime of toil by the grim reaper, a universal reality for all humans. When God's appointed time comes all humans have no choice (cf. 3:1-8).

In 2:26 what is at issue is the action of a sovereign creator who acts arbitrarily as he so desires. As the inscrutable creator of all things (cf. 3:11), God's actions are unpredictable and do not necessarily have to conform to ideas of human justice and merit, or to the strictures of the modern Western mind. The free actions of the inscrutability of a sovereign God cannot be understood by humans, as Qoheleth so pointedly reminds his readers as his discourse proceeds, especially in the second half of the book. It is widely acknowledged that there are contradictions in the book as a whole, but such perceived contradictions are but a reflection of Qoheleth's own experiences of life under the sun.[75]

It is not very clear what "heaping and gathering" refer to, but it is for the benefit of those who please God. Nor is it obvious to Qoheleth just what is involved in pleasing God. But for him, "The best humans can do is to accept and enjoy God's gift whenever it is offered. Enjoyment, thus, is not something one seeks. Rather, it is what one may, by the will of God, have."[76] Notwithstanding the possibilities for human enjoyment, Qoheleth allows no relief for his readers as he brings this important section to a predictable conclusion - גם־זה הבל ורעות רוח. The antecedent of "This" is unclear, but in K. Farmer's estimation, "It may be taken to mean that however one acquires an abundance of possessions (either by one's own labors or an unearned gift), these possessions are "a breath" which cannot be relied upon to endure."[77]

1:10 Summary and Conclusion

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the first two chapters of Ecclesiastes due to the fact that they give remarkable access to the nature of Qoheleth's spirit, ideas, and outlook on the world. It is a most noteworthy fact that these chapters set out many

[75] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (BCOTWP; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), holds (at 153) that we "must allow the contradictory perspectives to stand side by side. What we have here is an example of deliberate contradictory juxtaposition."

[76] Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qohelet's Theological Rhetoric* (BZAW 353; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 37.

[77] K. A. Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good? A Commentary on Proverbs & Ecclesiastes* (ITC; Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1991), 159.

of the main themes of his thought.[78] His vocabulary is also remarkable in its scope, which include leading terms and phrases like, הבל, עמל, יתרון, חלק, שמחה, טוב/טובה, חכמה/חכם, רעות רוח, and תחת השמש, which are strewn throughout the book. Also very significant from an epistemological perspective is the presence of several verbs: ראה = "to see," ידע = "to know," תור = "to search out, explore," דרש = "to seek," נסה = "to test." This range of terminology is highly suggestive of a man deeply involved in empirical investigation.

Qoheleth is greatly perplexed about life under the sun. One matter of the greatest concern to him is the fact of universal death, initially mentioned in 2:14-16. Over the entire book there are references made to death in every chapter, except chapter 10, which is mainly focused on aphorisms. Thus, the spectre of death is never far from the thoughts of Qoheleth.[79] And this concern is inextricably linked with the term עמל, especially in chapter 2. Qoheleth sees all his toil as having no lasting permanence because following his demise his property devolves to a successor. This prospect is deeply troubling for him. First, his successor could be someone who is completely unknown to him and could be either foolish or wise. And second, the successor may not have in any way toiled for it. There is for Qoheleth no lasting יתרון. Hence, a great problem for Qoheleth concerns toil; but there is an even greater issue concerning human mortality. As Gerhard von Rad has remarked, for Qoheleth death "casts its shadow over every meaningful interpretation of life."[80]

What is further revealing in these two chapters are the negative vibrations about Qoheleth's personality and character. The concentration on the personal pronoun in these first two chapters is enough to suggest that Qoheleth is something of an egotist, a self-centred man with no apparent attachment to his community. As Weeks so aptly puts it, "The image we are given . . . is of a man in conversation with himself (cf. 1:16; 2:1), not in dialogue with the world around him."[81] While 9: 9 does suggest that Qoheleth had knowledge of some personal intimacy in life, his relationship with the

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[78] There are some topics in the monologue that are not explicitly mentioned in chapters 1 and 2, namely, the judgment of God, the injunction to fear God, and the limitations of human knowledge, all of which appear for the first time in chapter 3.

[79] See Jean-Jacques Lavoie, *La penseé du Qohelet: Étude exégétique et intertextuelle* (Quebec: Fides, 1992). Lavoie makes the observation (at 53) that death is "la veritable *nemesis* du Qohélet." (Original emphasis). See also Shannon Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period* (SBL Dissertation Series 170; Atlanta: SBL, 1999).

[80] G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (SCM: London, 1972), 228.

[81] Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 60.

female sex does not appear to have been a roaring success, if 7:26-28 is anything to go by.[82]

The monologue format of the book might also suggest that Qoheleth was something of a loner. Indeed, the very personal dogmatic claims he makes right from the beginning at 1:2, and throughout the book, point to an individual who did not relish the cut and thrust of social interaction and debate. A man who claims to have more wisdom than any of his predecessors, who believes he has seen everything done under the sun, and who makes wide-ranging dogmatic, grandiose claims about God, humanity, and society at large, has reached a position where, as Michel has it, ". . . collective experience is no longer available to him."[83]

There is also another unfortunate aspect to Qoheleth's character revealed in these early chapters. This concerns his striking selfishness. On the evidence he presents, Qoheleth's acclaimed business ventures brought to him a considerable material fortune. Whether some of this fortune was handed to him on a plate at the commencement of his enterprise involvement is not clear. If this was the case, then his selfishness becomes even more disagreeable. But, in any case, there is not the slightest trace of ethical concern for succeeding generations when he contemplates his own demise. His observations and attitude displayed to his readers in 2:18-21 present a picture of a very unattractive sage. Qoheleth appears completely unable to think of anything, or of anyone else, other than his own mortality and how that event will impact his material achievements. Essentially, his worldview starts from his ego-centered observations with no hint of magnanimity or generosity of spirit, or moral concern for succeeding generations.

To add further to an assessment of Qoheleth's outlook and thought we need to give some attention to the key word הבל that defines Qoheleth's writing more than any other. It would be most difficult to read Ecclesiastes without being constantly reminded that something or some situation is הבל. To come to some understanding of the meaning and commanding presence of this word in the thought of Qoheleth is a necessary undertaking at this stage, and it is to this task that we now turn in the next chapter.

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[82] Frank Zimmermann, *The Inner World of Qohelet* (New York: Ktav, 1973), suggests (at 2) that "All the signs point to the fact that Qohelet was a married man and had a child, a son." Contra R. Gordis, *Koheleth*: *The Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes* (3rd aug. ed. New York: Schocken, 1968), 78, and most commentators. Zimmermann further claims (at 12) that Qoheleth had "neuroses and compulsions." His claim that Qoheleth was a neurotic stretches the putative evidence to the point of incredulity.

[83] Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 81.

PART 1: QOHELETH'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD

Chapter 2: הבל in Qoheleth's Thought

2.1 Introduction

If there is one word that epitomizes the Book of Ecclesiastes then it is the Hebrew term, הבל. As Leong Seow has noted, "No other book in the Bible is as readily identified, indeed, caricatured by perceptions of a single term."[84] הבל appears no less than a total of thirty-eight times, which amounts to slightly over half the total occurrences of the term in the Hebrew Bible.[85] A term that occurs eight times in the framing statements of 1:2 and 12:8, and thirty times in the monologue, all occurring at strategic positions in the text is, by any benchmark, a word of monumental significance in interpreting this puzzling book of only twelve chapters. [86]

2.2 The Term הבל

At its simplest and most basic level, הבל has the meaning of "a vapour," "a breath," "a puff of air."[87] Yet in translation הבל has proved to be a magnet for attracting a diverse variety of renderings. In the words of Douglas Miller, ". . . commentators and translators have found the term confusing, so that its interpretation has become perhaps the most crucial of many challenges involved with the book of Ecclesiastes."[88] Some of

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[84] C. L. Seow, "Beyond Mortal Grasp: the Usage of *Hebel* in Ecclesiastes," *ABR* 48 (2000): 1-16, at 1. While the term הבל is very prominent in the text, there are forty occurrences of the generic word for the deity, אלהים, with a further dozen examples implied by the use of various verbs and pronouns.

[85] The number remains at thirty-eight if one retains the MT. Some scholars would emend הכל to הבל at 9:2, and some would delete the second occurrence of הבל at 9:9.

[86] Michael Carasik, "Qohelet's Twists and Turns," *JSOT* 28 (2003): 192-209, suggests (at 195) that the recurrence of הבל and other terms is not only for stylistic reasons, "but is intended to alert the reader . . . to the repetitiveness and circularity which, in Qohelet's view, charactize the world."

[87] On the meaning of this term see K. Seybold, "הֶבֶל," *TDOT*; 111, 313-20. Seybold states (at 313) that the meaning of the term is attested by "later Aramaic dialects that were influenced partly by the Old Testament," and could suggest an onomatopoeic word formation in the Hebrew. See also Schoors, *The Preacher Sought, Part 2,* 119-129.

[88] Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of* Hebel *in Qohelet's Work* (Atlanta: SBL, 2002), 2. See also his "Qohelet's Symbolic use of הֶבֶל," *JBL* 117 (1998): 437-54. Note especially the review on pages 438-43 of the latter article that presents various scholarly opinions. For a most interesting interpretation of הבל see John Jarick, "The Hebrew Book of Changes: Reflections on Hakkol Hebel and Lakkol Z^{e}man in Ecclesiastes," *JSOT* 90 (2000): 79-99. According to Jarick the terms הבל and הכל occur together only in Ecclesiastes. The only difference between the two terms is a serif-mark. He suggests that this juxtaposition may be deliberate in order to portray a visual word-play.

the renderings of הבל include the following: "incomprehensible,"[89] "meaningless,"[90] "absurd,"[91] "futility,"[92] "bubble,"[93] " transience,"[94] "breath."[95] "a vapour of vapour!"[96] The NKJV and the NRSV stay with the traditional Latin influenced term, "vanity." Some other Bible versions render the superlative, הבל הבלים, "it is useless, useless" (GNB), "utterly vain, utterly vain" (Moffatt), "meaningless, meaningless" (NIV), "emptiness, emptiness" (NEB), and "nothing is worthwhile" (TLB).[97]

In determining the meaning of a word, James Barr has indicated that there is a danger in excessive reliance on a dictionary definition of the term, especially if that dictionary has been influenced by etymological emphasis.[98] In essence, there are two ways to determine the meaning of הבל, (i) the etymological, and (ii) the contextual. According to E. A. Nida and C. R. Taber, the most important principle to guide translators is, ". . . the priority of contextual consistency over verbal consistency."[99] Few scholars would dissent from this criterion.

In Hebrew, as in other languages, a word may take on different meanings according to the context in which it is used. In a seminal work on the semantics of

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[89] R. E. Murphy, "On Translating Ecclesiastes," *CBQ* 53 (1991): 573. Murphy does not elaborate on this rendering, but in his commentary, *Ecclesiastes*, (at lxxi) he opts for the traditional term "vanity."

[90] Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 59.

[91] Fox, *A Rereading*, 9, 10, 30. Fox argues that הבל means "absurd" in nearly the same sense as it is for A. Camus in his *Myth of Sisyphus*. See also his *Ecclesiastes: JPS Commentary* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2004), xix. A. Barucq, *Ecclésiaste. Qohéleth. Traduction et Commmentaire* (Verbum Salutis. Paris: Beauchesne, 1968), 27-8, 55, says that life for Qoheleth seems to be absurd in certain respects.

[92] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 57 adopts this term but switches to "absurd" at various points in his commentary, see 2:26 and 4:4 as examples. T. Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 42, has "Futile and fleeting," for the superlative הבל הבלים.

[93] F. C. Burkitt, "Is Ecclesiastes a Translation?," *JTS* Old Series 23 (1921): 27-8.

[94] D. C. Fredericks, *Coping With Transience* (JSOT; Sheffield: SAP, 1993): 11-32; Kathleen A. Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good?*, 142-46.

[95] Lohfink, *Qoheleth: A Continental Commentary*, 19.

[96] Scott*, Proverbs: Ecclesiastes,* 209.

[97] For a survey of the history of the interpretation of הבל see Russell L. Meek, "Twentieth- and Twenty-first-century Reading of *Hebel* (הֶבֶל) in Ecclesiastes," *CBR* 14 (2016): 279-97. Meek shows just how difficult it has been, particularly in the modern period, to achieve a scholarly consensus on the meaning of this crucial noun in the lexicon of Qoheleth. The unrelenting interest in the modern study of Ecclesiastes has resulted in a plethora of interpretative options for this troublesome term.

[98] James Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford: OUP, 1968), 118.

[99] E. A. Nida and C. R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translati*on (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 15-22.

biblical language, Barr points out that, ". . .word meanings have to be investigated by asking what is specific about the word."[100] Put succinctly, what does the actual usage of a word inform us as to its meaning? Thus I suggest that the most useful strategy in this context is to examine (i), the usage of הבל in a general sense in the Old Testament and (ii), its use(s) by the author in Ecclesiastes. This seems a reasonable procedure to follow.

2.3 General Usage of הבל

As we indicated above, the basic, literal meaning of הבל (breath, vapour) is related to the movement of air, and this sense is found in Isa 57:13. Here, הבל parallels רוח (wind):

> When you cry out, let your collection of idols deliver you!
> The wind will carry them off, a breath (הבל) will take them away.

Also in Ps 62:10 [ET 62:9] we read,

> Those of low estate are but a breath (הבל), those of high estate a delusion;
> in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath (הבל).

The sense of הבל as breath is also found in Ps 144:4 where the text reads,

> Humans are like breath (הבל); their days are like a passing shadow.

The use of הבל here suggests its use as a figure of transience, something insignificant. But when we turn to Isa 30:7 the author states,

> For Egypt's help is worthless and empty (הבל), . . .

the meaning of the uselessness of Egyptian aid is more a reference to lack of substance, or ineffectiveness, than to "transience."

Sometimes הבל has other meanings as in Job 27:12 that suggests that Job's friends were somehow confused or misguided. Then in Ps 94:11, הבל seems better understood as characterizing intellectual limitations. The notion of הבל as "transience" is suggested in Ps 39:6 [ET 39:5] due to the brevity of man's life on earth, but in the following verse a sense of confusion is discernible as humans are unable to detect who will gather what they pile up. The sentiment expressed here echoes the thought expressed in Ecclesiastes 2:26,

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[100] James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: OUP, 1961), 171.

> . . . but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is *hebel* and a chasing after wind.

Another sense of הבל is to be found in 1 Kgs 16:13 and 16:26 where it is said that the Israelites provoked ". . . the Lord God of Israel with their idols (בהבליהם)." Here הבל points to sin, or useless obsession.

From the above brief review of the usages of הבל in the Old Testament, we may conclude that הבל is a multivalent term that takes on a variety of meanings. According to Eric Christianson, in the Old Testament, but excluding Ecclesiastes, there are at least eight distinct connotations of הבל to be found. He identifies "breath/vapour," "idols," "worthless/false," "no purpose/useless," "futile," "nothing/empty," "fleeting," and "deceptive in appearance."[101] Stuart Weeks sums up the matter regarding the use of הבל in the rest of the Old Testament as follows:

> What we can say of *hebel* is that its principal biblical use is in figurative descriptions, which use the physical characteristics of *hebel* to evoke notions of transience, uselessness or misguidedness. While the interpretation of various passages remains open to debate, and while there has been lively discussion about some aspects of the sense, none of this seems especially doubtful or problematic. [102]

We now turn to the question: how is הבל used in Ecclesiastes?

2.4 הבל in Ecclesiastes

It has been well observed that the thirty-eight occurrences of הבל in Ecclesiastes are sited at strategically important points in the text, very often marking out discrete pericopae and sub-units, thereby encapsulating the thought and mood of the book.[103] The most prominent position of הבל is found at the beginning of the book (1:2) where, as noted above, the author boldly inserts a five-fold alliterative use of the term, while a three-fold use is found at 12:8. Between these framing statements, the remaining thirty instances of הבל are strewn throughout the monologue, but not evenly distributed. In the first six chapters, which comprise approximately half the entire book, הבל has twenty-six entries. Thereafter, the term is found twice in each of chapters seven, nine, and eleven, three times in each of chapters eight and twelve, with no entry in chapter

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[101] Christianson, *A Time to Tell: Narrative Strategies in Ecclesiastes* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 79-80.

[102] Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 108.

[103] Notably at 1:2, 14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:19; 4:4, 8, 16; 5:9; 6:2, 9; 7:6; 8:10, 14; 12:8.

ten.[104]

The various ways that הבל is distributed throws up some interesting information. First, הבל is given a universal application in 1:2,14; 2:11,17; 3:19 and 11:8 in the form הכל הבל = "All is *hebel*." Secondly, the term is presented in a few formulas, chief of which is גם־זה הבל (or similar wording) = "This is *hebel*." referring to some situation or phenomenon – as in 2:1,15,19,21,23,26; 4:4,8,16; 5:9; 6:2,9; 7:6; 8:10,14. הבל is also found with the well known descriptive phrase ורעות רוח = "and a chasing after wind" in 1:14; 2:11; 2:17, 26; 4:4; 6:9, while the associated phrase ורעיון רוח is found in 4:16. Further amplification of הבל occurs in

2:21- גם־זה הבל ורעה רבה: = "This also is *hebel* and a great evil."

4:8 - גם־זה הבל וענין רע הוא: = "This also is *hebel* and an unhappy business."

6:2 - זה הבל וחלי רע הוא: = "This is *hebel*; it is a grievous evil."

Then in 11:10 youth is described as הבל, and in 6:11 הבל is linked to spoken words. In 7:15 and 9:9 הבל is attributed to the days of one's life.

Qoheleth asserts in 8:14, יש־הבל אשר נעשה על־הארץ = "There is הבל that takes place on earth, . . ." which constitutes the reversal of the deed/consequence principle so demonstrably taught in the Book of Proverbs and Deuteronomy. In 5:6 [ET 5:7] the plural form, והבלים is associated with words and dreams; in 6:4, הבל is applied to a stillborn child; in 6:12, 7:15 and 9:9, Qoheleth associates הבל to his own life, or to the days of one's life, and in 7:6, the laughter of the fools is designated הבל. The love of money/wealth that never satisfies in 5:9 [ET 5:10] is also termed הבל, as are the wicked, who used to go in and out of the holy place, and yet were praised in the city (8:10).

2.5 הבל, עמל and יתרון in Ecclesiastes

Another interesting facet to Qoheleth's use of הבל is the way he employs his cosmic theme with other key terms, notably those found in 1:3.

מה־יתרון לאדם בכל־עמלו שיעמל תחת השמש:

What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?

This is a question of the first magnitude in the book's interpretation as significantly it

[104] Elisabeth Birnbaum and Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, "The Wise King's Vanity: The הבל Motif in the Reception of King Solomon," *Biblical Reception* 3 (2014): 265-90, assume a Solomonic authorship. They build a composite picture of Solomon using data from the books of Kings and Chronicles, Song of Solomon and Qoheleth. In the latter book these scholars view Solomon as a person who struggles with the finite limitations of human life; in response, Solomon is sometimes depicted as overcoming these limitations, while at others, he merely endures הבל.

contextually links הבל with two other noticeable terms in Qoheleth's vocabulary, יתרון (profit, advantage) and עמל (toil). These three terms in total cast a long shadow over the book's thought. Given their syntactical importance in relation to הבל, it will be helpful to consider briefly the semantic range of both terms, especially of עמל.

In the Hebrew Bible the root עמל occurs seventy-five times with its presence in Ecclesiastes amounting to thirty-five occurrences; this represents almost half of the occurrences found in the OT.[105] Schoors states that the root has the basic meaning of "tiredness."[106] The noun refers to "toil," "work," particularly "painful work." A. D. Power translates עמל as ". . . toil involving troublesome labour almost amounting to misery and suffering."[107] In F. Foresti's analysis he points to a clear distinction in respect of the meaning of the term. First, it has the sense of "hard, assiduous work, toil," and second, the term has the meaning of "fruit of work, income, profit."[108] But it is very difficult to deny that, as Fox indicates, עמל carries gloomy predictions through the Hebrew Bible, a mood that is broadly represented in cognate languages as well. In the manner in which Qoheleth deploys the term, there is an overwhelming sense that the futility of עמל dominates his world outlook.

Also present in 1:3 is the term יתרון, which, as noted earlier, has the sense of advantage/profit. While the term יתר, meaning "exceed, remain over," is well known in the OT, the noun יתרון (advantage, profit) is used only by Qoheleth, and has synonyms in יותר (cf. 2:15; 6:8,11;7:11,16; 12:9, 12) and מותר (cf. 3:19). יתרון is found ten times in the book (1:3; 2:11,13 (2x); 3:9; 5:8 [ET 5:9],15 [ET 5:16]; 7:12; 10:10,11). Fox distinguishes the use of יתרון by observing that in some contexts it means "advantage" (the comparative sense), while in others it means "profit" (the absolute sense).[109] Much,

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[105] According to Schoors, *The Preacher Sought,* Part 2, 139. However, F. Foresti, " 'amal in Koheleth: Toil or Profit," *ECarm* 31 (1980): 415-30, gives the number as seventy-six (at 420). This is due to the fact that Foresti includes the use of the term as a person's name in 1 Chron 7:35, which is omitted from Schoors' count.

[106] Schoors, *The Preacher Sought*, Part 2, 139.

[107] Power, *Ecclesiastes or Preacher* (London: Longman, Green and Co. 1952), 136.

[108] Foresti, " 'amal in Koheleth," 430. Foresti's comparative study includes a consideration of עמל in the cognate languages of Akkadian and Aramaic. On this basis he concludes (at 430) that " . . . the book of Koheleth was written very late in the history of Hebrew biblical literature." A. F. Rainey, "A Second Look at Amal in Qoheleth," *CTM* 36 (1965): 805, suggests (at 805) that the noun עמל can be used as a synonym for "skill", which he translates as "trade". Applying the meaning to 2:18-21, Qoheleth says, "I hate my *trade* . . ." The net result of this move is to give a more positive interpretation to Qoheleth's use of עמל.

[109] Fox, *A Rereading*, 112.

however, depends upon the exegesis of an individual passage, as indicated by Michel.[110] As earlier intimated, Plumptre said of the term יתרון, "Its strict meaning is "that which remains," the surplus, if any, of the balance sheet of life."[111] This suggests that Qoheleth was some kind of business man/entrepreneur.[112]

Some scholars have noted the commercial character of Qoheleth's thought and language.[113] It was W. Zimmerli who once observed that Ecclesiastes 1:3 advanced the "central" question of wisdom: what profit יתרון?[114] There does not seem to be any doubt that ". . . the commercial terms which he employs do seem to affirm that Qohelet is supposed to be seen as a businessman, who looks at the world in ways shaped by that perspective."[115] Certainly יתרון is used by the author in an economic sense as in 1:3; 3:9; 5:8 [ET 5:9],15 [ET 5:16], and 7:12.[116] But Graham S. Ogden holds that with the term יתרון Qoheleth creates a neologism which has a peculiar and circumscribed field of reference. He asserts that "It is vital for an understanding of this book that we be as clear as possible about the semantic field of this term."[117] Ogden's review of the term in Ecclesiastes leads him to claim that the original commercial application of יתר is absent from Qoheleth's use of the term יתרון. The essence of Ogden's claim is that יתרון is bound up with an eternal dimension.[118]

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[110] Michel, *Untersuchungen,*105-15.

[111] Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes,* 104.

[112] An observation that Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, develops to good effect at 34-7.

[113] A. R. Ceresko, "Commerce and Calculation," 222-36. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 27-30; W. E. Staples, "Profit" in Ecclesiastes," *JNES* 4 (1945): 87-96; J. G. Williams, "What Does it Profit a Man? The Wisdom of Koheleth," *Judaism* 20 (1971): 179-93; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 103-4; Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 34-7; Fox, *A Rereading*, 109-13.

[114] Cited in Murphy, *Ecclesiastes,* lix. J. F. Genung, *Words of Koheleth* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1904), makes the point (at 20) that יתרון expresses a pivotal idea of the whole book. He writes (at 214), "This question, [v 3] as a kind of obverse, follows naturally on the exclamation of vanity,— as much as to say, Since all is vanity, what profit? the first implication being negative and challenging, — no profit at all".

[115] Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 36.

[116] So M. J. Dahood, "Canaanite –Phoenician Influence," *Biblica* 33 (1952): 191-221. As a result of his identification of almost thirty terms which carry commercial connotations, Dahood writes, ". . . the overall picture delineated by Ecclesiastes suggests a distinctly commercial environment" (at 220-21). J. L. Kugel, "Qohelet and Money," *CBQ* 51 (1989): 51-62, examines Qoheleth's attitude to money and observes that Qoheleth ". . . inhabits a world, or more precisely a class, of financial high-rollers' (at 46). It should be noted, however, as indicated by Weeks *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, (at 36), that, "his [Qohelet's] attitude to wealth is rather complicated, and that money itself is only one issue among many in the book."

[117] Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 27.

It is very difficult to accept this claim as the evidence which Ogden posits is somewhat thin.[119] Seow resiles from the view that יתרון is potentially located in another world. "Qohelet does not deny that *yitrôn* is possible in this world because he thought it might be possible in another realm . . . The problem for Qohelet in this passage is not this world, but toil."[120]

The link between הבל and עמל is mainly found in the first few chapters of the book. Significantly, 1:2-3 set the tone for the entire book. The rhetorical question in v 3 is answered in 2:11, with the question virtually repeated in 3:9, the main difference being that the unique phrase תחת השמש found in 1:3 is missing in 3:9 (cf. 2:22). In 2:11 Qoheleth reflects on all his toil (עמל) and what he had achieved by it, but his immediate conclusion was that all of his efforts amounted to הבל, which term is further strengthened and enhanced by his use of עמל and יתרון. For Qoheleth, his very forthright conclusion at this very early stage of his monologue is boldly stated:

2:11

והנה הכל הבל ורעות רוח
ואין יתרון תחת השמש׃

> All was vanity and a chasing after wind,
> and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

The combination of these three key terms in 1:3 and 2:11, along with the two much repeated phrases in the book, ורעות רוח and תחת השמש, act like a type of compass for the reader indicating the direction of the ensuing discourse. The content of these verses powerfully demonstrates the downbeat nature of Qoheleth's world outlook. [121]

Another significant pericope, in which הבל and עמל are linked, is to be found in Chapter 2, vv 18-23. In v 18, עמל is the object of Qoheleth's ire, goading him to such an

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[118] Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 30.

[119] See Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, lx.

[120] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 104.

[121] For a different view see Stephen Garfinkel, "Qoheleth: The Philosopher Means Business," in *Bringing the Hidden to Light: The Process of Interpretation. Studies in Honor of Stephen A. Geller* (eds. Kathryn F. Kravitz and Dianne M. Sharon; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns/Jewish Theological Seminary, 2007), 51-62. He finds numeric or mathematical strands running through the book. He thus presents an economic interpretation of the term עמל, which leads him to present an economic understanding of the book as a whole. He concludes (at 62), "I suggest that the numeric and mathematical hints throughout the book should cause readers to accept the economic approach, which leads to an uplifting message."

extent that he hated toil. The problem concerns the fact that there is no lasting gain from all his toil since he must leave everything to someone after his death. His property and personal possessions could pass to either a fool or a wise man (v 19). The predictable conclusion is: גם־זה הבל = "This also is *hebel*." The cognitive pain Qoheleth feels continues in verses 20-23 by admitting that his heart is given to despair when he reflects on all the toil of his labours under the sun. What really is at issue here is the fact that the person who will succeed to his property did not work for it. For Qoheleth this represents not only another instance of הבל, but additionally רעה רבה. The lack of permanence seems to trouble Qoheleth deeply.

Qoheleth's anguish continues unabated in vv 22-23. The rhetorical question in v 22 is but a variation on the יתרון question in 1:3. There is no lessening of Qoheleth's anguish on this question of relentless toil, as is evident from the language used in v 23. Days are full of מכאבים וכעס = "pain and vexation," and contemplation of the night only suggests restless minds get no sleep. There is only one irreducible conclusion for the troubled sage: גם־זה הבל הוא = "This also is *hebel*." The intense feeling that עמל afflicts on Qoheleth at this point of the discourse is reflected by the fact that this term occurs a remarkable ten times in 2:18-23, with the הבל theme emphatically stated on three occasions, one of which is described as רעה רבה.

The הבל declaration is linked again with עמל in 4:4 where Qoheleth introduces the new idea that כל־אמל ואת כל־כשרון המעשה = "all toil and skill in work" are attributable to envy. Here the object of גם־זה הבל is not focused on work *per se* but on the competitive motivation and ambitious nature of human envy. This also is רעות רוח. Then in 4:7-8, Qoheleth instances another example of הבל with great intensity, which is discernible from his pleonastic use of אני at the beginning of v 7 (it is also employed at the start of 4:4). In this case, the solitary individual is the subject of Qoheleth's הבל theme. Toil for the individual is unrelenting, and there is no personal satisfaction or lasting pleasure achieved with riches. "For whom am I toiling," is the memorable exclamation that opens up the recognition that deprivation of pleasure is both הבל and הוא ענין רע = "an unhappy business." The הבל theme is pronounced in this passage in that it commences v 7 and closes the topic at the end of v 8, thus stressing the very personal nature of the discussion.

Finally, in 6:7-9, one can detect a certain cynicism in Qoheleth's outlook. In v 7 עמל is viewed as merely assuaging human hunger, though no one is ever satisfied. The following verse (8a) picks up on his earlier theme of the relative value of wisdom *vis-à-*

vis folly. Here the term יותר = "advantage" is employed. Qoheleth then reflects on a maxim in v 8b whose referent is difficult to determine. Whatever the meaning, this pericope is also significant in that it contains three crucial terms in Qoheleth's lexicon: הבל, עמל and יתרון/יותר (cf. 1:3).

Notwithstanding the fact that the term עמל adds a certain negativity to the dark colour of הבל, some scholars argue that not all instances of עמל are powerfully negative in Ecclesiastes, especially in 3:13, and 5:17 (ET 5:18), where the term seems to have joyful and positive connotations.[122] In William Brown's illuminating article on "work," he divides his material into two sections: (i) To Labor in Vain, and (ii) To Labor in Joy. Of the former he writes, "In his sobering acceptance of death, the sage ultimately comes to a positive appreciation of work. By dislodging toil from its market-driven, death-denying context, Qoheleth arrives at his own work ethic."[123]

The "joy passages" are identified as integral to his interpretation of work. "The significance of Qoheleth's commendations within the book as a whole is *the* interpretive crux of Ecclesiastes."[124] He thereby maintains that in Qoheleth's commendations there is an indissoluble relationship established between enjoyment and work. But the difficulty with this claim is that the joy passages indicate enjoyment that is very restricted to activity consisting of (i) eating, (ii) drinking and (iii) enjoying one's toil. And given the overpowering presence of negativity associated with עמל in the book, not to mention the dominant ethos of הבל and the syntactic linkage of both terms in 1:2-3, it is difficult to accept that "Qoheleth's taxonomy of joy incorporates, rather than rejects, the value of work."[125] The reality is that in 1:2-3 there is an arsenal of negativity attached to the book's cosmic theme (verse 2) and the programmatic question (verse 3).

While the relative importance of the joy passages for assessing Qoheleth's outlook on life cannot be denied, yet when they are placed in the overall scheme of the book's narrative, it is equally difficult to deny that the overwhelming use of הבל has negative connotations. And this negativity is further reinforced by the variety of ways

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[122] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 109, states that to interpret labour as negative in these texts prejudges the very question Qoheleth will explore. To fully acknowledge the negativity of עמל in a wide variety of contexts in the book hardly justifies the concept of "prejudges." It is very clear to observe that scholars who hold Qoheleth to be an optimist tend to downplay the negativity associated with עמל in Ecclesiastes, so Whybray, Ogden, *et al*.

[123] Brown, "Whatever Your Hands Finds to Do: Qoheleth's Work Ethic," *Int* Vol. 55 (2001): 271-84, at 278.

[124] Brown, "Whatever Your Hands," 279. Original italics.

[125] Brown, "Whatever Your Hands," 282.

Qoheleth uses הבל in conjunction with עמל and יתרון/יותר.

Carefully assessing the usages of הבל in the book, we discover that toil and what toil produces – wealth and property - and the negating effects of death in 2:11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23; 3:19; 4:4,7-8; 6:2; 9:2, constitute very prominent concerns of Qoheleth when he refers to something as הבל. At times it is by no means clear what the antecedent is when Qoheleth states גם זה הבל הוא. For example, it is difficult to discern what is הבל in 4:16b which comes in the context of the rather ambiguous story of the king and the youth in 4:13-16a. The referent of זה in 6:9 is also difficult to identify, as the relevance of the meaning in the context of 6:10-11 is not immediately apparent. From the foregoing data, we may conclude that most of the incidences of הבל in the monologue are applied to a diverse range of phenomena and situations.

2.6 The Meaning of הבל in the Monologue

From the above observations it is evident that Qoheleth's use of הבל is anything but straightforward. As Dominic Rudman puts it, "Many of the exegetical problems arising from a reading of the text of Ecclesiastes can be traced to Qoheleth's peculiar use of the term הבל to characterize the nature of existence, and humanity's role within it."[126] Words in every language have a dynamic range of meaning and in this regard context sensitive interpretations play a crucial role in determining meaning. Michael Fox states that Qoheleth's usage of הבל cannot simply be directly derived from the lexical meanings it has elsewhere.[127] This I suggest is due to the unique blueprint of Qoheleth's writing style, and one must therefore take cognizance of the creative literary skills of the author that tend to lower the threshold of grammatical and artistic predictability in his writing.

While we did briefly consider the general usage of הבל in the OT (excluding Ecclesiastes), הבל did not attract a singular meaning throughout. As we now turn to consider the meaning of הבל in the monologue, we need not be surprised if Qoheleth's use of the term does yield a degree of ambiguity.

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[126] Dominic Rudman, "The Use of הבל As An Indicator of Chaos in Ecclesiastes," in "*The Language of Qohelet in its Context: Essays in Honour of Prof. A. Schoors on the Occasion of his Seveneth Birthday"* (eds. A. Berlejung et al.; BETL 164; Louvain, Paris and Dudley, MA; Peeters and Dept. of Oriental Studies, Louvain, 2007), 121-41, (at 122).

[127] Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet," *JBL* 105 (1986): 409-27 (at 412). A similar view is found in John E. McKenna, "The Concept of *Hebel* in the Book of Ecclesiastes," *SJT* 45 (1992): 19-28. Of הבל he writes (at 21), "We must be content to appreciate the particular context as deeply as possible without imposing upon it a significance we have obtained from other contexts in some general manner." McKenna translates הבל as "contingency."

2.7 הבל as a Metaphor

Kathleen Farmer argues that the phrase הכל הבל, "all is *hebel*" is a metaphor, and since metaphors are intentionally provocative figures of speech they can be understood in quite different ways.[128] Given that a certain degree of ambiguity is attached to the interpretation of metaphors, "It is possible, then, that *hebel* (meaning a puff of air) might be understood in either a positive or a negative sense."[129] Farmer continues her argument:

> If the translation preserves the metaphor (as Scott does), the reader is forced to decide in what sense the comparison should be taken. In my opinion it is unfortunate that many modern versions of Ecclesiastes have chosen to take the decision away from the reader. Most translators obscure the metaphorical nature of the original statement and replace the concrete, nonjudgmental phrase ("breath" or "a puff of air") with various abstract terms – all of which have decidedly negative connotations in English.[130]

It is the transitory qualities of a breath that are foremost when Qoheleth appropriates the metaphor, according to Farmer. She bases her understanding of the term's use in the Psalms, which emphasizes the brevity of life and the transitory concerns of humans in relation to the eternal nature of God. "A breath, after all, is of considerable value to the one who breathes it . . . It is airlike, fleeting, transitory, and elusive rather than meaningless."[131] Farmer also points to the frequency of הבל with רוח ("spirit" or "wind" in 1:14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 16; 6:9) and thus asserts that הבל does not mean "absurd" (contra M. Fox) but is best rendered "ephemeral" or "fleeting," thus fitting in well with several passages in the Psalms and Job.[132]

Farmer accepts that the thematic metaphor הכל הבל "all is *hebel*" is fundamentally ambiguous, which in effect leaves the door open for different interpretations. As far as those who have taken הבל to mean "worthlessness,

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[128] Daniel Fredericks, *Coping With Transience*, also adopts (at 11-12) the metaphorical sense of "transience," for הבל. He does concede that הבל could mean "futility" in 5:6 [ET 7], 6:4 and 6:11, but he claims that such cases are few in number and that they should not be allowed to skew the meaning in the direction of futility for the book as a whole.

[129] Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good*? 143. Menachem Fisch, "Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) in Context – A Study of Wisdom as Constructive Skepticism," in *Critical Rationalism, Essays for Joseph Agassi, Vol. 2. The social sciences and the humanities*. Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science 162 (ed. J. C. Jarvie and N. Laor: Dordrecht: London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), 167-87, makes the comment '. . . the the human condition is characterized, according to Qohelet, not by its perpetual meaningless or absurdity, but by its ultimate uncertainty; by man's essential inability ever to achieve atemporal certitude.' (176).

[130] Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good*? 143.

[131] Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good*? 145.

[132] Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good*? 145.

meaningless, or futility" the result is to assume that the author was a man who lacked piety and faith and that Ecclesiastes is an anomaly in the biblical canon. From this, a negative, pessimistic interpretation follows. However, Farmer prefers the more positive reading of the book whereby הבל is understood to refer to a lack of duration ("transitoriness") which applies to everything "under the sun" in contrast to the permanence of God.[133]

How we view Qoheleth's use of הבל does, to some degree, reflect our own predisposition to life's mysteries. Farmer's approach to the book is theological and positive, and there is much to commend her rationale concerning the interpretation of this troublesome term. But, is her analysis of Qoheleth's use of הבל comprehensively persuasive?

The major difficulty with Farmer's translation of הבל as "breath/transitoriness," which also applies to scholars who adopt this stance like Scott and Fredericks, is that this understanding of הבל will not fit well with every passage where it occurs. Moreover, Farmer does not defend her theory across the board, as she omits discussion of 4:7-8 and 6:1-6. Scholars, who find this position of viewing הבל as having one primary sense applied to all cases, are forced to acknowledge at some point that "transience/fleeting" does not fit with every context. This translation of הבל can therefore be viewed as a version of the multiple-senses approach, one by which some scholars use a multiplicity of terms in translating it, particularly when their chosen term for הבל does not fit. The upshot of this "one metaphor" approach to the translation of הבל is that Qoheleth is deemed not to be using the term in a consistent manner.[134]

Douglas Miller attempts to appropriate this single metaphor approach, but with a difference from Farmer, *et al*. His underlying belief is that if one is to understand הבל in Ecclesiastes then its metaphoric and symbolic nature has to be taken seriously.[135] Miller

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[133] Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good*? 146.

[134] For an interesting view on the meaning of הבל see Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 248-57, where he discusses the diverse approaches to the הבל metaphor of Fox and Farmer. Salyer draws on the work of I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford: OUP, 1936) whereby he refers to the two components of a metaphor. First, there is the general idea of the statement, which is called the "tenor"; secondly, there is the non/literal/pictorial image, which imbues the statement with a comparative meaning. This aspect is referred to as the "vehicle" of the metaphor. Thus, when Qoheleth asserts that, "הכל הבל," the term הכל = "everything" refers to life in general; this is called the tenor, while הבל "breath, vapor, mist" is the vehicle. According to Salyer, Fox emphasizes the vehicle, while Farmer opts for the tenor. Hence, the lack of agreement. Salyer concludes by saying that Qoheleth's use of הבל is very difficult to understand due to the linguistic and semantic difficulty of understanding what is meant. In the words of S. Halloran, "Language and the Absurd," *PR* 6 (1973) at 98, "the writer tries to say what is fundamentally unsayable." (Cited in Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, at 255).

[135] Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric*, 2.

adopts an approach to the problem of Qoheleth's use of הבל by suggesting that הבל functions as a symbol in Qoheleth's exposition. He believes that Qoheleth holds to the root metaphor of הבל as "vapour" thus constructing "a symbol to represent the entirety of human experience."[136] According to this approach, Qoheleth is not consistent in his use of הבל and ponders whether this inconsistency is part of his purpose.[137] Building on the work of Philip Wheelwright, whereby "symbol" is being used as Wheelwright's "tensive symbol," Miller states that an image holds together a set of meanings that can neither be exhausted nor adequately expressed by any single meaning."[138]

On this reckoning, Miller thinks that, "Given the extent of Qoheleth's creative use of literary devices, it should not be surprising that his thesis statement (1:2; 12:8) involves הבל, a term capable of several senses, which Qoheleth employs with multivalency."[139] Miller postulates that there are three referents of הבל: transience, insubstantiality, and foulness,[140] and concludes that, "None of the three metaphors *by itself* applies to all of human experience, and yet with this symbol, Qoheleth can demonstrate that "all is הבל" in one way or another."[141] Miller claims that if his symbol thesis is accepted, then his "proposal provides that Qoheleth is internally consistent in regard to his use of הבל."[142]

While it is generally true that the term הבל in Ecclesiastes does not connote something that is good, it is another matter to describe it as bad. הבל can be transient and insubstantial but that is not essentially bad. Miller applies the notion of "foulness" to the metaphor of הבל in 2:21; 4:8; 6:2; 9:2 (as emended) but these instances of הבל are more suitably rendered as incomprehensible or enigmatic. The essential problem with Miller's thesis is that it is not a convincing theory notably regarding the unsuitability of "foulness" as a referent for הבל, and thus it suffers the same disadvantages of the single metaphor theory.

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[136] Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric*, 443.

[137] Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric,* 443.

[138] Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric*, 444. Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 256, has noted that Qoheleth has chosen such a polyvalent and fertile term, which is in keeping with the rhetoric of ambiguity that operates throughout the book.

[139] Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric*, 445.

[140] Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric*, 444.

[141] Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric*, 454. Original italics.

[142] Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric*, 454.

The notion that הבל means something "absurd" has been appropriated by some scholars, most notably by Michael Fox, whose advocacy has been influential.[143] Like most scholars, Fox acknowledges that no English word corresponds exactly to the semantic shape of הבל as Qoheleth uses it.[144] But he claims that the best translation equivalent for הבל in Qoheleth's usage is the term "absurdity," a choice that is ostensibly indebted to existential philosophy, notably from the concept of "absurdity" as advanced in Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*. For Fox, "The absurd is an affront to reason, in the broad sense of the human faculty that looks for order in the world about us."[145] Fox, however, concedes that,

> A word can, of course, be used in various ways in a single book, but Qohelet's thematic declaration that everything is *hebel* and the formulaic character of the *hebel*-judgments show that for Qohelet there is a single dominant quality in the world and that this quality inheres in the particular *habalim* that he identifies.[146]

Fox therefore eschews the multiple senses approach whereby some Bible translations use various glosses to translate הבל. He states that,

> If Qohelet were saying, "X is transitory; Y is futile; Z is trivial," then the summary, "All is *hebel*" would be meaningless. . . . To do Qohelet justice, we must look for a concept that applies to all occurrences, or, failing that, to the great majority of them. Then the summary statement "all is *hebel*" can use the word in the sense established in the particulars."[147]

Following from this concession Fox admits that, "it is frequently difficult, sometimes virtually impossible, to identify the antecedents of the pronouns in the *hebel*-judgments. Thus, in particular cases it is uncertain what exactly is being judged – a thing or action mentioned in the context."[148]

On a first reading, Fox's choice seems to fit appropriately in many contexts, such as 2:15, where the wise man has no real advantage over the fool – both share the

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[143] Fox, *A Rereading*, 27-49; ———, *Qohelet and His Contradictions* (JSOTSup 71; Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 29-51;———, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet," *JBL* 105 (1986): 409-27. Schoors, *The Preacher Sought*, Part 2 also adopts this translation of הבל, especially at 129. However, he does note that Fox has some difficulty in fitting in "absurdity" in every context. For example, Schoors states (at 127) that Fox has a problem in 6:4 with "absurdity" and proceeds to help "himself out of a jam." See also Michel, *Untersuchungen*, at 40-51, who defines "absurd" as "meaningless" (at 44). Bruno Pennacchini, "Qohelet ovvero il libro degli assurdi," *ED* 30 (1977): 491-510, takes the word "absurd" in the sense of "incomprehensibility." (at 496).

[144] Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 31.

[145] Fox, "The Meaning of Hebel," 409.

[146] Fox, *A Rereading*, 35.

[147] Fox, *A Rereading*, 36.

[148] Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet." (at 415). Fox's adoption of "absurd" was earlier referenced by A. Barucq, *Ecclésiaste,* 54-55*,* when he employed the term *absurdité* as a translation of הבל.

same fate; 2:21, where the wealthy man must pass it on to someone who does not deserve it; 4:7, the lonely man who labours on with no companionship or joy in life. While it is true that the idea of "absurdity" may pervade the text of Ecclesiastes to a degree, it nevertheless remains the case that Fox's translation of הבל by this one term, suffers the same weakness as the multiple senses approach: it cannot be coherently and consistently applied in every one of הבל's occurrences. It also attracts another crucial objection; הבל does not have this meaning elsewhere.[149]

How the intensified form of הבל in the opening and closing thematic statements relates to the thirty particular instances of הבל in the monologue in terms of unified and consistent meaning, is an interpretational challenge yet to be met. Seybold has noted,

> . . . that this word [הבל], which was not as yet overworked, and whose onomatopoeic basis gave it a certain attractiveness, was especially well suited for radical polemic and the definition of new insights. . . . Consequently, the range of meaning of *hebhel* is open. It has a broad emotion-laden stratum with strong evocative possibilities, and it is especially suited therefore to be keyword or catchword.[150]

This highlights the problem of interpreting this ambiguous term, especially since the writer has a unique and unpredictable writing style. The effect of this is that the feeling of obscurity that attaches to the use of הבל contributes to the overall ambiguity with reference to the book's principal theme. Gary Salyer offers a pertinent analysis of Qoheleth's use of this metaphor.

> In short, readers have a problem isolating which connotation in such a lively tensive-symbol is the salient aspect that succinctly sums up the overall meaning of the work. The basic problem is that tensive-symbols, which hold a variety of meanings, are poor vehicles for expressing unitary meanings, which is what most readers expect from a summarizing statement.[151]

Qoheleth's worldview is intimately connected to his use of הבל. In the words of Walther Zimmerli, the fivefold repetition of הבל in the superlative degree is "the

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[149] So Weeks, *An Introduction to the Study of Wisdom Literature* (Approaches to Biblical Studies; London: T&T Clark International, 2010), 81. As Weeks notes (at 81), ". . . it is difficult to see either how 'breath' could have come to mean 'absurd,' or how the original readers were supposed to deduce this meaning." Mark Sneed, *Ecclesiastes and the Politics of Pessimism* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2012) observes (at 174), ". . . in Qoheleth, "futility" and "illusion" (a few times as "transience" [e.g., 7:15]) or "worthlessness" seems the best options, and this fits in with the primary intent of the book: a polemic against traditional wisdom. . ." Whether the primary intent of Ecclesiastes is a polemic against traditional wisdom is a point of view far from convincing for it assumes that (i) all traditional wisdom was bad, and (ii) that the author of 12:9-14 effectively deconstructs the contents of the previous 216 verses. This is the same view as advanced by M. Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, *A Reappraisal of the Historical and Canonical Function of Ecclesiastes* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2007).

[150] Karl Seybold, "הֶבֶל," *TDOT*; 111: 318, 315.

[151] Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 256.

supreme intensification of הבל."[152] Unequivocally, these opening words of Qoheleth are programmatic for the whole book. And given the suggested onomatopoeic character of הבל, - the blowing of air – this makes his opening salvo all the more significant for the book's interpretation.

We also noted Graham Ogden's suggestion that to interpret הבל in context, one must do so paying attention to the painful scenarios to which the *hebel*-phrase is added as a response; the meaning of parallel and complementary phrases, "striving after wind," "a sore affliction," and "an unhappy business"; and the calls to enjoyment which punctuate the book at key points. This seems a sound hermeneutical procedure. But even if we were to acknowledge the importance of contextual meaning, it is still very difficult to deny that throughout the book the base meaning of הבל has very strong negative connotations, a fact recognized by many scholars. Furthermore, the essence of the advice given in the joy passages is that the recommended enjoyment is set within very narrow limits. It is, therefore, very difficult to view Qoheleth as an optimist in any substantial way, bearing in mind the overarching mood of prevailing pessimism that echoes throughout the book. Weeks assesses the commanding presence of הבל thus:

> . . . what hebel seems principally to represent for Qohelet is bound up with a misapprehension of the world, and their place in it, by humans: they invest effort for things they cannot gain, or for reasons which are false, and fail to pursue or to accomplish the only truly beneficial option which is open to them – pleasure in their activities – either because their concerns lie elsewhere, or because they have been misled into behaviour which may shorten their lives or prevent their enjoyment.[153]

2.8 Summary and Conclusion

In the light of the above survey, it is clear that there is no agreement on what the English equivalent of הבל should be. But what is generally recognized is that this Hebrew term has a basic, literal meaning of "vapour," "breath," or something concerned with air, or the movement of air. However, Qoheleth's use of הבל is generally acknowledged to be a metaphor/figure and as such he employs it to cover a wide range of phenomena that he wants to discuss.

No matter how we approach the resolution of this problem, it is timely to recall that we are over two millennia removed from the culture in which Qoheleth was active. It is quite possible, therefore, that when Qoheleth employed this multivalent term, it may have had connotations for his readers that are forever hidden from our modern

[152] Zimmerli, *Das Buch des Predigers Salomo*, 144.

[153] Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 119.

culture with all its linguistic conventions and ideological assumptions. Therefore, even if there were universal agreement today as to an agreed rendering to הבל, there still would be that nagging doubt that we do not have sufficient clarity to what Qoheleth had in mind when he used it, for at no point in the monologue does he inform the reader what it means. By the same token, it is also not possible to retrieve the understanding of הבל that his audience would have known.

Furthermore, due to Qoheleth's literary dexterity, his use of הבל is hardly likely to conform to its use in the Old Testament or elsewhere. We did note, however, that other authors employed the term to convey notions of transience and ineffectiveness, but cognizance was taken of the fact that these ideas do not give us a complete picture of its meaning in the rest of the Old Testament, and certainly not in Ecclesiastes. In the end, no matter how this ambiguous term is to be rendered in English, it will be impossible to capture the varied nuances that are employed in Qoheleth's writing.

In view of the above observations and complexities, there really is no satisfactory resolution of this issue. Whatever translation is preferred, it will not be possible to adopt one word that captures all the nuances that Qoheleth may have attached to הבל. I therefore think that, for want of a better term, the traditional rendering "vanity" will serve our present purpose adequately, but, at the same time, it should be kept in mind that the various ways Qoheleth applies the term cannot be reduced to any single term or phrase in the English language, be it "vanity" or otherwise.[154]

The הבל cosmic theme undoubtedly captivates the spirit and outlook of Qoheleth like no other. This is especially so when we observe how he employs it along with other important key words and phrases like עמל (toil), יתרון (profit, advantage), and רעות רוח (chasing after wind). By far the most striking employment of הבל is in conjunction with עמל. The ensuing symbiotic relationship occurs in 2:11,17,19,21,23; 4:4, 7-8. There is no other term that is coupled with הבל so extensively. Qoheleth's use of עמל has the distinctive effect of adding a dark shade to the colour of his cosmic הבל theme.

In this and the previous chapter it was our intention to gain entry into the mind of Qoheleth to determine what was his understanding of the world as he saw it. Our attention was especially drawn to the first two chapters of Ecclesiastes for in them we found that the majority of Qoheleth's major themes, key words and phrases were laid down as the groundwork for the rest of the book, so to speak. In fact, as is well

[154] Graham Ogden has clear certainty that הבל should not be rendered "vanity." See G. Ogden, " 'Vanity' it Certainly is Not," *BT* (1987): 423-28.

recognized, all these words and themes found in chapters one and two are picked-up in later chapters and are developed to devastating effect, especially with respect to the limitations of human knowledge.

From the evidence thus far deduced from these early chapters it is my contention that it provides us with an invaluable insight into the mind, spirit and outlook of this unique sage. That being so it is very difficult to resile from the view that Qoheleth was something akin to a pessimist. To a great extent, he appears to have been an existential loner who did not walk all that often on the sunny side of the street. Nor in these chapters does he appear to have engaged in contemporary debate about the claims he makes. Yet even when he invokes his call to joy in the first "joy passage" in the book at 2:24-6, his enjoyment is heavily undercut by his belief in the arbitrariness of God who gives wisdom, knowledge and joy to humans who please him. But it is not immediately clear how God can be pleased, and in any case, there is no joy for the sinner who loses out in his toil.

Moreover, notwithstanding this call to enjoy life, there is an accompanying sting in the tail in 2:26b, where Qoheleth strikes out with a ringing endorsement of the הבל cosmic theme. There is also a notable incongruity when we compare this call to joy where God is said to give "wisdom, knowledge and joy" to the person who pleases him, which all seems very positive, yet in 1:16-18 and 2:13-16, Qoheleth's assessment of wisdom and knowledge evokes once again the negative connotations of a הבל conclusion.

After laying the above foundation for our study, we will now turn in the next chapter to offer a descriptive analysis of claims made by several commentators regarding the nature of Qoheleth's epistemology to the effect that he was an empiricist in making his epistemic claims about God, mankind, and the nature of life for humans in the world.

PART 1. QOHELETH'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD

Chapter 3: Claims that Qoheleth was an Empiricist

3.1 Introduction

Several scholars have made claims concerning the nature of Qoheleth's epistemology to the effect that he was an empiricist. I will now present a descriptive survey of these claims, after which I will proceed in section 3.4 to tap into contemporary epistemological discussion with a view to situating Qoheleth's epistemic claims in a wider conceptual framework. My intention here is not to view Qoheleth as a modern epistemologist conversant with current Western philosophical debate, but rather to present a more nuanced and comprehensive perspective on Qoheleth's knowledge claims.

Our starting point is with the work of Michael Fox, who has made many insightful observations about the interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes. We have already, in chapter one, alluded to his seminal article published in 1977, which argued for the literary unity of the book, a view that has had considerable influence.[155] Ten years later Fox presented another important article entitled, "Qohelet's Epistemology," which has also exerted a very discernible impact on the study of Qoheleth's thought. We will now turn our attention to this substantial article as it has set the benchmark relating to the specific study of Qoheleth's epistemology.[156]

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[155] Fox, "Frame –Narrative," 83-106. Fox's contribution to Qohelethian studies has been substantial. In addition to the two above cited works, see his *Qohelet and His Contradictions*; ——, "Qohelet 1:4," *JSOT* 40 (1988): 109; —— *,The JPS Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes* קהלת; ——, "Wisdom in Qoheleth," in *In Search of Wisdom: Essays in Memory of John G. Gammie* (ed. by L. Perdue et al.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 115-31; ——, "A Study of Antef," *Orientalia* 46 (1977): 393-423;—— , "The Identification of Quotations in Biblical Literature," *ZAW* 92 (1980): 416-31; ———, "What Happens in Qohelet 4:13-16," *JHS* 1 (1997): 1-10; ——, "The Inner-Structure of Qohelet's Thought," in *The Language of Qohelet in its Context: Essays in Honour of Prof. A. Schoors on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (OLA 164; ed. by A. Berlejung and P. Van Hecke. Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters en Departemant Oosterse Studies, 2007), 225-38; Michael V. Fox, and B. Porten. "Unsought Discoveries: Qoheleth 7:23-8:1a," *HS* 19 (1978): 26-38.

[156] Fox, "Qohelet's Epistemology," *HUCA* 58 (1987): 137-55. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, states (at 41, f/n. 146) that this topic was anticipated by Bonaventura, Nicholas of Lyra, the evangelical Reformers and the distinguished Hebraist, I. Nordheimer, "Philosophy of Ecclesiastes," *American Biblical Repository* 12 (1838): 197-219. Nordheimer regards Ecclesiastes as a philosophic didactic poem (at 198). He writes (at 204), "The preacher . . . seems ever solicitous to lead his readers with him along the path of experience, and thus cause them to arrive at the truth as it were simultaneously with himself." He later states (at 207) that the author [for Nordheimer, this is Solomon] adopts, "the Socratic or sceptical

3:2 Michael V Fox

Speaking of Qoheleth's teaching, Michael Fox states that, ". . . the problem of knowledge – its possibility, its power, and its limitations – is the central concern in his book."[157] Fox sets out to argue that,

> . . . Qohelet has an essentially empirical methodology: he seeks both to derive knowledge from experience and to validate ideas experientially. He often reports his findings introspectively, communicating his discoveries as perceptions. And he conceives of knowledge as the product of human thought.[158]

He then proceeds to briefly consider the concepts of חכמה and דעת (wisdom and knowledge) that Qoheleth conjoins in 1:16 where he claims that his mind has had great experience of חכמה and דעת. Fox points out that the term חכמה as understood by Qoheleth does not conform to the English term "wisdom" which denotes sagacity, i.e., the ability to take the long view, and to be able to assess issues by moral as well as practical criteria. In this sense "wisdom" thus involves discerning the best ends as well as practical criteria. If a person knew the right course of action but did not take it, s/he would not be wise. But Qoheleth does not use חכמה of this kind of wisdom. חכמה in the Hebrew Bible certainly includes sagacity but also denotes other skills and knowledge as well; in fact, חכמה is experience of all sorts.

According to Fox, חכמה has two aspects: faculty and knowledge. Of faculty he says that wisdom is an intellectual power broadly similar to intelligence in its application. In this sense חכמה encompasses practical skills and common sense as well as the capacity to exercise logical thinking whereby one draws valid conclusions from premises. חכמה also exists as knowledge, that is, the communicable content of knowledge, that which is known.

As a preparation for his task, Qoheleth accumulated wisdom surpassing that of his predecessors (1:16). This wisdom must be knowledge because it is something learned which grows and develops. Qoheleth does not say exactly what the content of this learning was. One cannot assume it to be equated with the genre referred to as Wisdom Literature just because it is called חכמה. Since Qoheleth's lexicon, style and presuppositions are mainly rooted in the wisdom tradition, Fox holds that Qoheleth

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method of induction" . . . which, ". . . is the most perfect mode of attaining absolute certainty that can be conceived." These comments apart, there really is little reference in this article either to epistemology in general, or to empiricism in particular.

[157] Fox, "Qohelet's Epistemology," 137.

[158] Fox, "Qohelet's Epistemology," 137-8.

never openly deploys his vaunted learning in his inquiry, but rather relies on his powers of observation, analysis and reason. Qoheleth's approach can, therefore, be termed, perhaps somewhat loosely, "empirical" insofar as it assumes that the foundation of knowledge is experience. He seeks experience, observes it, evaluates it, then reports his perceptions and reactions.

Fox goes on to elaborate on the method and theory of Qoheleth's epistemology. His central thesis concerning Qoheleth's claims is:-

> Qohelet's epistemology is essentially empirical. I am applying this term to Qohelet's thought by analogy to the Western philosophical theories known as empirical, although Qohelet does not offer a philosophical theory or pursue a consistent methodology. Much that he says comes from traditional learning, impulse, or vague deduction. Many of his ideas he formulates *a priori* (e. g., 3:17, 8:12b), or derives from assumptions that lack experiential grounding (e.g., 7:11-12). Nevertheless, the "empirical" label is justified, first, by Qohelet's conception of his investigative procedure, which looks to experience as the source of knowledge and the means of validation, and second, by his concept of knowledge, which views knowledge as created by thought and dependent on perception.[159]

According to Fox, the methodology of Qoheleth by which he attained new knowledge involved two inseparable components, (a) the procedure of discovery and (b) the form of argumentation. Regarding (a) Qoheleth has a particular distinctive procedure of discovery. In 1:12-18 and 2:1-3, Qoheleth states he will investigate the world with the aid of חכמה, that is to say, he will use his reason rather than his prior knowledge in his inquiry. The nature of his investigations is stated in 1:13, 17; 7:23, 25, 27 and 8:16. Overall, Qoheleth's procedure, described in these passages, underlies his teachings as a whole, though he does not follow it at every step.

Fox states that, "He [Qoheleth] never invokes prior knowledge, anything he "heard" as an argument for his convictions."[160] The learned sage proceeds by seeking experience, observes what he sees and evaluates it. He thenceforth reports his perceptions or reactions. He also declares that Qoheleth seeks experience as a source of knowledge as indicted in 1:13- " . . . [I] applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven." Qoheleth then proceeds to investigate various activities, facts and situations, hence, the significance of his first experiment in 2:1-11 that is centred on pursuing pleasure.

However, before experience becomes knowledge, it must be interpreted by reason. Qoheleth uses חכמה, that is, reason as an instrument of guiding, organizing and interpreting experiences. Qoheleth speaks very often to his לב = heart, e.g., 1:13, 16, 17;

[159] Fox, "Qohelet's Epistemology," 141.

[160] Fox, "Qohelet's Epistemology," 142.

2:1, 3 (x2); 3:17, 18; 7:25; 8:9, 16; 9:1, which, according to Fox, is not a habit of his literary style, but rather because the "heart" has a central role in the process of perception and discovery. Fox, however, claims that Qoheleth does not always present arguments on behalf of his ideas, but when he does, he generally uses experiential ones.

With respect to (b), form of argumentation, Qoheleth's argumentation is experiential. Fox identifies two forms. One is *testimony* in which Qoheleth claims to have observed the fact that is being asserted, or the data from which the conclusion is drawn. This form of testimony is to be noted in 2:1-10. Here he confirms to the reader the value of pleasure on the basis of his own experience of it. A further example is where Qoheleth observes oppression. "Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed — with no one to comfort them." (4:1). This is a conclusion as well as a basis for a further inference about the value of life. "And I thought the dead, who have already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive; . . ." (4:2).

Testimony is only effective, however, if the audience accepts the speaker's credibility. Qoheleth, states Fox, tries to bolster his credibility by reiterating and emphasizing that his ideas are all first-hand perceptions. At various points in the narrative Qoheleth hammers this home by the pleonastic use of אני giving great emphasis to his introspective reporting. Qoheleth also uses experience as *validation.* This employs publicly observable facts as premises as in 2:21-23 where Qoheleth draws the conclusion that toil is absurd due to the indisputable fact that at death a worker must leave his wealth to someone else, whom he may not know, and /or to someone who never worked for it (cf. 2:3-9; 5:7-8).

A more complex example of validation is found in 1:4-7 where there is a description of the publicly observed natural phenomena that recur endlessly. Qoheleth then takes this publicly accessible observation to justify (validate, verify) his conclusion in verse 9: "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun." This conclusion (deduction) in turn validates Qoheleth's programmatic question in 1:3, "What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?" As Fox puts it, "The implicit rationale is that if even the powerful incessant forces of nature can achieve nothing new, certainly human toiling cannot do so. The fate of human toil is subsumed to a universal rule which is learned from, and validated by, observations of particulars."[161]

[161] Fox, "Qohelet's Epistemology," 144.

In demonstrating the significance of Qoheleth's validation (verification) methodology, Fox claims that "The importance Qohelet gives to validation is unique in Wisdom Literature."[162] But in assessing Qoheleth's procedures, Fox issues an important qualification.

> Qohelet's argumentation is not, it should be stressed, always valid. Its main flaws are those to which all induction is susceptible; generalisation from too few examples and transference of conclusions to inappropriate categories. His argumentation is, however, significant because of what it *attempts* to do: to prove the propositions of wisdom from experiential evidence.[163]

Fox comments that the contrast between the Wisdom sages and Qoheleth, in terms of the investigative procedures and the forms of argumentation employed, is of striking consequence. He states that Wisdom Literature's epistemology is not empirical: ". . . the sages do not offer their experience as the source of essentially new knowledge, and they rarely invoke experiential arguments on its behalf."[164] Admittedly, Fox concedes that a few passages in didactic Wisdom do refer to something the sage saw, which initially gives the impression of empiricism. However, Fox says that this is mostly a rhetorical strategy, which is far removed from Qoheleth: for him, it is the expression of a fundamental methodology.

The last step in Qoheleth's procedures, according to Fox, is to report his discoveries. Qoheleth does this by looking back and then proceeds to tell the reader what he earlier saw דעת "discovered" or found מצא "apprehended," and "said" אמר, i.e. "thought." Qoheleth's style of reporting is intensely introspective. For example, he says of the wise and the fool, "But I also realized that the very same fate befalls them both." (2:14), not, "But they have the very same fate." Or again, "I turned and saw that under the sun the race does not belong to the swift . . ." (9:11), and not, "Under the sun the race does not necessarily go to the swift . . ."

> It seems important to him that the reader not only knows what the truth is, but also be aware that he, Qohelet, saw this, felt this, realized this. He is reflexively observing the psychological process of discovery as well as reporting the discoveries themselves. Qohelet's introspective reporting has no parallels in other Wisdom Literature.[165]

Fox then proceeds to make the following assertion: "Qoheleth conceives of knowledge as a product of thought and discovery, not as an entity independent of the individual mind."[166] Knowledge for Qoheleth is subsequent to and independent upon observation.

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[162] Fox, "Qohelet's Epistemology," 145.

[163] Fox, "Qohelet's Epistemology," Original italics.

[164] Fox, "Qohelet's Epistemology,"

[165] Fox, "Qohelet's Epistemology," 148.

Qoheleth does not picture himself as receiving transmitted knowledge but as discovering truths that would not otherwise be known. Put differently, Qoheleth's epistemology makes knowledge (at least knowledge of the sort that interested sages) dependent on the knower's perceiving it.

Knowledge proceeds from perception, according to Qoheleth. But this belief may lead to scepticism as a person is likely to acknowledge the inherent fallibility and unverifiability of his own knowledge. This is exactly what Qoheleth does in 6:12, which is one of his key rhetorical questions. "For who knows what is good for mortals while they live the few days of their vain life, which they pass like a shadow? For who can tell them what will be after them under the sun?" There is huge irony here when one discovers that this undercuts what he says in 7:1-12, thus undermining the possibility of certain knowledge. Hence, what Qoheleth claims to know is both unverifiable and uncertain.

Between the sages in the Wisdom tradition and Qoheleth there is a huge contrast. For example, the teacher in Prov 1-9 encourages his pupil to "hear" and "keep" his father's wisdom. For Qoheleth, "seeking" and "finding" wisdom refer to exploration and discovery. There is very little attempt to argue for individual experience in Wisdom Literature as a whole. Fox states that Qoheleth is most unusual in his emphasis on validation, especially validation by empirical evidence. "In brief, if one could ask a more conventional sage, 'How do you know this?', he would, I believe, answer: 'Because I learned it.' To this question Qohelet would reply: 'Because I saw it'. The shift is profound."[167]

Fox expresses the view that in his opinion Qoheleth's epistemology is foreign to the ancient Near East, but it is paralleled in his Hellenistic environment, the fundamental tenet of this environment being the autonomy of individual reason. In other words, the ". . . belief that individuals can and should proceed with their own observations and reasoning powers on a quest for knowledge and that this may lead to discovery of truths previously unknown."[168] The conclusion that Fox draws from Qoheleth's methodology is,

> So Qoheleth did not merely go through life commenting on what he had noticed. He chose a heuristic procedure deliberately and pursued it with determination, if not with

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[166] Fox, "Qohelet's Epistemology," 148.

[167] Fox, "Qohelet's Epistemology," 154.

[168] Fox, "Qohelet's Epistemology," 123.

> consistency. This, I believe, is unparalleled: a sage choosing to seek sensory experience as a path to insight.[169]

3.3 Further Claims Concerning Qoheleth's Empiricism

Some other scholars have also made similar comments to the effect that Qoheleth employs an empirical epistemology, though their treatment of the issue has not been as extensive as Fox's. In an interesting article Peter Hayman sets out to compare Qoheleth and *Sefer Yezira* – The Book of Creation, (*SF*) believed to be a fourth century CE work.[170] Hayman states that both works have much in common in that scholars find them so difficult to incorporate in their definitions of Yahwism and Judaism. He observes that "Qohelet is one of the very few biblical texts quoted in *SF* and both his creation-based theology and his empirical methodology reappear in this much later work."[171]

According to Hayman both these texts claim, "the sources of truth and knowledge is human observation of the phenomena of nature."[172] For Hayman, these different authors have the same epistemological basis.

> How do the authors of these two texts know what they claim to know? Qohelet leaves us in no doubt whatsoever about this. His repeated use of the verbs ראה and ידע, plus supplementary verbs like תור (to inspect) and נסה (test by experience), reveal a thoroughly empirical epistemology. Qohelet pits his ראיתי (I saw) against the whole received tradition of Jewish wisdom (see Eccl. 2:24; 3:10, 14; 8:17). It seems from time to time that what Qohelet is doing is to cloak empirical statements in theological language. . . . This cloaking of empirical observation in theological language is particularly clear in the way in which in 8:17 Qohelet immediately rephrases את־כל מעשה האלהים ('all the work of God') as את־מעשה אשר נעשה תחת־השמש ('that which is done under the sun').[173]

Hayman makes a further comment about both authors: "For them, God's existence and role as creator and sustainer of the universe is self-evident truth derived from empirical observation and not from any prophetic pronouncements."[174] Hayman's assessment of Qoheleth's empiricism is arguably the most robust statement one is likely to find in the literature on this topic.[175] From an epistemological viewpoint it is very difficult to

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[169] Fox, *A Rereading*, 77.

[170] P. Hayman, "Qohelet and the Book of Creation," *JSOT* 50 (1991): 93-111.

[171] Hayman, "Qohelet… ," 94.

[172] Hayman, "Qohelet… ," 99.

[173] Hayman, "Qohelet… ," 98. It is remarkable that Hayman omits mention of the verb מצא ("to find"), which occurs seventeen times in Ecclesiastes, thus making it a key verb in Qoheleth's lexicon.

[174] Hayman, "Qohelet," 102.

[175] W. Brown, "Whatever Your Hands Finds to Do," describes Qoheleth as, "This radical empiricist of antiquity, . . ." (at 271). Brown offers no attempt to define an "empiricist."

accept the claim that God's existence as creator and sustainer of the universe is "a self-evident truth derived from empirical observation. . ."

We need say no more on the subject at present as this claim and others about Qoheleth's epistemology will surface in our discussion on Qoheleth's theological claims in the next two chapters.

In his recent commentary, Craig Bartholomew has highlighted, both in a lengthy introduction and throughout the commentary, the importance of Qoheleth's epistemology.[176] With reference to Fox's description of Qoheleth's epistemology as empirical, Bartholomew states that this view is too restrictive.[177] For him, Qoheleth's epistemology is better described as "autonomous."[178] Bartholomew holds that 7:23-29 is an important passage for Qoheleth's epistemology, and it is in his treatment of these verses that he elaborates on this topic. In response to Fox's claim that Qoheleth's epistemology is best viewed as "empirical," Bartholomew writes,

> "Empirical" is not the best word to describe Qohelet's epistemology, because classically it refers to dependence solely on sense perception, whereas reason and experience play a major role in Qohelet's epistemology. . . [Qohelet's] epistemology cannot be equated with any particular school of Greek philosophy, but it shares with many of the Greeks the sense of human and the role of reason and experience *and* observation as the route to true knowledge.[179]

He goes on to observe, "For Qohelet, investigation of the world "by wisdom" means that he will use his powers of reason applied to his experience and observations rather than traditional knowledge in his inquiry."[180] For these reasons, Bartholomew concludes, "Qohelet's epistemology is thus better referred to as "autonomous."[181] Again and again, throughout the commentary, Bartholomew affirms that observation is a key element in Qohelet's epistemology, a recurring phrase being, "Qohelet's autonomous epistemology."[182] He also singles out "the autonomy of individual reason" on Qoheleth's part as he feels Fox's emphasis on the term "empirical" does not bring out

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[176] C. G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*. See also his earlier work, *Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutical Theory* (AB 139; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute Press, 1998).

[177] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 58.

[178] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 58, f/n. 232. Also confirmed at 91, f/n. 388.

[179] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 271. Original italics.

[180] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 272.

[181] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 271.

[182] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, at 56, 57, 59, 93, 107, 115, 119 135, and 178. Weeks, *Ecclesiastes*, finds (at 125, f/n.19) Bartholomew's description of Qoheleth's epistemology as "autonomous" to be more helpful. I regard the appellation "autonomous" as tautologous in the light of Qoheleth's extensive use of the personal pronoun "I".

this aspect sufficiently.[183]

Building on the work of Fox's 1987 article on "Qoheleth's Epistemology," M. Patrizia Sciumbata examines the lexical field of the verbs relating to knowledge and perception in Ecclesiastes.[184] She offers a range of evidence for pre-exilic and post-exilic use of vocabulary associated with Jewish biblical epistemology and suggests that ". . . è però possibile dare un contributo all' esegesi del libro di Qohelet, fornendo un sostegno alle tesi che espone M.V. Fox nell' articolo 'Qohelet's Epistemology.' "[185] In the event, however, she advocates a positon more emphatic than Fox in her description of Qohelet's empiricism. Sciumbata holds that other wisdom traditions are essentially non-empirical and that Qoheleth intentially employs "un sistema epistemologico di tipo empirico-induttivo sia la polemica con le altre correnti sapienziali."[186] She does however note that Qohelet has a preference for the verb ראה over ידע, and this crucial fact will be examined at length in a later chapter.

In a more recent study Ryan O'Dowd focuses his attention on the epistemology in the Hebrew Bible.[187] This presentation of the issues of epistemology is wide-ranging in its scope taking in Genesis 1-11, Deuteronomy and Proverbs before drawing attention to Job and Ecclesiastes. Essentially this study explores the relationship between torah and wisdom in the Old Testament, O'Dowd's central assumption being that wisdom and law have a "shared view of reality."[188] He writes, "Israel's way of knowing is grounded in a storied, ethical, and religious way of life. *Knowing*, in fact is a matter of divine-imitation where creating, or imagining, is at one and the same time obeying God and knowing."[189] He views the books of Ecclesiastes and Job as "late" or "critical" responses to traditional Jewish religion, viewing them as "typically pitted against torah (Deuteronomy) and early wisdom (Proverbs)."[190]

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[183] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 271.

[184] M. Patrizia Sciumbata, "Peculiarità e motivazioni della struttura lessicale dei verbi della 'conoscenza' in Qohelet. Abbozzo di una storia dell' epistemologia ebraico-biblica," *Henoch* 18 (1996): 235-49.

[185] Sciumbata, *Peculiarità,* 236.

[186] Sciumbata, *Peculiarità*, 248.

[187] O'Dowd, *The Wisdom of Torah: Epistemology in Deuteronomy and the Wisdom Literature* (Band 225; Vandenhoeck & Riprecht, 2009).

[188] O'Dowd, *The Wisdom of Torah*, 152.

[189] O'Dowd, *The Wisdom of Torah*, 23-4. Original italics.

[190] O'Dowd, *The Wisdom of Torah*, 10.

According to O'Dowd, in the Old Testament, "Ecclesiastes has been the crown prince of epistemological studies."[191] He reads Ecclesiastes by keeping in view four threads or themes: (i) epistemology, (ii) rhetoric, (iii) structure, and (iv) the use of *a priori* wisdom concepts. However, because of the nature of his comprehensive examination of early traditional material, he does not engage with Ecclesiastes in a sustained way, restricting his observations to two passages, (i) 1:12-2:26, and (ii) 4:17-5:6 [MT].

In his reading of 1:12-2:16, O'Dowd sets out to demonstrate the "inconsistent or broken irony in Qoheleth's speeches that indirectly affirms the order and foundations of traditional wisdom."[192] This speech is said to be the peak of Qoheleth's irony. But significantly, O'Dowd confirms that there is "an underlying *a priori* view of reality behind his [Qoheleth's] thoughts."[193] He disagrees with Harold Fisch in that the latter sees Qoheleth breaking stride with his radical empiricism. For O'Dowd, ". . . this misses the obvious turn from empirical (observational) statements to the faith based declarations of what Qoheleth assumes to be true. It is these unexpected turns from empirical to rational/traditional judgments which force readers to question Qoheleth's epistemological foundations and his relation to his tradition."[194]

Of 4:17-5:6, O'Dowd says that the reader is struck by Qoheleth's positive conclusions in matters of cult, wisdom and the fear of God. But when the question arises: how does Qoheleth know about these matters? no answer is forthcoming. He concludes that the reference concerning את האלהים ירא is to be taken as a

> " . . . subversive way to deconstruct the fruitless, disengaged rhetoric which dominates the speech in 1:12-2:26. The ultimate function of these subversive phrases is fully confirmed in the conclusion (12:13-14). Like the present passage (4:17- 5:6) these phrases also mark the "shared view of reality" between wisdom and law and expose the moments in Qohelet's thought which are obscured by his empirical, hyper-subjective epistemology."[195]

In his summing up, O'Dowd observes that there is a modern tendency to set Proverbs against Ecclesiastes and Job, a tendency accruing from inattention by scholars to the storied-based worldview of the ancient world. O'Dowd offers an alternative new way to hear these books. He claims that the important relationship between Ecclesiastes'

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[191] O'Dowd, *The Wisdom of Torah*, 137.

[192] O'Dowd, *The Wisdom of Torah*, 149.

[193] O'Dowd, *The Wisdom of Torah*, 149.

[194] O'Dowd, *The Wisdom of Torah*, 149.

[195] O'Dowd, *The Wisdom of Torah*, 152.

frame-narrative structure, irony, and a priori material explains the epistemology at work in the book.

> While it is possible to see Qohelet at odds with the tradition, there is also good reason to expect a more complicated message – one which carefully pits הבל statements against carpe diem sayings in order to draw an audience into an unresolved bi-polar experience. . . . The answer to the ambiguities in the world is not perfect or better knowledge, but "to fear God and keep his commandments" in the search for wisdom.[196]

The net effect of O'Dowd's thesis is that he homogenizes the uniqueness of Qoheleth's thought by wrapping it with a conservative hermeneutic: the outcome is that he makes 12:13-14 the interpretational key to the book's meaning. O'Dowd does hold Qoheleth to be an empiricist, but he also acknowledges that there is much *a priori* material in the book. He does not, however, discuss the nature of empiricism *per se*, nor does he advance a detailed analysis of the nature and extent of Qoheleth's epistemology.

Finally in this chapter I wish to draw attention to the wide-ranging study of Annette Schellenberg who explores the problem of human cognition in the Old Testament.[197] This study is not so much concerned with the nature of knowledge as with its sources and limitations. Schellenberg presents a polyphony of texts in the Hebrew Bible: (i) Qoheleth, (ii) Job, (iii) "Theologized Wisdom" – Proverbs 1-9, Sirach, The Wisdom of Solomon, (iv) Genesis 2-3 and related texts, (v) excerpts from the prophetic literature – notably Isaiah, and (vi) the Apocalyptic Literature.[198]

Schellenberg examines Qoheleth's skeptical outlook, i.e., his concern with the limitations of knowledge, e.g., (i) death, (ii) the future, and (iii) God's doing/activity. (ii) the future, and (iii) God's doing/activity.[199] Thereafter she moves to consider his empirical side in which she examines his sources of knowledge.[200] Unfortunately, Qoheleth does not spell out in explicit terms what his sources of knowledge are. Schellenberg suggests that there are indirect allusions to the sources of knowledge in the book. The usual tripartite sources – experience, tradition and divine revelation – are found in "theologized Wisdom," but in Qoheleth divine revelation is missing. Schellenberg emphasizes personal experience (*Efrahrung*) as Qoheleth's major source

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[196] O'Dowd, *The Wisdom of Torah*, 161.

[197] Annette Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis als Problem. Qohelet und die alttestamentliche Diskussion um das menschliche Erkennen* (OBO 188; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002).

[198] Schellenberg acknowledges the importance of Qoheleth's contribution to the problem of knowledge in that she devotes the whole of chapter 2 (35-200) to it.

[199] Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis*, 75-160.

[200] Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis*, 161-91.

of knowledge, that is to say, living is the prime source of knowledge. Human experience is an essential part of cognition, or human knowing. In this respect Schellenberg stresses Qoheleth's constant use of first person verbs, and in the great majority of these instances there is a clear connection with the cognitive process, what Schellenberg calls *Erkenntnisgewinnung* (knowledge acquisition).

Furthermore, Schellenberg discusses Qoheleth's various forms of argumentation. She identifies three: (i) *Beobachtung mit freier Reflexion* (Observation with free reflexion, as in 4:1-3); (ii) *Induktion* (Induction, as in 1:13-15) and *Falsifikation* (Falsification, as in 7:15-18). Qoheleth's use of some verbs are analysed such as ראה, שמע, ידע, and דבר, along with other words and expressions which are less frequently employed. Schellenberg draws a distinction between Qoheleth's use of the two verbs that are crucial for sensory perception and the cognitive process, namely, ראה and שמע.[201] She asserts that Qoheleth's preference for the use of ראה is not a literary gimmick. She defines the principle difference between the two verbs thus: ראה is associated with denoting visual perception and thus is characterized by the immediacy of the experience, as opposed to the indirect nature of auditory perception.[202]

Schellenberg correctly notes that ראה has a wide range of meanings in the book, as in 8:16-17, where the term designates an object of vision (empirical fact), and also refers to cognitive engagement (understanding/recognizing). She holds that this insistence on one's own experience as a source of knowledge is closely linked to cognitive perception, indeed it is so close that the verb ראה refers not only to visual perception but also is used in the figurative sense of cognitive recognition.[203] The recognition of this fact will be of the first importance when we later discuss the significance of ראה.

A second source of knowledge for Qoheleth, according to Schellenberg, is the concept of creationism (Schöpfungsdenken).[49] Thus, Qoheleth acquires knowledge from this foundational concept that he takes as axiomatic, without direct recourse to argumentation. In her view, while Qoheleth gives expression to "some unreflective/uncritical notions, it is primarily his explicit reflections on human cognition

[201] Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis*, 181.

[202] Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis*, 181.

[203] Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis*, 183-84.

[202] Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis*, 188.

and its limits that define the character of the book.[205] This claim that Qoheleth expressed "uncritical presupposed ideas," is an issue of some note, as I will seek to show in the ensuing chapters. There is no doubt, however, that on the whole, the stress Schellenberg lays on Qoheleth's "empirical" outlook, i.e., the prominence given to his personal experience (*Efrahrung*) as a source of knowledge and reflection, indicates her acceptance that Qoheleth was in essence an empiricist in his epistemology.

To round off this section, I will briefly refer to some other scholars who hold Qoheleth to be an empiricist. For example, Tomáš Frydrych posits the view that observation and experience are the two decisive sources of knowledge for Qoheleth and Proverbs.[206] He states that for Qoheleth, ". . . the personal experience is the primary *modus operandi*, as is shown by the frequent appearance of the 1cs forms of ראה, ידע, and מצא."[207] According to Frydrych revelation plays some role in Qoheleth's epistemology in the light of his exposition of 2:24-26 and 4:12-5:1 [MT].[208] Thus, epistemology in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes is, for Frydrych, primarily empirical, but both are different. "In Proverbs the cumulative collective experience is the standard against which every new experience is measured and by which, if necessary, it is overruled. Qoheleth's attitude toward secondary information is much more critical, for him the immediate personal experience is the criterion . . ."[209]

According to Aron Pinker, "The *Kohelet* relied on experience and keen observation when formulating topics for consideration. Reason and experience are the key elements of its epistemology (1:13; 2:3; 7:23)."[210] William Johnstone goes further by depicting " 'The Preacher' as a Scientist."[211] This title carries with it the clear impression that Qoheleth was an empiricist due the fact that in the history of modern science, empirical evidence is the touchstone of scientific inquiry. In assessing Qoheleth's outlook on the world, Johnstone states that in the book " there is to be found

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[205] Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis*, 199.

[206] Frydrych*, Living in the Sun: Examination of Proverbs and Qoheleth* (VTSup 90 Leiden: Brill, 2002), 80. Leo G. Perdue, *The Sword and the Stylus*: *An Introduction to Wisdom in the Ages of Empires* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), states (at 250), ". . . empiricism was the one epistemology, not the teaching of former sages or rational thought, which prompted and sustained Qoheleth's understanding."

[207] Frydrych*, Living in the Sun*, 69.

[208] Frydrych*, Living in the Sun*, 76-7.

[209] Frydrych*, Living in the Sun*, 80.

[210] Pinker, "Ecclesiastes Part 11: Themes," *JBQ* 41 (2013): 163-70, (at 168). Italics original.

[211] Johnstone, " 'The Preacher' as Scientist," 210-21.

a technique, a method of procedure which may not improperly be described as scientific."[212] Johnstone sees the problem for Qoheleth as stated in 1:3: "What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?" There follows 31 sections in the book, which according to Johnstone, form a series of observations of aspects of life. He writes, "The strong emphasis on empiricism, Koheleth's brand of the traditional wisdom procedure, is notable: 'I observed,' the implication being, what I have not observed I cannot accept on hearsay."[213] He also observes that "A resumé of Koheleth's position in a word, then: he sets out deliberately to observe in an empirical way, leaving no area of life untouched."[214]

We have succinctly shown that a substantial number of scholars adhere to the view that Qoheleth's methodology was essentially empirical in making his diverse epistemic claims. We will critically respond to these claims later in this study, but meantime I would make the observation that it is one thing to state that someone is an empiricist; it is quite another to offer an account of what it means to be an empiricist. To do so is more difficult than it appears. In approaching this issue of defining an empiricist, I think it necessary to examine the notion of empiricism in the wider context of contemporary philosophical debate with specific reference to epistemology.

3.4 Epistemology

As far as I can observe, the above commentators do not address this question of defining the term "empiricist." It is, therefore, of the first importance to come to a determination on this issue as in so doing we will be in a much better position to assess whether or not Qoheleth meets the requirements of being termed an empiricist in a meaningful sense. In pursuance of this task it will be necessary to broaden the scope of our enquiry so that we may be able to situate Qoheleth's epistemic claims in a wider epistemological perspective. To this end we will, at the outset of this section, consider various key issues in contemporary epistemological debate. As the literature in this area of philosophical study is vast our aim will be to delineate some of the key concepts and distinctions in epistemological discussion that may prove helpful in coming to a

[212] Johnstone, " 'The Preacher' as Scientist," 217.

[213] Johnstone, " 'The Preacher' as Scientist," 215.

[214] Johnstone, " 'The Preacher' as Scientist," 219.

working definition of empiricism. It will also have the added benefit of placing Qoheleth's knowledge claims in a more informed epistemological framework.[215]

3.5 What is Knowledge?

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that principally addresses three defining questions.

(i) What is knowledge?

(ii) How can we gain knowledge?

(iii) What are the limits of knowledge?

As we shall observe later, Qoheleth has much to say about the limits of human knowing, especially in the second half of the monologue. For the moment we will concentrate on questions (i) and (ii).

Various responses have been advanced to the question: What is knowledge? The term "knowledge" and its cognates are employed in a variety of ways. For example, one common use of the verb "know" is where a person expresses a psychological conviction; "I just knew that John would not come to the concert." But consider this example: "Jack *knows that* London is the capital city of England." This claim is called propositional knowledge because it is a proposition that is known.

Yet another kind of knowledge can be identified by "how to" clauses; "Johnny *knows how to* mend a tyre puncture." This kind of knowledge is referred to as procedural or non-propositional knowledge. Epistemologists tend to be more interested in the word "know" in its "factive" sense. A proposition is therefore something that can be expressed by a sentence that seeks to describe a fact or a state of affairs as when Qoheleth writes, ". . . yet *I know that* it will be well with those who fear God" (8:12).

Knowledge requires belief, but not all beliefs constitute knowledge. When we say that we believe that something is the case, the belief in question could be true or

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[215] For the content of sections (e) – (f) that follow, I have consulted the following works in epistemology. Matthias Steup and Ernest Sosa, eds. *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005); Paul K. Moser et al., *The Theory of Knowledge: A Thematic Introduction* (Oxford; New York: OUP, 1998); Roderick M. Chisholm, *The Theory of Knowledge* (3rd ed.; Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1989); Ernest Sosa et al., *Epistemology: An Anthology* (2nd ed,; Oxford: Blackwell, 2008); Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York, Oxford: OUP, 1993); Anthony Quinton, *The Nature of Things* (London: Rouutledge and Kegan Paul),1973; John Greco and Ernest Sosa eds., *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999); Bryan Greetham, *Philosophy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 2006); Ted Honderich, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford, New York, 1995); Matthias Steup, "Epistemology" in E. N. Zalta, ed., *The Standford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (December 2005): 1-45. Cited 30 January 2016. Online: http:// plato.standford.edu/entries/epistemology/htm.

false. Belief formation is a mental process and typically the purpose of belief is to capture and describe the way things actually are. If a belief is not true, it therefore cannot constitute knowledge. Accordingly, if there is no such a thing as truth, then there can be no knowledge: in sum, knowledge necessitates truth. If Jack does not believe in the proposition that London is the capital city of England, then it is clear that this is not a proposition Jack knows. Thus, knowledge requires true belief. But even if Jack held a belief to be true, this does not wholly capture the nature of knowledge. A third element is essential since it is conceivable that Jack's belief could be a matter of luck.

This third constituent element of knowledge is usually referred to as justification, which means that there must be good reasons/warrant/evidence to hold the epistemic claim in question. One might therefore conclude that to constitute knowledge, a belief must be both true and justified. But the fact that a belief is held to be true does not confirm one way or the other that it is justified. For example, prior to the work of Nicholas Copernicus (1473-1543), it was authoritatively held that the earth was the centre of the universe with the sun revolving around the earth, a belief referred to as the geocentric view in cosmology. People in that era adhered to a worldview that inhibited them from seeing that the nature of the solar system was much more complex than had previously been thought. Yet the evidence for their worldview was, at least for them, conclusively final; but their belief, as it turned out, did not constitute true knowledge because what they believed was untrue.

We have briefly outlined the nature of knowledge as consisting of (i) belief, (ii) truth, and (iii) justification. These three elements constitute what is referred to as the tripartite analysis of knowledge known as *justified true belief* (JTB). To further expand on this, let us consider the following schema where Q refers to Qoheleth, and P indicates a proposition. Three conditions must be satisfied if a genuine instance of propositional knowledge is to be established.

(1) Q must believe that P,
(2) P must be true, and
(3) Q's belief that P must be adequately justified.

Let us now flesh this out with a concrete example from Ecclesiastes 3:14.

(1) Q confidently believes that "Whatever God does endures for ever."
(2) The proposition, "Whatever God does endures for ever." must be true.

(3) Q's belief that, "Whatever God does endures for ever." must be adequately justified.

When we bear in mind how much Qoheleth speaks about God in his monologue there cannot be any doubt that for him, the statements in (1) and (2) are beyond question. In fact, he prefaces the above claim in 3:14a with the words, ידעתי כי = "*I know that* . . .", which represents an unambiguous epistemic claim. From an epistemological perspective, however, decisive issues surround validating the truth of proposition (2), and the justification problem in (3). For Qoheleth, there is no problem with the truth claim of (2), as he certainly believes that (2) is assuredly true. Regarding (3), in the text Qoheleth advances no explicit warrant for its epistemic justification (EJ). The problem with justification, which is held to be adequate and secure, is a central issue in epistemological theory today. This is an interesting question and it will occupy our attention at a later stage. Meantime, let us pick up on our treatment of the definition of knowledge as JTB.

Until recent times the traditional analysis of knowledge as *justified true belief* was held to fulfil all the requirements of knowledge. In 1963, however, Edmund Gettier, in a very influential article, presented a pair of counter-examples that sought to show that knowledge could not be defined as justified true belief.[216] On the basis of his two counter-examples, Gettier showed that a person could have a true and justified belief but did not have knowledge, because luck seemed to play a role in his belief – a belief which turned out to be true. The justification element in the traditional account of knowledge was meant to establish that knowledge was based on strong evidence rather than on misinformation or luck. Yet, Gettier-type counter-examples seemed to show that JTB can, on occasion, still involve luck, and consequently, fall short of an adequate definition of knowledge.

After Gettier, the justified true belief account of knowledge was held to be defective, with JTB loosing its exalted status. Nevertheless, even though justification together with truth is not *sufficient* for knowledge, it is possible to hold that it is necessary and *nearly* sufficient for knowledge. In the opinion of Laurence BonJour, the traditional account of knowledge is "at least approximately correct."[217] I would add that a belief constitutes knowledge when it is true and justified *and* there are no defeating

[216] E. Gettier, "Is justified true belief knowledge?" *Analysis* 23 (1963): 121-23.

[217] Laurence BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 3-4.

propositions to the justification of that belief. Keeping this modification in mind, we may conclude that the explication of knowledge as "justified true belief" is essentially sound.

The principal issue that has emerged from the knowledge debate, post-Gettier, concerns the nature of justification and central to any discussion of justification is the epistemic regress problem. The essence of this problem can be stated as follows. If a belief is to be justified, one must appeal to another belief on which it depends. Any further justification will in itself depend on another belief for its justification, and so on. In other words, for an inferential belief to be justified the beliefs that support it must of themselves be justified. This appears to lead to an infinite regress, with each belief justified by some further belief. If this line of reasoning was followed without bringing the series to a termination some way or another, then some commentators think that the only outcome would be scepticism, i.e., since no beliefs are justified, therefore, no one really knows anything. Few people would accept such an extreme outcome.

Epistemologists therefore have responded to this issue by advancing various explanatory theories by attempting to bring the infinite chain of reasoning to a halt. The two principal approaches that have emerged are foundationalism and coherentism. I do not deem it necessary to delve into this area of epistemological theory in great detail, as that would be superfluous for our requirements in this study. But I believe it will be helpful to briefly outline these two responses to the ingress problem, and then outline some of the reactions to them. In this way a range of ideas will emerge which we can draw on later in this thesis in order to assess the nature of Qoheleth's epistemology.

I must stress that my intention is not to attempt to press gang Qoheleth into being a modern type epistemologist.[218] It is rather to enable us to nuance the nature of Qoheleth's methodology as applied to his epistemic claims. While Qoheleth makes no explicit claim to have an interest in epistemology that does not mean that he has none. A writer who claims to know so much about God, mankind, and the world, must have some underpinning theory about knowledge and its acquisition.

A foundationalist theory of empirical justification holds that an empirical belief is justified if and only if it is either a basic belief justified by the subject's experience, or an inferred belief justified in some way by the support of basic beliefs. By way of further explication in the form of a metaphor, justified beliefs are like the structure of a building. We have the foundation and the superstructure. Beliefs that belong to the

[218] See the article by J. Gericke, "A Comprehensive Philosophical Approach to Qohelet's epistemology," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71 (2015). Art # 2868, 1-9.

foundation are basic; beliefs that are part of the superstructure are non-basic and find their justification in the justified beliefs in the foundation. This approach to the regress problem acknowledges that the subject's experience is significant and relevant to how justified he/she is in his/her beliefs about the world.

This line of reasoning has not escaped censure, however, the main criticism being that foundationalism ultimately leads to the arbitrary or unjustified acceptance of certain beliefs. It is also claimed that it accords a privileged status to basic beliefs that are justified by experience alone, but ignores the interdependence among a person's beliefs. In response, one might suggest that a belief could be justified if its warrant is premised on perception or certain *a priori* knowledge, i.e., knowledge that is known independently of experience. It could also be said that a belief could be deemed foundational in that the person who holds that belief believes it to be true until defeating evidence emerges.

There are of course several versions of empirical foundationalism. Bonjour distinguishes three grades. In *strong foundationalism* basic beliefs are "not just adequately justified, but also infallible, certain, indubitable, or incorrigible."[219] As far as *moderate foundationalism* is concerned, the non-inferential warrant possessed by basic beliefs need not amount to absolute certainty, but it must be "sufficient by itself to satisfy the adequate justification condition of knowledge."[220] By implication, in *weak foundationalism* the basic beliefs possess only a very low degree of epistemic justification on their own. Such beliefs are only "initially credible" rather than fully justified.

Coherentism, on the other hand, is the theory that denies the assumption that the infinite chain of reasoning proceeds according to a pattern of linear justification. To evade the charge of circular reasoning, advocates of coherentism hold that a belief is justified by the way it fits together or coheres with the rest of the belief system of which it is a constituent part. In this way coherentists avoid the infinite regress by not claiming a privileged status for some particular class of beliefs. But detractors of this theory suggest that while a system can cohere it can also be wrong, which means that coherentists have the problem of ensuring that the whole system corresponds to the real world.[221] This problem is referred to as the "isolation objection."

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[219] Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, 26.

[220] Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, 26.

[221] A combination of foundationism and coherentism, known as foundherentism, has been proposed by Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry: Towards Reconstruction in Epistemology* (Oxford:

Naturally, there have been various critical responses to both of these positions. It is, for example, claimed by Peter Klein that neither foundationalism nor coherentism can solve the regress problem.[222] He opts for the view known as infinitism. According to this theory it is not impossible for an infinite justificatory series to exist. Typically, for infinitists, the infinite series of beliefs is held to be potential. For example, an individual may have indefinitely many reasons available to him/her, without having consciously thought through all the reasons. Moreover, infinitism does not require that we hold an infinite number of beliefs, but it does require that there be an infinite non-repeating set of propositions each of which is an available reason for the preceding one. In this sense it is like foundationalism. In practice, however, a person need only have the ability to bring forth the relevant reasons when the need arises.

Finally, I wish to refer to an important distinction that crops up consistently in the literature, i.e., that between epistemic internalism and epistemic externalism. Internalists claim that the justification of an epistemic belief is entirely determined by factors that are relevantly internal to the subject's perspective on things. Conversely, externalists deny this. They claim that the epistemic status of a belief is not entirely determined by factors that are internal to the subject's perspective. Factors deemed external are held to be outside of the psychological states of subjects, and can be conditions of knowledge. For a true belief to count as knowledge, the externalist maintains that it must be caused in the right sort of way, by relevant facts. To the extent that is outside the mind, such causation would be regarded as an external, knowledge-yielding condition. On the other hand, internalists claim that all knowledge-yielding conditions are within the psychological states of those who gain knowledge.

There are various shades of opinion among internalists and externalists, but we have briefly outlined the principal thrust of their ideas, which will be adequate for our purposes. Whether any of the above responses in explicating the nature and structure of knowledge have any explanatory power with regards to Qoheleth's outlook on the world remains to be seen as our study unfolds in the following chapters.

Blackwell, 1993). The essence of this theory is captured by the use of an analogy. The regress of reasons, which are "shaped" like a straight line, are in Haack's view, more like a crossword puzzle, with multiple lines interlinked and supporting each other.

[222] See Klein, "Is Infinitism the Solution to the Regress Problem? Infinitism is the Solution to the Regress Problem," in Steup and Rosa, *Contemporary Debates*, 131-55.

3.6 How can we gain Knowledge?

Just as there are various kinds of knowledge, so also there are various sources of knowledge. These include, intuition, reason, perception, introspection, memory, testimony and social dependence, customs and traditions, revelation, and experience. The latter term, "experience," is our principal concern for the moment. The term "empirical" is derived from the Greek ἐμπειρία that translates to the Latin *experientia*, from which we in turn derive the word "experience." Most epistemologists agree that we acquire knowledge about something through sense experience, by seeing it, hearing it, smelling it, touching it, and tasting it.

In explaining the nature of empiricism, it is common to distinguish between concepts that are said to be *a posteriori* and concepts that are *a priori*. The proposition "3 + 5 = 8" is an *a priori* statement. It is called a necessary truth because the truth of this type of proposition is independent of, and prior to, any experience. Other examples of *a priori* statements are "bachelors are unmarried," and "a triangle has three sides." These *a priori* propositions are also referred to as "analytical" statements for their truth is determined by the meanings that we assign to the words that we express. Simply stated, the truth of analytical statements is self-evident. In making the assertion, "Better is a handful with quiet than two handfuls with toil and a chasing after wind." (Ecc 4:6), Qoheleth is not making an *a priori* statement, but is merely affirming an observation, an opinion, and therefore not advancing a necessary truth.

Propositions are said to be *a posteriori* if they are knowable only on the basis of sensory experience. For example, "All metals expand when heated." is a proposition which is not a necessary truth because it needs to be verified by the evidence of experience. Thus when Qoheleth makes his opening declaration in Eccl 1:2, "Vanity of vanities. . . All is vanity," he is not advancing a necessary truth. Therefore, propositions that are to be verified by experience are called "empirical" or "contingent" propositions, i.e., their truth is not necessary. This is especially important in the philosophy of science in which the scientific method must be empirically based on the evidence of the senses, which means that working hypotheses are tested by observation and experiment. Scientific knowledge is but a particular species of knowledge, though some epistemologists would go so far as to view science as the ultimate epistemological authority, but this is not a majority view.

In relation to our topic, two key questions emerge between rationalism and empiricism: Is sense experience the only avenue whereby we can acquire knowledge? Do we ever know anything independently of sense experience? Broadly speaking, an

empiricist holds to a theory of knowledge that emphasizes the role of experience, especially experience based on perceptual observations by the five senses. On the other hand, a rationalist believes that knowledge is primarily acquired by *a priori* processes, or is innate, as for example, in the form of concepts not derived from experience.

Historically, the distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* propositions has been a hotly contested area in the rationalist/empiricist debate, especially in the eighteenth century, but contemporary epistemologists have demurred from such extreme disjunctive positions preferring instead more nuanced approaches to understanding reality. Consequently, empiricism comes in a variety of shades and strengths, the implication being that, today, there is not one standard definition of empiricism that will attract universal assent among epistemologists. Be that as it may, our aim is to arrive at a working definition of empiricism that will be adequate for our purpose. As a useful starting point let us consider the following formulation:

> Empiricism is a doctrine that holds that the senses do provide us with knowledge in some sense of the word.[223]

This definition achieves two objectives: (i) it captures the essence of the term "empiricism" in that some knowledge is gained by sensory experience, and (ii) it does not make exclusory claims to the effect that other possible sources of knowledge are unwarranted. It certainly would be very difficult to deny that we acquire knowledge about the physical world by the use of the five senses, particularly those of sight and hearing. When Qoheleth makes the observation, "When clouds are full, they empty rain on the earth;" (11:3a), there is no doubt that this was a statement borne of past experience observing weather changes derived from the use of the faculties of sight, touch, and hearing. Thus to say that we have learned something from experience is to say that we have come to "know" it by the use of our senses. Most people would not dissent from this common-sense view.

However, some epistemologists would describe the above definition as a *weak form of empiricism*, viewing it as too feeble and lacking in semantic precision. At the other end of the spectrum we have this exclusive claim that could be described as the *strong form of empiricism.*

> Empiricism holds that all of our knowledge is derived from our senses.

[223] This definition is taken from D. W. Hamlyn, "Empiricism," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 7 Volumes: Vol 2, (eds. Paul Edwards, et al: New York: Macmillan and the Free Press, 1967), 499-505, at 499.

This extreme view led to the emergence of the logical positivism movement of the 1930's, a view that held that statements that are not tied to our experiences are meaningless. Such radical empiricism entails the abandonment of religious and ethical discourse and not surprisingly this extreme view is not in vogue today among epistemologists. A less dogmatic approach would be to hold that there are some cases in which the senses are not the basis of our knowledge, as for example, mathematical concepts and logical truths.

These two definitions can be generalized as follows. The weak form of empiricism could translate to: *all* knowledge comes from experience, while the extreme form could be rephrased by the claim: no source other than experience provides knowledge at all. If we take both of these definitions at face value, and apply them to Ecclesiastes, there is much in Qoheleth's claims to knowledge that could not be regarded as knowledge at all. The crucial issue is how are we to understand the term "experience" in this context. This question is germane to the sources of Qoheleth's epistemic claims that we will examine in a later chapter.

For now, in nestling down to an acceptable definition of empiricism I think it is desirable to adopt a *moderate form of empiricism* compared with those just stated. Thus, my proposal is to adopt the following definition:

> An empiricist is a person who holds to a theory of knowledge that elevates the role of experience, especially experience based on perceptual observations by the five senses.

This definition catches the essential element of "experience" implicit in the term "empiricism." Qoheleth claims to have had a varied range of experiences, so it remains to be seen if those experiences were the foundation of his epistemic claims.

3.7 Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter we have endeavoured to offer descriptive accounts by a number of scholars who claim that, in essence, Qoheleth was an empiricist in his outlook. However, we did draw attention to the fact that to claim that an author is an empiricist is one thing, quite another to enquire into what an empirical outlook entails. Since the authors under review did not consider in any detail what an empiricist is by definition, it was thought necessary to situate the term "empiricism" in a wider philosophical context by briefly examining some of the concepts and discussions that obtain in contemporary epistemological debate. This, I suggest, will enable a more nuanced understanding of Qoheleth's epistemic claims to be attained as we move to examine and assess his epistemological credentials.

As the reader makes his/her way through the text of this unique book it is remarkable how the divine name is so prominent in Qoheleth's thought. On any analysis of the book's vocabulary, one can only conclude that the references to the divine presence assume an importance of the first magnitude for Qoheleth. God is first mentioned in Ecclesiastes 1:13. However, that reference initiates a raft of over fifty occurrences of the divine name in the book which is rendered exclusively by the generic name אלהים. Yet, at no point in Qoheleth's narrative do we find divine revelation as an explicit source of his epistemic claims about God's nature and activity. That being so, it is interesting to note that James Barr has made the claim that wisdom literature, as a whole, is typically empirical or has a 'natural theology.'[224] Since Qoheleth gives no explicit clues as to the source(s) of his knowledge of God, and given the plethora or references to God in the text, it therefore seems necessary to thoroughly investigate what Qoheleth claims to know about God, his nature, character and activity in the world.

Because of the extensive references to God by Qoheleth, I will examine this material over the next two chapters. My express purpose is to determine what Qoheleth claims he knows about God. Thus in our next chapter, i.e., chapter 4, we will consider "God Who Gives," and "God as Creator Doer/Maker." In chapter 5 all the remaining claims that Qoheleth makes about God will be brought to our attention. At the end of chapter 5 a summary and assessment of all this theological material - with specific reference to its epistemological significance - will be undertaken.

[224] J. Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology: The Gifford Lectures for 1991: Delivered in the University of Edinburgh* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), at 93-4; ———, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (London: SCM,1999), 476-78. Whether a strong case can be made for viewing Qoheleth as a proponent of natural theology is questionable. Because there is no ostensible reference in Ecclesiastes to divine revelation as a source of knowledge about God, that fact does not automatically imply that the learned sage "stands closer to the standpoint of natural theology." (*Biblical Faith*, at 94). At no point in the monologue does Qoheleth offer a philosophical defence of the existence of God. Neither is there any attempt in the book to postulate a divine creator from contemplation of the natural order. Like his fellow Hebrew authors, Qoheleth accepted God's existence as a known and felt reality, but unlike the Psalmist *et al* he never extols the majesty and power of the created order.

PART 2. QOHELETH'S EPISTEMIC CLAIMS ABOUT GOD

Chapter 4: Qoheleth's Theological Claims (Part A)

4.1 Introduction

It is a well-known fact that in the literature of the Old Testament there are two principal names that refer to the deity, אלהים and יהוה. The latter name was dramatically made known when God revealed himself to Moses in an unprecedented theophany in Exod 3.[225] Very significantly, it is only the generic name אלהים that is exclusively employed by the author of Ecclesiastes - nowhere in the text of the book can the tetragammaton, יהוה be found.

Robert Salters offers the suggestion that the omission of יהוה by the author may perhaps be explained by the fact that in the post-exilic period the personal name of Israel's God fell into disuse and the generic name became more prominent.[226] Perhaps this is so, but it could also be suggested that the primary use of the generic name for the deity makes the message(s) of Ecclesiastes more universal in outlook. In any case, reference to the deity is widely dispersed throughout the book, with the divine name being more prominent in the first half of the book.[227]

In fact, in the monologue alone (1:12-12:7), Qoheleth explicitly refers to the deity thirty-seven times,[228] with a further twelve implicit occurrences *via* the use of pronouns and subjects of various verbs. This very high incidence of אלהים in Qoheleth's thought makes the deity a major theme in the book, and one that is unquestionably foundational for his outlook on the world. In pursuance of our objective in this study to

[225] The natural implication of Exodus 3 is that the divine name was given for the first time to Moses, and through him to Israel. Yet the name יהוה appears extensively in the book of Genesis. How can this be explained? See R. W. L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) who offers an insightful canonical approach to the problem.

[226] Salters, "The Word for "God," in the Peshitta of Koheleth," *VT* 21 (1971): 252-54, at 251.

[227] There are thirty-three occurrences of אלהים (explicit and implied) up to 6:9. Most of the time the author employs the divine name with the definite article, but on eight occasions the article is not used: 1:13, 3:10, 13; 5:3, 18; 7:18; 8:2, 13. Bo Isaksson, *Studies in the Language*, suggests (at 145) "In spite of its frequency, one gets the impression that the article is without consequence, and its syntactical significance seems to diverge from that in the classical prose."

[228] These are 1:13; 2:24, 26; 3:10, 11, 13, 14 (x2), 15, 17, 18; 4:17; 5:1 (x2), 3, 5, 6, 17, 18 (x2), 19; 6:2 (x2); 7:13, 14, 18, 26, 29; 8:2, 12, 13,15,17; 9:1, 7; 11:5, 9; 12:7. The Epilogue 12:9-14 has two references to אלהים thus bringing the total occurrences of the generic divine name to forty.

critically examine and determine the nature of Qoheleth's epistemology, there are two distinct questions directly related to Qoheleth's theological claims that need to be addressed.

(1) What does Qoheleth claim to know about the nature, character, and activity of God?
(2) What are the sources of Qoheleth's theological knowledge?

The first question will be addressed in this chapter, while question 2 will be discussed at the end of the next. In considering the first question it will be found from the text that Qoheleth has substantial information to impart to his audience regarding God's activity and work, but little that comes in the form of a systematic treatment about the nature and character of God *per se*.[229] What is particularly striking is the fact that Qoheleth employs a diverse range of verbs with אלהים as subject. I therefore propose to examine these verbs with the deity as subject, for in so doing we will be able to extrapolate the knowledge claims he makes about God. In this respect the two most important verbs are נתן = "to give" and עשה = 'to do, make." It will presently become clear that Qoheleth portrays God as a very active deity, perhaps more than is realized.[230]

Kieran Heskin has advanced an interesting suggestion to the effect that divine activity in Ecclesiastes falls into two categories: (i) *endogenous* divine activity, and (ii) *reactive* divine activity. The former refers to the divine activity which originates within God's person and which is not affected by outside stimuli such as human virtue or human sinfulness. *Reactive* divine activity, as the name suggests, is used in relation to divine activity that is affected by external stimuli. *Endogenous* divine activity is arbitrary, incomprehensible in human terms, and unchangeable; the latter has the opposite qualities.[231] Heskin concludes that the endogenous activity of God is more in evidence in the book, while God's reaction to human activity is less marked. This dichotomy is certainly borne out in Ecclesiastes.

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[229] Qoheleth is viewed by R. N. Whybray, "Qoheleth as a Theologian," in A. Schoors, (ed) *Qoheleth in the Context of Wisdom,* (at 239), as a theologian and, at the same time, an apologist. I rather doubt that Qoheleth is either one or the other. I think that Whybray is nearer the mark when he says (at 239) that Qoheleth is something like a philosopher.

[230] A point made by Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, lxviii. Murphy indicates that God is the subject of the verbs נתן and עשה no less than eighteen times. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, makes the observation (at 146), "This God described by Qohelet is very present and very active in the cosmos, always giving . . . and doing/making. . ."

[231] K. Heskin, *Qohelet's Concept of God* (Phd diss., Leeds University, 1985), 5.

Let us now move to consider the context in which the first mention of אלהים appears in the book, as I believe this sets the theological/anthropological agenda for Qoheleth's endeavours.

4.2 God Who Gives

1:13b

הוא ענין רע נתן אלהים לבני האדם לענות בו׃

It is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with.

The context in which the deity is first mentioned is at the commencement of Qoheleth's monologue. There is an aura of negativity about this statement. The immediate preceding words outline Qoheleth's enterprise in which his mind will be preoccupied with investigating and exploring what is done under the sun. This will be achieved by his wisdom, for which he makes a colossal claim in 1:16. Immediately following v 13, Qoheleth's cosmic theme is stated: ". . . and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind." (v 14), a theme which is riveted into the structure of the book.

The grammatical force of these verses is entirely negative, without the slightest glimmer of optimism about human life under the sun. While the generic name for the deity looms large in the book overall, yet equally significant is the fact that the generic term for man, אדם = "humankind/mankind," occurs an amazing forty-nine times.[232] But, as we will see as this study proceeds, what is more remarkable is that on virtually every occasion Qoheleth refers to the deity, he inextricably links reflection on God with reflection on the nature and condition of humans in the world.

This juxtaposition of God and mankind is a conspicuous feature of Qoheleth's thought. It entails that when we consider what he says about God, (his theology) we are inevitably locked into considering his understanding of humanity (his anthropology). In this respect, it is not far off the mark to say that Ecclesiastes encapsulates what is generally regarded as the profoundest issue in the Bible as a whole: the troubled relationship between divinity and humanity.

Chapter 1:13 not only introduces God for the first time, it is also the first time the verb נתן appears. The giving of God is a topic that constitutes an important thread in the tapestry of the book's structure. It becomes clear that, according to the sage, God gives a range of gifts which, at the outset, appear in positive terms, but almost invariably it is the case that there is a negative connotation associated with God's giving

[232] Schoors, *The Preacher Sought*, Part 2, 44.

to humans.

What then is the referent of the phrase הוא ענין רע in relation to God's giving? That is, what is it that God has given to mortals? Verse 13a outlines Qoheleth's intellectual quest. Wisdom is the guiding principle whereby he sets out to seek and to search all the activity on earth.[233] Whatever the task/occupation alluded to, it is described as רע.[234] But is the activity on earth referring to what God is doing in the world, or is it what man is doing? The inquiry by wisdom is, for Qoheleth, a very comprehensive undertaking: the phrase "all that is done" (1:13a) refers to all that is happening on earth not just what humans do.[235] In the context of Qoheleth's programmatic statement of intention, the adjective רע casts a dark shadow over the task God has assigned to humanity.

Qoheleth's outlook on life in 1:13 points to God as one who is a great giver to humankind. The verb נתן appears a total of twenty-five times in the book. Of these occurrences, אלהים is the subject of the verb eleven times.[236] As pointed out by Anton Schoors, "In sum, the most striking features of the verb נתן in Qoh are the relative frequency of its use with God as subject, and the combination with 'heart,' in order to connote an intellectual endeavour."[237]

2:24-26

24 אין־טוב באדם שיאכל ושתה והראה את־נפשו טוב
בעמלו גם־זה ראיתי אני כי מיד האלהים היא׃

25 כי מי יאכל ומי יחוש חוץ ממני׃

[233] This intention is repeated in 2:3, 9 and 7:23.

[234] The term ענין only occurs in Ecclesiastes (2:23, 26; 3:10; 4:8; 5:2, 13 (ET verses 3, 14); 8:16. According to Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, at 72-73, the related verb has four related meanings (i) to answer, (ii) to be occupied with, (iii) to be oppressed or afflicted, and (iv) to sing or chant. Either (ii) or (iii) are appropriate in the context. The adjective רע can mean "bad," "inferior," "disagreeable," "adverse," "evil." Sometimes ענין has the meaning of something that causes anxiety.

[235] See 1:9, 14; 4:3; 8:9, 17; 9:3, 6.

[236] The number would come to twelve if we include the occurrence of נתן in 12:11. While there is a strong exegetical tradition to interpret "one shepherd" as referring to God, the more convincing view is set out by Fox, *A Rereading*, 355-6; see also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 388. The eleven occurrences are: 1:13; 2:26 (x2); 3:10, 11; 5:17,18; 6:2; 8:15; 9:9; 12:7. On several occasions the term לב "heart" is then subject of the verb נתן: 1:13, 17; 7:21; 8:9, 16. Also in 7:2; 9:1 we find the related expression נתן אל לב. The use of the word לב has the deep emotional utility of drawing the reader into a very intimate conversation with the author.

[237] Schoors, *The Preacher Sought*, Part 2, 159.

26 כי לאדם שטוב לפניו נתן חכמה ודעת
ושמחה ולחוטא נתן ענין לאסוף ולכנוס
לתת לטוב לפני האלהים גם־זה הבל ורעות רוח:

24 There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God;
25 for apart from him who can eat or who can find enjoyment?
26 For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

These verses represent the first appearance of the so-called "joy passages" that occur in the book at strategic points.[238] In verse 24a Qoheleth acknowledges and commends enjoyment. His taxonomy of joy is, however, tightly circumscribed as it consists of the simple gifts of eating, drinking and the enjoyment of one's toil. Nonetheless, as Qoheleth puts it, "This too, is from the hand of God."[239]

There follows in verse 26 the statement in which Qoheleth views God as the giver of wisdom, knowledge and joy. But there are two caveats. First, the object of such giving is only for those who please him; and second, God gives to the offensive person the task of gathering and amassing, but only for the purpose of giving to the one who pleases him. The statement is, paradoxically, consonant with the orthodox view of retribution, i.e., Qoheleth appears to confirm the traditional view of divine reward and punishment. Consequently, his conclusion can be stated as follows: God gives tangible rewards to those who please him, but to the wrongdoer he gives the thankless task of working for those who please him. Essentially, enjoyment comes from the mysterious and inscrutable will of a sovereign deity. Therefore, what Qoheleth is emphasizing here with his הבל conclusion is that God disposes of all things in accordance with his own sovereign unlimited will.

3:10-11

10 ראיתי את־הענין אשר נתן אלהים לבני האדם לענות בו:

11 את־הכל עשה יפה בעתו גם את־העלם נתן בלבם מבלי אשר
לא־ימצא האדם את־המעשה אשר־עשה האלהים מראש ועד־סוף:

10 I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with.
11 He has made everything appropriate[240] for its time; moreover he has put a sense of eternity[241]

[238] The other "joy passages" are found in 3:12-13; 3:22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9;7-10 and 11:8-10.

[239] This phrase, ביד האלהים is also found in 9:1 with reference to "the righteous and the wise and their deeds" who are said to be in the "hand of God."

[240] The term is יפה, which has the meaning "right, proper, appropriate, good." The RSV and the KJV have the translation "beautiful," but it is unlikely that an aesthetic judgment is intended here. See 5:17 (ET 5:18) "It is right (יפה) to eat and drink."

into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

Verse 10 quotes 1:13b almost word for word, the major difference being that in 1:13b the business/occupation (ענין) that God has given to mankind attracts the pejorative adjective רע, whereas in 3:10 Qoheleth leaves open the question as to whether the ענין referred to is good or bad.[242] Yet a negative connotation is clearly evident.[243] Murphy believes that ענין refers to problems of indeterminate times alluded to in 3:2-8,[244] a view similar to Crenshaw and most scholars.[245]

When Qoleleth states that ראיתי – "I have seen . . ." the sense is "I have examined."[246] It could be equally rendered, "I observed . . ." But what has Qoheleth examined or observed? This is the same question as in 1:13 above, and the same answer equally applies. On this occasion the observation of Roland Murphy is worth noting. Of God's giving he writes, "It is to be interpreted within Qoheleth's own religious traditions: God controls everything and grants 'gifts,' even if arbitrarily. This is all part

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[241] The NRSV has "a sense of past and future in their minds." I see no reason to deviate from the traditional rendering "eternity" as it is in keeping with that meaning in 3:14. See further comments below.

[242] According to M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumin, the Talmud Bible and Yerushalmi*, etc, (New York: Traditional Press, 1903), (at 1095) ענין is attested in post-biblical Hebrew and has the meaning "subject, business case." In a recent article, A. Schellenberg, "Qoheleth's Use of the Word ענין," in *The Language of Qohelet*, 143-55, states (at 150), "After verse 10, it most likely has to be understood as Qohelet's report on his insights gained by contemplating the ענין." Schellenberg's definition of ענין is too narrow as it limits its meaning to Qoheleth's quest for knowledge.

[243] Crenshaw, *Commentary*, states (at 97) that this term retains an oppressive connotation throughout Ecclesiastes, even when the translation is neutral (task/business). Contrary to this view N. Lohfink, *Qohelet: A Continental Commentary,* writes (at 61), "In fact, the position that now follows is totally positive, taking for granted, as he does, that human activity is always God's activity." This is, I suggest, a very questionable assumption. It is like saying, in Hegelian terms, "Whatever is, is right." While it is an incontestable fact that there is an emphatic, towering belief in God's absolute sovereignty in the thought of Ecclesiastes, there is also room for man's free will. Witness the way Qoheleth issues ethical imperatives from 4:17 (MT) onwards.

[244] Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 34.

[245] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 96-97. Also see Rudman, *Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (JSOTSup 316; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 90-1; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 72. According to J. Blenkinsopp, "Ecclesiastes 3:1-15: Another Interpretation," *JSOT* 66 (1995): 55-64, Ch. 3:2-8 is not from the hand of Qoheleth; he added the title, 3:1 and a brief commentary, 3:9-15, in which the learned sage sought to refute the thesis of 3:2-8. He argues (contra Rudman) against a determinist reading of 3:2-8, involving Stoic philosophical influences on Qoheleth (at 61). For Blenkinsopp this passage is to be interpreted as meaning that everything has its appropriate time in which humans can exercise their freewill.

[246] Ginsburg, *Coheleth Commonly Called the Book of Ecclesiastes:Translated from the Original Hebrew, with a Commentary, Historical and Critical* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861), states (at 307) that Qoheleth is engaging in ". . . a minute inspection of the different employments which God has assigned to the children of men." Michel, *Untersuchungen*, comments (at 190), "Dies ist is, was ich jedenfalls als gut, d.h. angemessen betrachtet (eingesehen?) habe . . ."

of the inscrutable divine action, which defies understanding."[247]

It should be observed that this forthright statement of Qoheleth's is yet another observation he makes, just like the one found in 1:13, considered above. It amounts not to empirically grounded knowledge, but is a clear personal statement of opinion that reflects how Qoheleth viewed the world of divinity and humanity through his own idiosyncratic lens.

Verse 11a picks up on the theme of עת in verses 2-8, and in verse 11b a well-known *crux interpretum* presents itself. The same God who made everything fitting/appropriate (יפה), is ironically the same deity who has נתן = (placed/ put) העלם in human hearts. But to what does העלם refer? Various proposals have been advanced.[248] The basic idea is that עלם is the opposite to עת, that is, something which transcends time. In the same passage, עלם occurs in verse 14, and here the meaning "that which transcends time" fits in very well.

This "giving" by God to mankind has a negative effect in that man's limitations are once again decisively asserted: humans cannot find out what God is doing from the beginning to the end. Characteristically, this negative stance is the preparation for another ode to joy in vv 12-13, which is the second "joy passage" to appear up to this point. In the light of humanity's inability to comprehend the actions of God, Qoheleth's response is to signal another "better/than" saying. The enjoyment invoked in verse 12 is further enumerated into its component elements in verse 13: eating, drinking and working, all of which are positively confirmed as the gift of God, מתת אלהים.

5:17-18 [ET 5: 18-19]

17 הנה אשר־ראיתי אני טוב אשר־יפה
לאכול־ולשתות ולראות טובה בכל־עמלו
שיעמל תחת־השמש מספר ימי־היו
אשר נתן־לו האלהים כי־הוא חלקו׃

18 גם כל־האדם אשר נתן־לו האלהים עשר ונכסים והשליטו לאכל
ממנו ולשאת את־חלקו ולשמח בעמלו זה מתת אלהים היא׃

[247] Murphy, *Ecclesiastes,* 13. In his comments on 1:14, (at 13) Murphy goes on to state, "The "deeds" are the events that make up the fabric of human life, and they are inseparable from the "work of God."

[248] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, (at p. 97) has summarized the various approaches to the meaning of העלם thus: (i) eternity, (ii) world, (iii) course of the world, and (iv) knowledge or ignorance. For a detailed discussion see his "The Eternal Gospel (Ecclesiastes 3:11)," in *Urgent Advice and Probing Questions: Collected Writings on Old Testament Wisdom* (eds. James L. Crenshaw and J. T. Willis; Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 548-72.

> **17** This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot.
> **18** Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil – that is the gift of God.

This traditional Jewish belief that God is the giver of life is asserted in yet another "joy passage." What Qoheleth states in these verses is clearly intended to be a counterpoint or antithesis to what he has observed in verses 12-16 regarding the unfortunate rich man. Thus, the clause, "It is a good thing . . ." is in striking contrast to "a sick misfortune," "to his harm" (verse 12); "unfortunate business," "he owns nothing whatsoever" (verse 13), "nothing of his toil" (verse 14); "darkness," "vexation" and "resentment" (verse 16).[249] In verses 17-18, what is good (טוב) and appropriate/fitting (יפה) is highlighted and this is, for Qoheleth, the enjoyment of eating and drinking, notwithstanding all the toil. Yet, as William Brown reminds us:-

> The theme of death is more important here than in the sage's previous commendations of enjoyment . . . Enjoyment for the sage is a deadly serious matter. The shortness of an individual's existence ("the few days of life") serves not to neutralize but rather to underscore, all the more, the efficacy of life's simple pleasures.[250]

Thus, according to Qoheleth, the love of wealth can pose problems (verses 12-16), yet having wealth and possessions is a gift of God, but only for those people to whom God gives it (verse 18a). Not only does God give, he also empowers a person to enjoy his gifts. That God enables a person to enjoy wealth and possessions, and not lose their riches, is solely an expression of his sovereign activity.[251]

8:15

ושבחתי אני את־השמחה אשר אין־טוב לאדם תחת השמש כי
אם־לאכול ולשתות ולשמוח והוא ילונו בעמלו ימי חייו אשר־
נתן־לו האלהים תחת השמש׃

> So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun.

Qoheleth further demonstrates that God is the 'Giver' of life in yet another "joy passage." At face value this verse seems to exhibit a very positive approach to life that advocates the unqualified enjoyment of some of the simple, but necessary, pleasures of

[249] Verse 17 is essentially a paraphrase of material in 2:24-6; 3:11-12; 3:21-2; 8:15 and 9:7-10.

[250] Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 62.

[251] The next unit to consider under this heading would be 6:1-2. However, these verses come under another sub-heading in chapter 10, "Evils Observed." These verses will be examined there.

life.[252] Whybray argues that Qoheleth speaks with increasing confidence as each of the "joy passages" unfolds in the text. Thus the verb ושבחתי (So I commend) with the pleonastic אני is used before the well-known formula, "there is nothing better than" as found in 2:24; 3:12, 22. And in later passages, 9:7a and 11:9a, Qoheleth changes to the imperative mood.[253] But Whybray's thesis is not really persuasive: 8:15 must be seen in its present context.

When reading the exhortation to joy in the context of injustice previously described in verse 14, in which the הבל theme is repeated twice, verse 15 takes on a very different semantic colour. This is further exemplified by the contents of 8:16-17 where human ignorance is again highlighted in the face of the impenetrable nature of the work of God.[254] In this light, it could be said that, "Qoheleth is recommending pleasure as a distraction from the painful awareness of realities such as he has just described. Man cannot change these things; he can only alleviate the distress they cause him as observer."[255]

The words of 8:15 offer a startling contrast to 2:2 where Qoheleth held joy to be a madness, and in 4:2 where he stated that the dead were more fortunate than the living. This observation brings to the fore very distinctive features of Qoheleth's writing that can be educed from the material we have so far surveyed, namely, (a) the ability to adroitly change perspectives, and (b) the lack of engagement with logically sustained argument in the exposition of his ideas.[256] Notwithstanding, 8:15 is further evidence that for Qoheleth, God is the giver of life.

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[252] It is not immediately obvious what the referent of עשר (that) in verse15b relates to. Does the author mean enjoyment, toil, days of life? In the immediate context "life" seems the most likely rendering.

[253] Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," 87-98. In his later commentary, Whybray, *Ecclesiastes,* (at 28) appears to be a little more reticent about stating that Qoheleth is a preacher of joy. "Whether he was a pessimist or an optimist, therefore, will remain a matter of opinion; what is certain is that he was a realist."

[254] That one cannot fathom the ways and activity of God is a major theme in Qoheleth' thought (3:11; 7:25-29; 9:12 and 11:5). This important facet of Qoheleth's outlook will be examined presently.

[255] Fox, *A Rereading*, 287.

[256] This latter point could be explained by the fact that literary conventions may vary from culture to culture. See J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (2nd ed. London: Darton, Longman & Todd (1996), 135-36. Consequently, we need not be surprised at Qoheleth's alleged failure to conform to modern protocol associated with the requirements of academic research.

ראה חיים עם־אשה אשר־אהבת כל־ימי חיי הבלך אשר נתן לך תחת השמש
כל ימי הבלך כי הוא חלקך בחיים ובעמלך
אשר־אתה עמל תחת השמש:

> Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because this is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.[257]

In yet another "joy passage" we have a unique reference to conjugal love between a man and a woman. It is a well-reported fact that there are striking parallels between verses 7-9 and the Gilgamesh Epic in which Siduri, the ale-wife, offers advice to the hero, Gilgamesh. The sequence of unfolding ideas in these documents is very close, especially in the way the similar type events appear in the same order.[258] Both of these species of ancient literature emphasize the fact that humans cannot live forever. Hence, one must make the best of the present. The motto here, as in the other "joy passages," is *carpe diem.* Everything is in the hand of God (9:1; 2:24).[259]

Qoheleth's imperative to the reader to enjoy life with the woman he loves (most likely one's wife) must be understood in the section 9:1-12 as a whole. The main topic in this pericope is the prevalence of death for both the righteous and the wicked (verse 2). Verse 9 is sandwiched between verses 1-6 – where the negative and solemn effects of death are drawn – and verses 10-12, where "time and chance," that is, death, happens to all (verse 11): and there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in the shady world of שאול (verse 10). On this passage Graham Ogden comments,

> Qoheleth's imperative addressed to his male students is that they seek the love of a woman and appreciate her as a divine gift (cf. 4:9-11; Gen 2: 22-24). It is another concrete example of the

[257] The term אשה (woman) does not have the definite article. Charles F. Whitley, *Koheleth: His Language and Thought* (BZAW 148; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979), draws the conclusion (at 80) that without the article any woman could be referred to, other than to one's wife. However, the term by itself may refer to one's wife as in Gen 30:4, 9; 1 Sam 25:43 and Deut 22:22. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, writes (at 301) that the Akkadian word in the Gilgamesh Epic is rendered "wife" rather than woman.

[258] See J. B. Pritchard, ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament,* 90. The sequence is: eat/drink, feasting, clothing, washing, and wife. The child is not mentioned in Qoheleth. In a very recent article Nili Samet, "The Gilgamesh Epic and the Book of Qohelet," *Bib* 96 (2015): 375-90, explores this relationship. She concludes that Gilgamesh is the only known ANE text that could be regarded as a direct literary source for Qoheleth. See also Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 94-5; Seow, *Ecclesiastes,* 305-6.

[259] Similar accounts are mirrored in the genre of Egyptian texts known as "Harpers' Songs." These are inscriptions that reflect on death, and on occasion, the impossibility of human immortality. In the light of the inexorable eventuality of death for all, people are urged to enjoy themselves while they are able – *carpe diem.* See M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings*. Vol 1, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1973): 196-7.

> general principle which runs through Qoheleth's work, that the sage knows how, under God, to enjoy life in this world of ironies.[260]

In a similar vein, Thomas Krüger observes, ". . . if human beings accept death as a destiny that (with justification!) affects everyone in like manner (9:1-6), they gain the freedom to actively shape and enjoy their lives in the present."[261] Both these critics render a positive interpretation of Qoheleth's exhortation to human love, but it has to be conceded that there is also a touch of irony in the text. Qoheleth is indubitably in tandem with mainstream Jewish tradition: God is the Creator and Giver of human life. It is an affirmative statement that is replicated throughout the Hebrew Bible. But the sage goes on to say that one is to accept this portion (חלקך) for that is the only response to God's bounty, i.e., one's "vain life" (הבלך).

Qoheleth does not make a practice of sustaining attention on one issue or idea for too long, and this is particularly the case when he refers to life. Shannon Burkes comments, "Even when Qoheleth is not specifically speaking of death, one cannot help but notice that almost every time he mentions life, he can hardly refrain from attaching 'hebel (ephemeral)' or 'few days of' to the word."[262] (cf. 2:3; 5:17; 6:12; 7:15; 9:9 and 11:10). This is clearly obvious in this segment 9:1-12 where the spectre of death is persuasive and the ethos is one which has a very serious tone. Even in verse 4, where he states that the living has hope, he deftly observes, "a living dog is better than a dead lion" (verse 4).[263]

12:7

וישב העפר על־הארץ כשהיה והרוח תשוב אל־האלהים אשר נתנה׃

> and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it.

In what is Qoheleth's grand finale, he depicts the dissolution of human life in terms of the reversal of the act of creation. At creation God formed man from the dust of the earth and breathed into man's nostrils the breath/spirit of life (3:19; Gen 2:7). Conversely, death brings about the opposite: the spirit of life at death returns to God who gave it (12:7). Death as the dissolution of life is similarly described in various Old

[260] Ogden, *Qoheleth,*166.

[261] Krüger, *Qohelet*, 172.

[262] S. Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth*, 72.

[263] The referents are hardly akin to human life, especially the mention of a "living dog" which was typically associated with filth and even death in ancient Near Eastern culture (cf. 2 Kgs 9: 30-37).

Testament texts as man's return to the dust of the earth (Ps 104:29; 146:4; Job 10:9; 34:15) and as the taking away of breath (Job 34:14; Ps 104:19).

When one compares 3:21 with 12:7, does Qoheleth contradict himself? In 12:7 he states that the רוח returns to God who gave it. But in 3:21 he makes the observation, which is in the form of a rhetorical question, as to whether the רוח of man goes upward and the רוח of the beast goes downward to the earth. In the latter text Qoheleth raises a question about what happens to the רוח at death, and the anticipated response is: "no one knows." Yet in 12:7 a categorical certainty is evident in Qoheleth's thinking as to what happens at death.[264]

The alleged contradiction is, however, more apparent than real. The context of 3:21 is polemically charged. Qoheleth may have heard some people assert that there is a difference between humans and animals, but he merely denies any qualitative difference. What Qoheleth is saying is that at death the life breath returns to God, whence it came. That return is neither up nor down (3:21); the breath of life is merely returned to God. There is no contradiction here.[265] All that Qoheleth is doing is refusing to speculate about the destinations of humans or animals. He simply thinks no one knows: hence, the rhetorical question in 3:21.

There is no issue here regarding immortality. If a man survives after death it is in the underworld of שאול (9:5-6). Nor is a distinction to be drawn between the body and the soul. Such dualism is foreign to Hebrew anthropology.[266] Qoheleth is merely describing the end of life on earth. He believes that life is only possible on the basis that God gives the life-breath; the body is only dust. In this respect Qoheleth is well within the compass of Old Testament tradition in this area of belief. Fox observes, 'When, at the climax of his grim description of death in chapter 12, he speaks of the departure of

[264] Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, attempts (at 273) to solve the difficulty by viewing Qoheleth as a "confused wise man." This is not a satisfactory solution.

[265] As indicated by Lohfink, *Qoheleth: A Continental Commentary*, 171; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 382; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 120. Fox, *Qoheleth*, holds (at 309) that there is a contradiction that cannot be resolved but it does not have any major implications for the book's meaning. In his later commentary, *A Rereading*, (at 331-32), he is more reticent to express this view. More recently in his commentary, *JPS Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes*, he makes no mention of this issue.

[266] See A. Schoors, "Koheleth: A Perspective of Life and Death?" *ETL* 61 (1985): 301-02; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 188-9; Crenshaw, "Beginnings, Endings, and Life's Necessities." in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel*. SBL Symposium Series 36; (ed. R. J. Clifford, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007): 93-105, (at 99).

the life breath, he perceives it in the ancient way as signifying God's repossession of the life force.'[267]

4.3 God as Creator Doer/Maker

12:1

וזכר את־בוראיך בימי בחורתיך׃

Remember your creator in the days of your youth -

In this famously known verse Qoheleth addresses the youth (possibly his students?) by the above exhortation. This verse begins Qoheleth's commanding and very poignant description of old age and death (verses 1-7). 'Your creator' in 12:1, and God as the giver of life in 12:7, form an *inclusio* for the poem. While some commentators would suggest that the reference to God as creator ill fits the context, the fact still remains that the notion of God as creator pervades the whole book.[268] As in 12:7, there is an allusion to creation (cf. Gen 2:7; 3:19), ". . . and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it."

It is clear to see that Qoheleth stands solidly in the mainstream of Jewish tradition in affirming that God is the creator and giver of life, - the life-breath (Ps 104:29-30; Job 33:4; 34:15; Isa 42:51 and Ezek 37:5). It is noteworthy that this is the only instance of the root ברא in the book. This verb is used in the creation account in Genesis 1, but Qoheleth has a preference for the more common verb עשה = "to do, make."[269]

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[267] Fox, *Qoheleth*, 309. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, remarks (a 224), "Additionally, by suggesting that at death the human spirit/breath returns to God, Qoheleth is again theorizing on the post-death possibility of *yitrôn*. Reversing the process of original creation would seem to imply that Qoheleth reasons that death will not separate us from God; rather at that moment we return to his presence. Though the term *yitrôn* is not cited, this return to God is fundamental to Qoheleth's hope for the future." This is a theological gloss on what some see as Qoheleth's oppressive message on the finality of death for all humans.

[268] BHQ has בוראיך, which appears to be plural, but many MSS read the singular form. Various proposals have suggested alternative readings, but as Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, has noted, (at 351), ". . . it is difficult to think that something other than "creator" is the primary meaning." H. L. Ginsberg, "The Structure and Contents of the Book of Koheleth," 138-49, brings a dash of creativity to the interpretation of this term by an ingenious emendation (at 145) that gives the rendering, "Remember your vigour in the days of your prime." As Harold Fisch, "Qohelet: A Hebrew Ironist," in *Poetry With A Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Harold Fisch; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 198), wryly comments (at 195), "Critics go to strange lengths to accommodate biblical texts to their own preconceived notions of what the biblical authors ought to have said."

[269] The root עשה is found in Ecclesiastes a total of sixty-four times. It occurs in the qal twenty-nine times and fourteen times in the niphal form, while the noun מעשה has twenty-one occurrences. However, despite this impressive listing, the root עשה occurs thirteen times, with only seven occurrences in which אלהים is the subject.

את־הכל עשה יפה בעתו גם את־העלם נתן בלבם מבלי אשר
לא־ימצא האדם את־המעשה אשר־עשה האלהים מראש ועד־סוף׃

> **11** He has made everything appropriate for its time; moreover he has put a sense of eternity into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

The verb עשה occurs twice in this verse, and there is also an example of the cognate noun המעשה, which refers to "the work" of God (cf. 7:13; 8:17). Although the teacher affirms the appropriateness (יפה) of God's creation, he never refers to the created order as something that is טוב (good) (cf. Gen 1:13).[270] Fox's view is that verse 11 does not refer to God's original act of creation. "Everything" in verse 11 resumes "everything" in verse 1, and that, as the pairs in verses 2-8 show, comprises the range of events and actions in human life rather than the major constituents of creation, described in Genesis 1.[271]

The positive note in 3:11a and the placing of eternity in human hearts in 11b, is now followed by Qoheleth's negative assertion that humans remain in the dark as to knowing what the deity is doing, past, present or future (verse 11c). Murphy makes a most fitting comment with respect to the contents of verse 11 in relation to the immediate context of 3:2-8.

> Then it [the poem] culminates with a devastating claim: in the toil that marks these time limits there is no profit for a human being. These are all God's times, and Qoheleth has no quarrel with them in themselves: they are "appropriate" in the divine plan. But the divinity has played a desperate trick upon humanity, placing that mysterious העלם "duration," "world," in human hearts so that they can make no sense out of God's work. This is a fantastic statement of divine sabotage.[272]

This observation highlights again a very dominant theme in the book: the vast distance between God and mankind. This distinction accentuates the absolute sovereignty and incomprehensibility of God on the one hand, and the puniness and finitude of humankind on the other. Again and again, Qoheleth presses home the point by studied repetition, that no man can understand what God is doing in the world.[273] Given the context, the irony displayed in 3:11 is palpable.

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[270] Loader*, Ecclesiastes*, draws attention (at 39) to the fact that, "In Ecclesiastes there is no sign of a positive appreciation for work as a way of exercising dominion over the world (cf. Gen 1:28); nor is there to be a found in it a deliberate interpretation of toil as God's punishment upon sin (cf. Gen 3:17-19)."

[271] Fox, *A Rereading*, 209.

[272] Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 39.

[273] This is especially the case in Qoheleth's trenchant rhetorical flourish in 8:16-17, a passage we will examine in due course when we consider Qoheleth's use of the verb מצא (to find).

3:14

ידעתי כי כל־אשר יעשה האלהים הוא יהיה לעולם
עליו אין להוסיף וממנו אין לגרע והאלהים עשה שיראו מלפניו׃

> I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him.

Qoheleth comes to another conclusion based on his observations in 3:1-8. This second certitude beginning with ידעתי in verse 14a, closely follows the first, indicated by the same verb in verse 12. However, what Qoheleth claims to know here is vague and generalized. The imperfect form יעשה suggests a possible reference to what God might do in the future, though by the end of verse 14c, Qoheleth reverts to using the perfect. The key question is: what does Qoheleth know? Seow states that by using the term לעולם Qoheleth does not mean that everything that God does will last forever.[274] Rather, it is that whatever God does will not be confined by time. In sum, although God has made everything appropriate in its time (verse 11a), everything that God does is not bound in time. Thus God's activity is both temporal (verse 11a) and eternal (verse 14a). The language of adding and subtracting is found elsewhere in the Bible (cf. Jer 26:2; Prov 30:6; Rev 22:18-19).

Whatever God has done and will do, Qoheleth makes two remarks that highlight once again the disparity between divine sovereignty and human creatureliness. First, man is limited in what he can do in relation to what God does, as nothing can be added to it or taken from it. The formula in verse 14b has antecedents in Deut 4:1-2 and 13:1(MT). Secondly, Qoheleth acknowledges that God has made it thus so that humans might fear him (verse 14c).[275] This is an instance of God desiring to create and maintain a disparity between mankind and deity. Hence, his work is immutable which confirms once again the distance between humans (dependent beings) and God (absolute sovereign over everything). Thus, the major purpose of God's activity is to arouse in humans a "reverential awe."[276]

7:14

ביום טובה היה בטוב וביום רעה ראה גם את־זה לעמת־זה
עשה האלהים על־דברת שלא ימצא האדם אחריו מאומה׃

> In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider; God has made the one as well as the other, so that mortals may not find out anything that will come after them.

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[274] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 173-4.

[275] Hertzberg, *Der Prediger*, understands (at 108) "fear" in 3:14 as humankind keeping its distance from God.

[276] Ginsburg, *Coheleth*, 312.

Qoheleth once again confirms the view that God has made all things and, in the same breath, so to speak, characteristically juxtaposes his claim that man is unable to know the future. The segment 7:1-14, which is composed of a collection of aphorisms, is widely recognized as a distinct section of the book. This pericope imitates the 'sentence literature' collections as found in Prov 10:1-22:16. Qoheleth marshals together a series of proverbs in verses 1-6 that display a preoccupation with death, mourning and sorrow, culminating with a repeat of the הבל motif in verse 6b. The contents of verses 7-12, challenge the validity of verses 1-6. Specifically, the advantage of wisdom, as stated in verse 12b, is directly challenged by the theological conclusion drawn in verse 14b.

The fact that God is responsible for prosperity and adversity is set over against man's inability to know the future (verse 14b), thus stressing human ignorance in the face of God's superiority (cf. 6:10-12). In these two verses, which close the unit, Qoheleth explicitly describes God's work as crooked at verse 13 (את אשר עותו). Thus far in the book's unfolding thought, this is the most overt challenge to the deity. It constitutes a most daring connection whereby "crookedness" is directly identified as the work of God (מעשה). Daring though it appears to be, the contents of this assertion are not unique to Qoheleth. It is in fact, quite in keeping with a trajectory of Israelite monotheism that holds God responsible for good and evil (cf. Job 2:10; 2 Sam 24, and Isa 45:6-7). Robert Gordis has aptly commented on 7:13-14 thus:

> This verse [13] and the following are an admirable epitome of Koheleth's thought – God is all-powerful, man must resign himself to ignorance regarding the meaning and purpose of life. Hence, he must take good and evil in his stride, enjoying the good while he can and remembering it during the days of trouble.[277]

It is noteworthy that 7:13-14 reflects material about the divine work already alluded to in 1:15 and 3:10-14. In Ch 7, however, there is a difference, as Murphy has noticed.

> Qoheleth is not merely repeating an old saying similar to 1:15 or 3:11-14 about the divine work. He is demolishing the security that was claimed for wisdom in vv 11-12. He invites the reader to "consider" (vv 13,14), and he poses the problem of the incalculable work of God. It can even be said that the main point of the book concerns "the work of God." [278]

7:29

לבד ראה־זה מצאתי
אשר עשה האלהים את־האדם ישר
והמה בקשו חשבנות רבים׃

[277] Gordis, *Koheleth*, 274-75.

[278] Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 66.

> See, this alone I found, that God made human beings upright, but they have devised many schemes.

In this verse the common verb עשה is employed. The word ישר means "upright," or "correct," *contra* "straightforward" in NRSV (cf. Prov 8: 6-9). What is interesting in this verse is that in 7:20 Qoheleth acknowledges the problem of wrong doing in human nature: "Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins." A similar allusion to man's nature in found in 9:3 where Qoheleth observes that, ". . . the heart of the sons of men is set fully to do evil." These statements resonate with similar sentiments in Gen 1-11.[279] And once again Qoheleth's understanding of God concurs with traditional Jewish belief with reference to God as the creator of a flawed humanity.

This verse appears to be in conflict with the thought expressed in 7:13, considered above. There, some aspect of God's creation is term "crooked" (עותו). In 7:29, mankind was made upright (ישר).

11:5

כאשר אינך יודע מה־דרך הרוח
כעצמים בבטן המלאה
ככה לא תדע את־מעשה האלהים
אשר יעשה את־הכל׃

> Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything.

Seow has correctly seen this segment as another of Qoheleth's rhetorical set-ups.[280] In verses 3-4 the impression is given of the human ability to know. But these verses are surrounded by a frame of negativity in verses 2 and 5-6 thus emphasizing the cognitive limitations of humans.

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[279] For the possible influence of Gen 1-11 on Qoheleth's thought see C. C. Forman, "Koheleth's Use of Genesis," *JSS* 5 (1960): 256-63, who connected (at 255-9) these statements by Qoheleth to the Fall in Gen 3. The same view is taken by M. V. Fox and B. Porten in "Unsought Discoveries: Qoheleth 7:32-8:1a," *HS* 19 (1978): 26-38, although they argue that the story of the fall gave rise to the polemic against women in 7:26-8. See also R.V. McCabe, "The Message of Ecclesiastes." McCabe states (at 95) that Qoheleth reflects a solid grasp of the early chapters of Genesis." He also believes that the "joy passages" are a *Leitmotiv* in Qoheleth's outlook; D. B. MacDonald, "Old Testament Notes," *JBL* 18 (1899): 212-15, commenting on Eccl 3:11 writes (at 212), "The careful reader of Ecclesiastes cannot fail to notice how great must have been the influence of the early chapters of Genesis with the stories of the creation and the fall on the mind of the writer." For a similar strong endorsement of this interpretation see R. Antic, "Cain, Abel, Seth, and the Meaning of Human Life as Portrayed in the Books of Genesis and Ecclesiastes," *AUSS* 44 (2006): 203-11. I agree with Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, when he comments (at 119), that it is difficult to be dogmatic about the influence of the early chapters of Genesis on the mind of Qoheleth. See also Katherine Dell, "Exploring Intertextual Links Between Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1-11," in *Reading Ecclessiastes Intertextually* (ed. Katharine Dell and Will Kynes; London, New York: Bloomsbury T &T Clark, 2014), 3-14. After a detailed examination Dell reaches the conclusion that Qoheleth did not have Genesis at his hand when writing his book. According to her, the linguistic links are few between the Genesis data and Ecclesiastes (at 12).

[280] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 344.

In the interpretation of 5b the question arises: are two distinct entities referred to, e.g., (i) the unknown course of the wind, רוח, and (ii) the development of the human embryo? Since רוח means 'wind' in 4a, does the meaning stay the same in 5a, or is the latter to be rendered life-breath? In the above translation, Fox opts for the latter thus giving the sense of one illustration. But as Barton points out, the phrase, אשר יעשה את־הכל can be rendered, "who makes both."[281] This would give the following translation, "As you do not know what is the way of the wind or how the bones are formed in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of God, who does all things."[282]

Either way, as Crenshaw has noted, "Emphasis certainly falls on human ignorance, whatever the number of divine mysteries."[283] Just as man is ignorant of the causes of wind change, so also is he cognitively limited in his understanding of the development of the embryo in a woman's womb. This is but another forceful reminder of human ignorance (temporality) in the face of the mystery of God's sovereignty (eternality). Of this pericope, 11:1-6, Seow aptly sums it up: "Qohelet moves from the elements of nature, to the wonders of life coming into being, ultimately to theology: wind is unpredictable (11:4), the life-breath is a mystery (11:5a), and God is inscrutable (11:5a)."[284] Once again we see that the topic of man's ignorance in the face of a sovereign and distant God is a crucial characteristic of Qoheleth's thought, especially, as we observed earlier, in the latter half of the book.

4.4 Summary

In this chapter our main purpose has been to examine what Qoheleth tells us about his knowledge of God, especially with respect to the nature of God's giving and his doings. We certainly found that for Qoheleth, God is the great giver of gifts to humankind, a fact notably expressed by the distinct phrases – "from the hand of God (2:24)," and "this is the gift of God" (5:18 [ET 5:19]), (cf. 3:13). God is also the creator of all things and is very active in the world (3:10-11; 11:5; 12:1). He has made humans upright, but they seek to pursue a different path (7:29). Whatever God does stands forever, which is

[281] Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 183-4.

[282] The MT supports two illustrations, although the syntax is awkward. As Gordis argues, *Koheleth*, (at 331-32) if two illustrations are referenced here one would expect the copula *waw* to begin the clause commencing with כעצמים thus giving וכעצמים. However, parallel comparisons introduced by כ without the copula *waw* are found in Deut 1:17 and Song of Songs 1:5. The MT is supported by the Targum, LXX and Vg.

[283] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 180.

[284] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 345-6.

calculated to make humans be in awe of him (3:14). The days of prosperity and adversity are equally at God's command, but this has a negative connotation: God has acted thus to demonstrate that humans will be unable to know what happens in the world after them (7:14).

This positive/negative approach can also be found in two of the joy passages. In 9:9 the injunction for a man to enjoy his wife/woman whom he loves has the expressed implication that the days of their lives, are in any case, הבל. Also in 2:24-26, the first joy passage, it is confirmed that humans can please God, and the ability to enjoy wisdom, knowledge, and joy comes from the hand of God. But those who cannot please God (the sinner = ולחוטא) have the hapless task of working for those who please God. But how one pleases God is not clear. Also in 6:1-2 God is the giver of wealth, possessions, and honour, yet God in his sovereign will prevents some humans from enjoying these gifts – a stranger enjoys them (cf. 2:18-21). Even though over half the joy passages in the book have been cited above, the cosmic הבל theme is not far from the surface of the material we have examined.

Briefly stated, Qoheleth's God is the prime mover of all things, the creator of everything, including human kind. He is very active in the world but humans are unable to understand what is truly happening, now, or in the ages to come. God gives, but he also arbitrarily takes away.

In this chapter we have examined Qoheleth's knowledge claims in relation to God as giver, and God as creator/maker/doer. What we have found is quite remarkable. Qoheleth's knowledge of God in these two areas of divine giving and divine activity is at once extensive and detailed. From an epistemological standpoint, the pressing question immediately springs from one's mind: how did this sage come to know so much about God's nature and activity, when at no stage did God directly reveal himself to Qoheleth? Before we address this important question (which goes to the very core of our thesis claim) we shall proceed to consider the remainder of Qoheleth's claims about what he knows about God. When all the appropriate material has been examined, we shall summarize what Qoheleth claims to know about God. A critical evaluation will then be given to determine whether, in the light of his epistemic theological claims, Qoheleth can properly be accorded the status of an "empiricist."

PART 2. QOHELETH'S EPISTEMIC CLAIMS ABOUT GOD

Chapter 5: Qoheleth's Theological Claims (Part B)

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 4:17-5:6 [ET 5:1-7] is a very revealing pericope that gives the reader a most unusual insight into the theological thinking of Qoheleth. In what is a most exquisite passage, this is the only occasion where Qoheleth considers Jewish cultic worship and practice.

5.2 God in the Context of Worship

4:17 – 5:6

17 שמר רגליך כאשר תלך אל־בית האלהים
וקרוב לשמע מתת הכסילים זבח
כי־אינם יודעים לעשות רע:

1 אל־תבהל על־פיך ולבך אל־ימהר
להוציא דבר לפני האלהים
כי האלהים בשמים ואתה על־הארץ
על־כן יהיו דבריך מעטים:

2 כי בא החלום ברב ענין
וקול כסיל ברב דברים:

3 כאשר תדר נדר לאלהים אל־תאחר לשלמו
כי אין חפץ בכסילים את אשר־תדר שלם:

4 טוב אשר לא־תדר משתדור ולא תשלם:

5 אל־תתן את־פיך לחטיא את־בשרך
ואל־תאמר לפני המלאך כי שגגה היא
למה יקצף האלהים על־קולך
וחבל את־מעשה ידיך:

6 כי ברב חלמות והבלים ודברים הרבה
כי את־האלהים ירא:

4:17 Guard your steps when you go to the house of God; to draw near to listen is better than the sacrifice offered by fools; for they do not know how to keep from doing evil.
5:1 Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few.
5:2 For dreams come with many cares, and a fool's voice with many words.
5:3 When you make a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it; for he has no pleasure in fools. Fulfill what you vow.

5:4 It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not fulfill it.
5:5 Do not let your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake; why should God be angry at your words, and destroy the works of your hands?
5:6 With many dreams come vanities and a multitude of words; but fear God.

The shift in tone from reflection in the previous chapters to issuing ethical instruction is at once immediate and dramatic, a move demonstrably indicated by the use of a string of imperatives in the spaces of seven verses. On nine occasions Qoheleth issues commands to his readers who worship (presumably) in the Temple in Jerusalem.[285] As a consequence, the subject matter of this pericope is, on the face of it, intensely theological since the generic divine name is mentioned seven times.[286]

Once again the great disparity between the deity and humanity, between the sovereign and absolute reality of God and the feebleness of man as a dependent being, is graphically confirmed in 5:1 by the words, ". . . for God is in heaven and you upon earth." In the light of this, Qoheleth therefore advances three clear warnings in relation to (i) improper conduct towards the deity in sacrifice (4:17); (ii) in words relating to prayer (5:1), and (iii) the lack of seriousness in vow making (5:3-6). Qoheleth is adamant that the disparity indicated in 5:1 between God and humanity should be respected in cultic matters. The underlying assumption is that this respect for the divine presence is not always forthcoming; hence, the imperative warnings. These verses reveal a strong cautionary tone aimed at discouraging a casual approach in worship. Glibness, loquacity and complacency are all ruled out, but such admonitions are not peculiar to Qoheleth. Indeed, this passage deals with common wisdom *topoi*.[287]

But again, in keeping with the thought of 3:14, Qoheleth's God is not engaged on an intimate basis with mankind. God is transcendent and "Wholly Other" and this has practical ramifications for Temple worship. Qoheleth therefore urges, ". . .let your words be few" (verse 1). Constraint, sincerity and reticence in approaching God, and making vows and sacrifices are befitting the worship of the creator of all things.[288]

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[285] That the Jerusalem Temple is assumed here is due to the reference to "the house of God" and "sacrifice" in 4:17. A further point in support of this is the fact that the phrase is used of the second Temple (cf. Ezra 3:8; 6:22; 8:36; 10:1, 6, 9).

[286] Explicitly in 4:17; 5:1 (2x); 5:3, 5, 6, and once implicitly in 5:3 where God is referred to by the third person pronoun ("for *he* has no pleasure in fools").

[287] For example, the advocacy of thoughtful and restrained speech is found in Prov 10:14, 19; 21: 23; Eccl 6:11; 10:13-14. Personal accountability in vow-making is addressed in Prov 20:25; Sir 18:22; Ps 66:13-14. Also, Eccl 5:3-4 has a precise parallel in Deut 23:22-24. In substance, Ecclesiastes, with the rest of the Old Testament, regard religious activity and commitment as a serious matter.

[288] Restraint in worship and piety in ancient Egyptian wisdom literature is also discernible in *The Instruction of Any*, Lichtheim, *AEL* 2 137, and the Egyptian wisdom text known as *The Instruction for Merikare*, Pritchard, *ANET* 3d ed., 417.

Significantly, Qoheleth does not speak of God on earth (*contra* 2 Chron 6:14), which is indicative for him of the distance between the transcendent One and mere mortals.

Verse 5 is significant for several reasons. First, verses 3-5 have a close parallel with Deut 23:22-24 (MT) in relation to making vows.[289] The warning is clear: if you make a vow to God, ensure that it is fulfilled. Once a vow is made but not kept, the worshipper may be required to give an account of such erring conduct. The person to whom one is to give an account of such conduct is referred to as the מלאך (messenger), the identity of whom has occasioned some scholarly discussion. It is most likely that מלאך refers to a priest or some Temple emissary to whom confession of failure or impulsively made vows would have to be made (cf. Mal 2:7).[290]

What Qoheleth appears to be saying to his readers is that the מלאך will not accept one's excuse for making a rash vow. Hence, the wrongdoing will therefore attract the anger of God that will have the devastating effect of destroying the offender's work. The implication is obvious: the motive clause (verse 7) emphasizes the idea that God will not tolerate the foolish words of the worshipper who, despite confessing to an intermediary, will be punished accordingly.

Overall, this sombre passage is one in which there is heightened seriousness in relation to cultic worship. As Murphy has noted,

> The presumption behind verses 4-5 is that God hears what humans say, and that God reacts. There is no sign of the "deed-consequence" mentality here. In short, God judges and even punishes. Qoheleth never denies that there is divine judgment, even if it remains a mystery to him.[291]

There is no question of eschatological judgment; the punishment and judgment in this context appears imminent. As Fox puts it, "The punishment will take the form of material loss, as it is appropriate, since (in terms of votive symbolism) a default on vows impinges on God's material dues."[292] Whatever else the phrase "the work of your hands" means, it is clear that Qoheleth's taxonomy of joy includes the enjoyment of one's toil and life. To have such work destroyed would, therefore, be a disastrous

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[289] The Deuteronomy text warns that slackness in paying one's vow is a sin that "God will require of you." It also points out that, ". . . if you refrain from making a vow, it would not be a sin." Prov 20:25 also warns against the making of rash vows (cf. Sir 18:22-23).

[290] LXX (supported by SyrH) and Syr substitute the term with אלהים. MT is supported by Aq, Symm, Theod, and Targ. A good discussion of the issue is found in R. B. Salters in, "Notes on the Interpretation of Koh. 5:5," *ZAW* 90 (1978): 95-101. Salters holds that the interpretation of מלאך (priest) has most to commend it.

[291] Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 51.

[292] Fox, *A Rereading*, 232-33.

outcome.

From this important passage it is revealing that at no time does Qoheleth address God in a personal capacity, as in offering a prayer. There is a huge contrast, then, between the experience of Qoheleth in the context of worship and the close personal and direct contact between the Psalmist and his God. Also, in Exod 33:11 we are informed that the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. By startling contrast, nowhere in Ecclesiastes does God ever speak to Qoheleth directly. In this cultic passage Qoheleth seems to be on the outside, a spectator of society, giving people advice as to how they should behave in a Temple worship setting. From it we may draw the conclusion that for Qoheleth, his God is somewhat distant (5:1 [ET 5:2]) and should only be approached with the greatest care (5:4 [ET 5:5]). It is in this passage that we find it most telling that the personal name for Israel's God, יהוה is absent from Qoheleth's view of the world.

5.3 God is to be Feared

The end of the previous segment brings us most appropriately to a core belief in Qoheleth's understanding of God, namely that the deity should be feared. The concept of 'the fear of God' is one that runs deep in Israel's sapiential literature.[293] As Michael Barré has pointed out, the fear of God lies at the heart of the worldview of wisdom.[294] Qoheleth employs the concept of the "fear of God" four times in his monologue (3:14; 5:6 [ET 5:7]; 7:18; 8:12b-13).[295] However, contrary to the other wisdom books of Job and Proverbs, the word 'fear' only occurs in Ecclesiastes in its verbal form, which might suggest that 'fear of God' in the book is not a coherent and fixed principle.

Franz Delitzsch once described Ecclesiastes as "das Hohelied der Gottesfurcht" (the supreme song of the fear of God).[296] This rather fulsome endorsement is perhaps difficult to sustain, but it is indisputably true that any serious engagement with the

[293] See H. Blocher, "The Fear of the Lord as the "Principle" of Wisdom," *TB* 28 (1977): 3-28 for a general survey of the concept. An earlier article is B. J. Bamberger, "Fear and Love of God in the Old Testament," *HUCA* 6 (1929): 39-53. Bamberger's opening sentence (at 39), "Old Testament writers speak frequently of fearing God, less often of loving Him," is highly appropriate in describing Qoheleth's disposition to the deity.

[294] M. Barré, " 'Fear of God' and the World View of Wisdom," *BTB* 11 (1981): 41-43.

[295] The injunction to "fear God" is found in the Epilogue 12:9-14 and as such is not the actual words attributed to Qoheleth.

[296] Delitzsch, *Biblischer Commentar über die poetischen Bücher des Alten Testaments. Vol. 4, Hoheslied und Koheleth. Mit Excursen von Consul D. Wetzstein* (Leipzig: Dörffling & Franke, 1875), 190.

book's interpretation must consider the meaning and function of 'fearing God' in the author's discourse. While the phrase cannot be considered as the *leitmotif* of the book, the following analysis will seek to show that it is a concept integral to the author's thought and outlook.

The underlying notion of God in 3:9-22 is that of a sovereign reality who is eager to maintain inviolate the distinction between the divine and the human. As Eunny Lee puts it: "To fear God in short, means to recognize and respect the distance between the divine and the human."[297] Thus, when man takes cognizance of his proper place in the scheme of God's created order, both its limitations and possibilities can be realized. In concrete terms, Qoheleth's stress on the finitude of man is coupled with his exhortation to enjoy life. This symbiotic relationship is arguably at the heart of Qoheleth's thought, and is certainly in evidence in 3:13-14.[298]

In sum, Qoheleth's understanding of God in this verse is one whose eternal nature and his work stand at a great distance from the finite creatureliness of humans. But this does not mean that in the realization of God's absolute sovereignty, man has no opportunity to exercise his voluntary choice in seeking "to fear before him." It is obvious from this passage, therefore, that 'to fear God' amounts to a voluntary human attitude that is a genuinely made human response.

7:16-18

16 אל־תהי צדיק הרבה ואל־תתחכם יותר
למה תשומם׃

17 אל־תרשע הרבה ואל־תהי סכל
למה תמות בלא עתך׃

18 טוב אשר תאחז בזה וגם־מזה אל־תנח את־ידך
כי־ירא אלהים יצא את־כלם׃

16 Do not be too righteous, and do not act too wise; why should you destroy yourself?
17 Do not be too wicked, and do not be a fool; why should you die before your time?
18 It is good that you should take hold of the one, without letting go of the other; for the one who fears God fulfills them both.

These puzzling admonitions have attracted a variety of responses. In seeking an explanation of verse 18b, it might prove helpful to examine the correspondence between 4:17-5:6 [5:1-7], and the immediate context of 7:13-18. In both instances God's

[297] Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment,* 85.

[298] This is the essence of Lee's thesis, i.e., the "fear of God' exhortation has, as its flip side, the exhortation to enjoy life when this is possible.

sovereignty is juxtaposed with man's creaturely status (5:1; cf. 7:13). Restraint is encouraged in offering sacrifice, praying and vow making (4:17; 5:1, 3-5); in 7:16, restraint and balance is encouraged in pursuing righteousness, wickedness, wisdom and folly. In both passages destruction is threatened (5:5; 7:16) as indicated by the interrogative statements commencing with the use of למה. Finally, the climatic use of the "fear of God" motif is presented as a positive alternative that is introduced by כי in 5:6 and 7:18.

In the immediate context, what does verse 18b refer to by stating that, "For he who fears God fulfills them both?" And especially, what is the meaning of the phrase, - "fulfills them both?" It seems best to view verse 18b as referring to the previous and most immediate pair of injunctions in verses 16-17. Qoheleth's own conclusion is that both of them are embraced, but not to the point of self-destruction or premature death. It has been suggested by some that what Qoheleth is advocating here is the Aristotelian doctrine of "the golden mean" whereby one avoids both extremes and adopts a *via media*. This view, however, has not found favour with many commentators.[299]

"The fear of God," by contrast, embraces both the possibilities and impossibilities of being human.[300] As a consequence of this stance, Qoheleth's searingly honest realism leads to a form of piety that is more modest and therefore less demanding when viewed against human frailty. This recommendation in verse 18b is thus both in keeping with the mystery of divine activity adumbrated in verses 13-14, and with the overarching הבל theme. Certainly, neither course of action indicated in verses 16-17 is profitable because, as far as Qoheleth is concerned, the orthodox teaching of divine retribution has lost its power to fully convince (verse 15b). In the light of the imponderable observations about human effort and activity, the only course for Qoheleth to commend is to fear God because whatever the situation, it is the God-fearer who will emerge in the best light.

[299] Gordis, *Koheleth*, 275-76; Delitzsch, *Biblischer Commentar,* 319, and others support the idea. For a contrary view see Fox, *A Rereading*, 259-61; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 266-69. J. H. Choi, "The Doctrine of the Golden Mean in Qoh 7:15-18: A Universal Pursuit," *Biblica* 83 (2002): 358-74 reviews the two main different biases in the interpretation and holds that this passage does support the golden mean doctrine. He argues that the golden mean is not the result of Hellenistic influence, but is a universal phenomenon.

[300] See Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 103.

8:12-13

12 אשר חטא עשה רע מאת ומאריך לו
כי גם־יודע אני אשר יהיה־טוב ליראי האלהים
אשר יראו מלפניו׃

13 וטוב לא־יהיה לרשע ולא־יאריך ימים כצל
אשר איננו ירא מלפני אלהים׃

> **12** Though sinners do evil a hundred times and prolong their lives, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they stand in fear of him,
> **13** but it will not be well with the wicked, neither will they prolong their days like a shadow, because they do not stand in fear before God.

By vivid contrast to 7:16-18, Qoheleth, in these verses launches a forthright avowal of traditional Jewish belief relating to divine justice. This is strong approval of retributive justice but it is flanked on either side by statements that expressly contravene this principle, e.g. verses 10-12a, and verse 14. In the context of the unit 8:10-15, how is this cognitive dissonance to be explained? Various attempts have been made to explain the tension in the text by positing editorial activity,[301] or by the fact that Qoheleth advances a traditional wisdom quotation with a view to debunking it. But the contents of verses 12b-13 are to be regarded as a theological statement from the pen of Qoheleth himself for nowhere does he deny outright the doctrine of retributive justice. That being so, if 8:10-15 is to be understood as a unified text from the hand of the author, how are verses 12b-13 be interpreted in this context?

Many scholars hold the phrase, כי גם (yet/even though), to be concessive and the phrase, יודע אני (I know), to indicate public knowledge as opposed to knowledge which Qoheleth himself had acquired from his own investigations.[302] What Qoheleth is therefore doing is conceding the truth of conventional wisdom, but he does so reluctantly. Seow remarks,

> But this concession is merely parenthetical, it seems, and without much conviction, for he quickly returns to note the injustice in the treatment of the just and the unjust in v 14. That is, Qoheleth accepts the orthodox doctrine of retribution, but he points to a contradiction of it in reality. He does not deny that there are all sorts of contradictions in the world.[303]

Briefly stated, the deed/consequence connection functions in society normatively**,** but there are exceptions to the rule. This is the conclusion reached by Fox.

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[301] Barton, *Ecclesiastes,* 53; A. Lauha, *Kohelet*, 157; Ellermeier, *Qohelet*, 127; Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste*, 402-03; Galling, *"Der Prediger,"* 112.

[302] Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, makes the useful distinction between "private" and "public" knowledge in Qoheleth's discourse. See "The Epistemological Spiral: The Ironic use of Public and Private Knowledge in the Narrative Presentation of Koheleth," 167-238.

[303] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 288.

> Although Qohelet "knows" the principle of retribution and nowhere denies it, he also knows there are cases that violate the rule. It is because Qohelet holds to the axioms of Wisdom that he is shocked by their violations and finds the aberrations absurd.[304]

This section, 8:10-15 is not a reflection of Qoheleth's enigmatic contradictions as traditionally understood, but a transparent realization that life, then as now, is replete with its contradictory overtures and ironies.

Verse 13 is also another reminder to the sage's readership that for evildoers, just retribution will be their lot. While Qoheleth raises the issue of delayed justice in verse 11, he still holds that there is a "time and a judgment for every matter" (cf. 3:17). The judgment implied in verse 13b comes in the form of a shortening of life for the wicked, " . . . because they do not stand in fear of God" (verse 13c). It is evident that despite the tension in 3:10-15, the concept of the fear of God dominates 8:12b-13, occurring three times. However, the "fear of God" phrase ". . . does not have the same nuance as in 3:14; 5:16; 7:18. In those verses fear of God has a tough-minded quality of fidelity and devotion. Here it reflects the traditional attitude that is secure and certain, for it is tied to clear divine retribution."[305]

Closely related to the notion of fearing God is another important element in Qoheleth's epistemic claims about God, the strong and consistent belief that God will judge humans for their conduct.

5.4 God as Judge of the Just and the Wicked

3:17-18

17 אמרתי אני בלבי
את־הצדיק ואת־הרשע ישפט האלהים
כי־עת לכל־חפץ ועל כל־המעשה שם:

18 אמרתי אני בלבי על־דברת בני האדם לברם האלהים ולראות
שהם־בהמה המה להם:

> **17** I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work.[306]

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[304] Fox, *A Rereading*, 286.

[305] K. Dell, "Ecclesiastes as Wisdom: Consulting Early Interpreters," *VT* 44 (1994): 301-29 (at 328).

[306] The word שם at the end of this verse has posed some difficulty. MT, LXX and Syr read this word as an adverb meaning "there." The Vulgate renders it "then." Either way the referent is unclear. Gordis, *Koheleth,* holds (at 235) that it is a reference to the other world after death. This approach has, however, found little support. Whitley, *Koheleth*, presents a survey of possible solutions. He proposes (at 34-36) the rendering ". . . for there is a time for everything and for every act too." He admits that the force

> **18** I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals.

These verses appear in the section 3:16-22, which is connected to the previous unit 3: 1-15. This can be seen from the fact that the opening words of verse 16 – ועוד ראיתי (Moreover, I saw) – echo in verse 10. In 3:1-15 Qoheleth has considered the absolute sovereignty of God in the allotment of times and seasons. Now, in verse 16 he introduces a new topic: the specific problem of justice. In addressing the inequity of human jurisprudence, Qoheleth sees that the injustice in human courts is the exact reversal of normative equity: the innocent are declared guilty and the guilty innocent. Verse 16 therefore constitutes a searing indictment on human behaviour.

This state of affairs thus described initiates two responses from Qoheleth, both introduced by the formulaic phrase, אמרתי אני בלבי = "I said in my heart," in verses 17 and 18 respectively. Qoheleth's immediate response is to offer a classic statement of Jewish belief about divine justice in verse 17a. The reality of divine justice is unequivocally and emphatically confirmed by the words: "God will judge the righteous and the wicked."[307] In this respect Qoheleth was voicing a belief that was universally held in Israel.

In verse 17b the claim, ". . . for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work," is linked to the statement in 3:1, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven." Qoheleth has considered the sovereignty of God in allocating times and seasons (3:1-15), and for him, God is incomprehensibly in control of these times and seasons. Since there is a divinely appointed time for everything, it follows that there must also be a time for God's judgment. There is however something of a mystery about God's judgment in Qoheleth's thought. He seems unable to tell his readers much about the nature of God's judgment or when it will occur. Nevertheless, for Qoheleth, what God will do by way of judging human kind is not bound by time. As

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of the term is uncertain. Some scholars prefer to repoint שם to שם (to set, appoint), but this places the verb at the end of the sentence which is syntactically awkward. While the text may be corrupt, as Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, (at 30) suggests, one might accept that שם is a reference back to 3:16, the place where injustice is indicated. See Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 65.

[307] The imperfect ישפט (he will judge) is used here; while the imperfect can refer to the future, it can also refer to the present. See GKC, **§** 107a-g. In the overall context of Qoheleth's thought, it is unlikely that he has in mind an eschatological judgment after death. Fox, *A Rereading*, points out (at 215), "According to the belief prevalent in Biblical times, death means the loss of life-breath (רוח) and descent into Sheol, a fate shared by all creatures. When God "takes back" (*'osep*) the spirit (that is the life-breath common to all creatures, not the "soul"), the creature dies (Ps 104:29; Job 34:14-15). This "taking back" of the life-spirit does not imply an afterlife, but merely the dissolution of the components of the living being." For an extended treatment on Jewish belief on death in Old Testament times, see Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth*, 35-80.

Murphy remarks, "Judgment belongs to God, not human time."[308]

The declaration, "I said in my heart" in verse 18a signals Qoheleth's second response to the injustice mentioned in verse 16. This second reaction is more protracted than the first; it extends from verses 18-21 and closes with a "joy passage" at verse 22. It is not easy to see the connection between verses 16-17 and verse 18, the latter being extremely difficult syntactically.[309] Despite the difficulties associated with the peculiar syntax of this verse, Ogden holds that the tenor of the verse is clear: man and beast share a great deal in common. The basis of this conclusion is the fate that they share: both will die.

One may ponder why God is "testing" humans to show that they are but beasts, when the deity, on Qoheleth's understanding, already knows this. Weeks' interpretation tends to follow the suggestion of F. J. Backhaus with regard to the derivation and sense of the verb לברם = "to separate out." However, he adopts a future tense for the verb and offers the following translation of the second clause of verse 18: "God is going to separate them (humans) out, but what they are going to see for themselves is that they are cattle."[310] This translation has merit because, as Weeks suggests, "the point is more probably that although God will draw distinctions, humans are incapable of perceiving them for themselves."[311] Thus in the light of this human ignorance, Qoheleth advocates pursuing pleasure in one's work at 3:22.

11:9

שמח בחור בילדותיך ויטיבך לבך בימי בחורותך
והלך בדרכי לבך ובמראי עיניך
ודע כי על־כל־אלה יביאך האלהים במשפט׃

Rejoice, young man, while you are young,
and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth.

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[308] Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 36. The term הֶמָּה (verse 18) seems redundant and most scholars regard it as a dittography. The final למה (verse 18) also seems unnecessary though some scholars regard this term as adding emphasis to the somber status assigned to humanity earlier in this verse. See Whitley, *Koheleth*, 37-8 and Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 103.

[309] The word לברם has the form of an infinitive with the suffix "them." Yet one expects a finite verb here to make sense. The verb ברר means "to purge out, sort." Cf. W. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 50. It can also mean, "to purify, select." See *BDB*, 140. The Vg and the Tg take the term to mean "test" which is followed by many scholars. Also the MT reads לראות (verse 18c) but the subject of this Qal infinitive is not clear. The LXX, Syr and Vg read this verb as a Hiphil infinitive, להראות meaning "to show," rather than "to see." For a fuller discussion see Whitley, *Koheleth*, 36-8. The final clause is also difficult. The term המה בהמה seems redundant and most scholars hold it to be a dittography.

[310] Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 82, f/n 7.

[311] Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 82.

Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes,
but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.

Most commentators recognize 11:7 – 12:7 as a distinct unit from what has preceded. As Crenshaw has noted, there is a great contrast between the rigour of youth and the incapacitation of old age which ultimately leads to death.[312] These two entities are metaphorized as "light" (verse 7a) and "darkness" (verse 8b), and also in the pathos of the evocative poem (12:2-6). With this unit - generally sombre in tone – the author draws his readers to a dramatic finale. These are the last thoughts of Qoheleth rounded off in typical style with the concluding exclamation of the הבל cosmic theme in 12:8.[313]

If there is one certainty that Qoheleth holds to consistently it is his belief in the judgment of God. In 11:9 there is a forthright, unambiguous statement of belief that God is the judge of mankind. The recommendations in this pericope, 11:7-10, reflect the ancient exhortation, "let us rejoice while we are young." In verses 7-8a, there is a call to enjoyment, but this is immediately followed by the warning of impending dark times ahead (verse 8b) which ends with the הבל theme. In the first two parts of verse 9, Qoheleth issues an imperative call to the young to rejoice and enjoy themselves. This is the most extensive call to enjoyment in the book. It is also a very case specific call for it is to a "young man." But with all the suddenness of an unexpectant bout of theological whiplash, the same youth is warned of the grave nature of God's judgment, which is directly related to his behaviour. Noteworthy here is the fact that Qoheleth situates enjoyment in a theological framework: "know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment."

Since the earliest time, the tension between verse 9ab and traditional teaching as in Num 15:39 - (". . . to do them [the commandments], and not to follow after your own hearts and your own eyes, which you are inclined to go after wantonly.") - has been openly acknowledged. It should not be thought, however, that Qoheleth is encouraging excessive indulgence (cf. 10:17-19). The obvious tension in this verse, some would suggest, is best explained by positing verse 9c as a redactional gloss to delimit Qoheleth's rhetoric.[314] But the contents of this verse are not inimical to Qoheleth's thought and perspective. Enjoyment is, for him, the lot (portion) of humanity (2:10) and

[312] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 182.

[313] Attention has been drawn to this particular pericope as a masterful display of literary artistry. See, for example, Graham Ogden, "Qoheleth X1 7-X11 8: Qoheleth's Summons to Enjoyment and Reflection," *VT* 34 (1984): 27-38; idem, *Qoheleth*, 207-12.

[314] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 184.

a gift of God (2:24-26; 3:10-15; 5:17-19 [ET 5:18-20]). Enjoyment is not only desirable and permissible; it is a divine imperative.[315]

Yet, in Qoheleth's thought the notion of הבל is ubiquitous. A structural analysis of the passage shows that Qoheleth states his theme – that enjoyment of life is imperative -three times, (i) 11:7-8a, b, (ii) 11:9a,b,c, and (iii) 11:10a,b. On each of three occasions a reason is advanced, first because life is fleeting (11:8c,d) and second, because it is the will of God. On the third occasion both these reasons are stated in 11:10c and 12:1a.[316] There is no doubt that the exhortation to enjoy life is an important facet of Qoheleth's outlook, but this has to be seen in the context of the הבל theme, found here in 11:8c and verse 10c.

William Anderson states that, "Qoheleth holds a view of God as judge, with an eschatological component."[317] This is not, however, a convincing deduction from the evidence in Ecclesiastes. What is certain is that, for Qoheleth, God will judge the righteous and the wicked (3:17), and despite the longevity of evildoers (8:12) it will not go well for them in the long run. That Qoheleth teaches the traditional Jewish belief relating to the judgment of God is beyond doubt, but equally in evidence in his thought is the fact that the time, place and nature of that divine judgment are all unknowable (8:5b-7).

5.5 General References to God

For the sake of completeness there are five further references to God to record: (i) the sacred oath (שבועת אלהים) is found at 8:2; (ii) long ago God approved that humans should be happy (9:7); (iii) the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in God's hand (9:1); (iv) God keeps those occupied with joy in their heart , i.e., those to whom God gives wealth and the power to enjoy it (5:19 [ET 5:20]; and finally, God seeks to do things he has already done (3:15). Four of these references to the deity emphasise that God is very active: he seeks, he keeps, he approves, and he is in sovereign control.

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[315] Something similar is found in the Talmud: "Everyone must give an account before God of all the things one saw in life and did not enjoy," (y. Qidd. 4:12). The injunction to enjoy life is also to be found in an Egyptian inscription as "The Song of Antef" which includes the exhortation to "follow the heart" while one is still alive. See Fox, "A Study of Antef," 393-423. See also Lichtheim, *The Instruction of Ptahhotep*, Lichtheim, *AEL* I, 66, where the advice to "follow your heart" completed a series of geriatric complaints.

[316] Gordis, *Koheleth*, 326-7.

[317] W. H. U. Anderson, *Qoheleth and its Pessimistic Theology: Hermeneutical Struggles in Wisdom Literature* (Lampeter: Mellen Biblical Press, 1997), 109.

5.6 Summary and Assessment

With the many and varied references to the divine name in the text, the deity's presence is pervasive right across the book. In fact, God is mentioned in every chapter in the book apart from chapter 10 [MT].[318] In our examination of Qoheleth's theological assertions, we found that his understanding of God is, for the most part, situated well within the boundaries of Old Testament monotheism. Qoheleth holds to the orthodox Jewish belief that there is only one God who has created the world and humanity: in a word, everything (3:11; 11:5; 12:1, 7). This God exercises absolute sovereign control over the created order (3:14; 6:10; 7:13; 9:1), and is wholly transcendent and exalted above the earth, and quite distinct from all his creatures (5:1 [MT]; 6:10).

The world that God created was good (3:11) and God made mankind from the dust of the earth and animated him by the life-breath that he gave (3:19; 12:7). While God made man upright (7:29a), man is a sinful and weakly creature (6:10) who by his own volition turned to follow evil, injustice and oppression (2:11; 3:16; 4:1-3). Humans, along with animals, must die in God's allotted time (3:1-22) but man can, on occasion, by his own extreme behaviour, die before his time (7:17). At death the life breath returns to God who gave it (12:7) and the earthly bodies of humans and animals revert to dust, whence they all came. After death, man only survives in the shady world of שאול (9:5-6), and there appears to be no meaningful existence after death (3:21; 9:10b). On the other hand, human life, while it lasts, is a gift from God (3:12-13; 5:19; 8:15), and should be enjoyed to the full (9:10).

God separates and judges human actions (3:17-18; 11:9; 12:14), but the nature, time, place and duration of that judgment remain a mystery to Qoheleth. God is "wholly other," distant and silent (5:1 [MT]), and whatever God does, nothing can be added to it, or taken from it (3:14; 3:21-22; 6:12; 7:14; 8:16-17; 9:1). The only fitting response to the deity is to "fear him" (3:14; 7:16-18; 8:12-13; 12:13).

Qoheleth's God is therefore a mysterious and inscrutable deity who brings about pleasant and unpleasant experiences on earth (7:13-14). God has given mankind a terrible business to be busy with (1:1b; 3:10; 8:16), yet the opportunity to enjoy life is possible and comes from the hand of God (2:24). But even when God is viewed as the "giver" of many gifts, his actions appear arbitrary at times (6:1-2). It is possible, however, for humans to please God (2:26; 7:26), but it is not clear how this can be achieved. Qoheleth envisages his readers attending cultic worship, but God must be

[318] אלהים does not occur in chapter 4 in the English translations but occurs in 4:17 [MT].

approached with trepidation and awe, as he can be made angry if vows are not honoured (4:17-5:6 [MT]).

While Qoheleth affirms that God made everything appropriate/fitting in its time, yet he has also made some things crooked which man cannot straighten (7:13b, cf. 1:15a). While there are injustices and anomalies in the world, nevertheless, the righteous and the wise are in 'the hand of God' (9:1). God approves of human beings eating and drinking (9:7), and he keeps people occupied with joy as they enjoy life, 5:19 (ET 5: 20).

Qoheleth has a solemn but distant view of God. He expresses little of the very lofty concept of man found in Psalms 8 and 139:13-16. Qoheleth's enquiry is focused and limited to the here and now, the earthly realm. He views man as having no advantage over the beasts of the fields in terms of lasting achievement (3:8-22). Indeed, his overall picture of human character is very bleak. All humans face the same fate (2:14-17; 9:1-3) and while humans live on earth they are inclined to do evil (8:11; 9:1-3). Human appetite is insatiable (6:7) and one of the most powerful and destructive of human emotions – envy, is a prominent factor in motivating people *vis-à-vis* their neighbour (4:4). Given mankind's finite limitations, there is little advantage to be gained in this life – everything is הבל. So the best thing to do is to enjoy life when you can. "Even those who live many years should rejoice in them all; yet let them remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity" (11:8).

From the considerable evidence we have marshalled in the present and previous chapter, it is clear that Qoheleth has a secure and certain belief in God's existence whose sovereign will cannot be thwarted by human machinations. God is in complete sovereign control over all the events that occur in the world. Thus, when one reflects on the staggering amount of knowledge that Qoheleth possesses and presents about God, both in its sheer scale and depth of expression, it is nothing short of astonishing given the brevity of the book.

By contrast, what is equally remarkable is the silence of God in this unusual book. At no stage does אלהים enter into the picture as an active protagonist revealing himself, his will, and intentions to Qoheleth in the way that we find applicable to God's relationship with Moses and the prophets, all of whom spoke as, "Thus says the Lord." Nor does the author present Qoheleth as directly addressing, or praying to God. What we have observed in Qoheleth's presentation of divinity is that God is always giving, always acting/doing, and judging. Yet in a strange sense, God keeps silent.

In attempting to understand the theological dimension to Qoheleth's epistemology, it is necessary at this juncture to observe that at no time in Ecclesiastes does Qoheleth present himself as having an interest in epistemological theory *per se*, as Weeks has correctly pointed out.[319] It is important to distinguish between a person who has a quest for knowledge (which I believe Qoheleth had) and one who is absorbed with theories of knowledge and epistemological reflection more generally. This distinction is important to bear in mind as we move to explore Qoheleth's epistemic claims more carefully, now and in the chapters to follow.

It is also important to note that because Qoheleth does not articulate a specific epistemological theory, that does not mean he had no theory of knowledge. Like all other OT authors, Qoheleth had certain unexpressed, underlying assumptions about knowledge. Since Qoheleth makes so many detailed claims about God, humans, and the nature of life on earth, he must have some ideas about the nature and extent of human knowledge. More than any other OT author, Qoheleth stands out as someone akin to a philosopher who did not explicitly look back to tradition or divine revelation as a springboard to launch his ideas. Bearing in mind our introduction to contemporary epistemological discussion in chapter 3 in which we highlighted the concept of knowledge as justified true belief (JTB), it will be of great interest to see if Qoheleth offers any explicit justification for his beliefs about God.

Let us now round off this chapter by picking up this key question: what were Qoheleth's source(s) of his theological knowledge? First of all, it cannot be divine revelation as no divine encounter between God and Qoheleth is recorded in the book, nor is any such theophany remotely indicated. A possible source of his knowledge of God could have come from being taught by others, which implies the use of his sense of hearing. But the verb שמע = "to listen, to hearken," only occurs 8 times in Ecclesiastes and never once is this verb used in the first person with Qoheleth as subject. Of course the absence of such usage would not preclude Qoheleth from relying on his Jewish upbringing in a monotheistic culture that would have grounded him in God's past dealings with Israel. He could have easily relied on the traditions of his forefathers without explicitly mentioning them.

Since some commentators have claimed Qoheleth was essentially an empiricist in his epistemology, can all the knowledge about God that we have exhumed from the

[319] Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 161. So also Fox, *Qoheleth*, when he observes (at 85) that, "Qohelet's epistemology is essentially empirical. … although he does not offer a philosophical theory or pursue a consistent methodology."

text be derived from his own personal experiences? We saw in chapter 1 that there is some basis for regarding Qoheleth as an empiricist, especially in Eccl 2 where he very specifically set out on several quests or investigations into human wisdom, human toil, and human pleasure. His business ventures and his pleasure seeking as recorded in 2: 4-11 undoubtedly imply that he had concrete experiences from which he drew his own very personal conclusions. Whether another person who lived through the same experiences as recorded by Qoheleth would have reached the same conclusions is very debatable. But certainly, Qoheleth did actually experience certain events in his life and learned from them. In that sense he can be called an empiricist for he had drawn knowledge from his experiences.[320]

However, when we move to consider the realm of theological assertions, we enter a very different field of knowing. In several of the above paragraphs we gave a very substantial summary of what Qoheleth claimed to know about God and it amounted to very wide-ranging knowledge. In this context, Crenshaw gives us a most telling summary of Qoheleth's knowledge claims when he refers to ". . . the extensive impact of non-experiential data on his thinking." He continues:

> Where, one asks, did he learn so much about the deity who, on Qoheleth's own admission, remains hidden, thus concealing the essential character of divine activity? What empirical facts conveyed the following insights: that God has appointed a time for judgment, dislikes fools, will punish rash vows, created the world good/appropriate, dwells in heaven, creates the embryo within the mother's womb, chases the past, test people in order to make them fear, gives human beings unpleasant business, keeps them preoccupied with joy, made men and women upright, has already approved one's actions, and rewards those who fear/worship the deity.[321]

Of course, very few scholars would deny the experiential nature of the wisdom enterprise, and Qoheleth's desire to communicate his views to his contemporaries was, without doubt, in a very general sense, fired by his appeal to experiential data. But on the basis of the above considerations, the reality is that Qoheleth's very extensive detailed knowledge about God cannot possibly have been derived from his physical observations and experiences under the sun. In fact, not only is Qoheleth's theology non-experiential, I would go further and state that it is counter-experiential especially when we take into account (i) how Qoheleth declares that God conceals so much from

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[320] According to Benjamin Lyle Berger, "Qohelet and the Exigencies of the Absurd," *BI* 9, 2 (2001): 141-79, "Qohelet is ultimately concerned with the experience of existence. The book unfailingly returns to the basic question of what it means to be human in the universe that Qohelet sees." (At 144). Berger later refers to Qohelet's investigations (at 156) as proceeding from an "experiential epistemology." At face value this view accords with Qoheleth's stated objectives in 1:13 and 7:25, but the many claims to knowledge that Qoheleth makes are far removed from an experiential epistemology.

[321] Crenshaw, "Qoheleth's Understanding," in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. Antoon Schoors. BETL 136. Leuven: University Press and Uitgeverij Peeters, 1998), 212-13.

humanity, (ii) the inability and limitations of human knowledge and understanding, and (iii) how various situations in life are simply impervious to human comprehension.

When an author puts pen to paper, so to speak, he/she may not feel obliged to outline their sources of information, whatever their epistemic claims. All authors write with underlying assumptions about reality that both they and their readers take for granted. Qoheleth undoubtedly was an adherent of Jewish monotheism. It is inconceivable that Qoheleth would not have been familiar with the teaching of the book of Genesis, especially with reference to God as creator and giver of all things.[322] When addressing his understanding of God to his contemporary audience the teaching about God's creative and sovereign control over all things would have been a known area of belief for his audience to relate to. It would therefore not have been necessary for Qoheleth to cite the actual source(s) for this foundational belief in the Jewish faith.

Whatever the source of Qoheleth's teaching about God in all its manifold dimensions, it is difficult to detect any epistemic justification on his part for his adherence to, and advocacy of, Jewish monotheism. Indeed, if one surveys the entire body of writings of the Hebrew Bible, it is very difficult to detect a philosophical and theoretical defence of the existence of God. The Psalmist does make the claim: "Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God" " (Ps 14:1; 53:1), but this is a dogmatic claim that stems from faith.

However, because Qoheleth does not expressly mention the notion of justification as applied to his knowledge claims that does not mean that his "God Talk"[323] is devoid of some form of justification. In chapter 3 we mentioned the regress problem in relation to justified true belief (JTB). One such solution to that problem was foundationalism. I suggested that foundationalism might offer a conceptual framework whereby Qoheleth's epistemology may be understood. We shall endeavour to develop this line of thought later in this study; meantime we shall explore more aspects of the monologue that, on the face of it, have great epistemological import. I am particularly referring to Qoheleth's use of three crucial verbs – ראה = "to see," ידע = "to know," and מצא = "to find," all of which have self-evident experiential significance. In the next chapter we will examine Qoheleth's use of the verb ידע = "to know." Our examination

[322] We drew attention to the possible influence of the early chapters of Genesis on Qoheleth's thought in chapter 4 f/n. 54 where scholarly comments are noted. I agreed with Longman's comment that one cannot be certain of this putative influence on Qoheleth.

[323] The phrase comes from the title of a book by John Macquarrie, *God Talk* (London: SCM Press), 1967.

of this verb in the exposition of Qoheleth's ideas has the potential of further extending our understanding of the nature of his epistemic claims.

PART 3. QOHELETH'S USE OF THE VERBS ידע AND מצא

Chapter 6: The verb ידע = "to know" (Part A)

6.1 Introduction

In this and the next chapter we will examine the verb ידע which has obvious significance for examining Qoheleth's perceptual and cognitive activities. To start with, an overview of the principal verbs of epistemological significance in Ecclesiastes would be helpful at this stage. Tabulated below is a list of these verbs with the number of times each verb occurs.

Table 1

Verb	Occurrences	Verb	Occurrences
ראה	47	בקש	7
ידע	36	סבב	7
מצא	17	תור	3
שמע	8	דרש	1
		נסה	2

The most used verbs of epistemological significance are those listed in the left column.

ראה = "to see"

ידע = "to know"

מצא = "to find"

שמע = "to hear, hearken"

Those listed in the right column could be classed as associate verbs.

בקש = "to seek, find"

סבב = "to turn"

תור = "to search out, explore"

דרש = "to seek, enquire about"

נסה = "to test, try"

This latter list of five verbs is important, not necessarily because of the frequency of their occurrences but because they convey to the reader the great emotional intensity

which Qoheleth brings to his very deeply personal quests.

With reference to the verbs listed in the left column, by far the most significant, from an epistemological point of view, are the first three.[324] In this present chapter we will be concerned with the verb ידע as it seems to present the most obvious starting point for understanding Qoheleth's claims to knowledge.

6.2 The Verb ידע: Qoheleth's general knowledge claims

On a number of occasions Qoheleth utilizes ידע in what one might call a common every-day sense. There are eight such examples to briefly consider. In 4:13, Qoheleth, in a "better/than" saying, states that a foolish king does not know how to take advice, and in 4:17 (MT), where the context is temple worship, fools, declares Qoheleth, do not know that they are doing wrong when they offer up sacrifice. Another "better/than" saying is found in 10:15 where it is stated that fools do not know the way to the city after a wearisome day's toil.

A unique use of ידע in the form of a Qal active participle, masculine plural, יודעים occurs in 9:11 where it is used to refer to men of skill, which literally means, those who know how to do something well. Then we encounter a rare insight into Qoheleth's views on personal relationships in 7:22 where he addresses the reader directly in the second person: ". . . your heart knows that many times you have yourself cursed others." There follows in 8:5, where the Qal imperfect occurs twice, we have a more traditional saying in which Qoheleth asserts that an obedient servant will meet (know) no harm, and that a wise man will know both the time and the way. This conventional wisdom saying, however, is countered in verses 6-9. Two examples of ידע are found in Chapter 6. One is a commendation for a poor man who knows how to conduct himself before the living, 6:8b, and in 6:10 the only example of the passive form of ידע (Niphal) where Qoheleth states that it is known what man is. Whatever the knowledge referred to here, it is, according to Qoheleth, common knowledge, not an insight he garnered from his own experience.

None of these eight occurrences of ידע is of any notable significance in understanding Qoheleth's epistemology. His 'knowing' in these instances is of a very general nature, not necessarily the direct result of his personal experiences.

[324] Reference will be made to the verb שמע in Chapter 9 when we will examine Qoheleth's use of the very important verb ראה.

6.3 The living and the dead

The spectre of death is deeply seated in the psyche of Qoheleth. There are two explicit references to the dead in the monologue, one in 6:3-5 and the other in 9:5.

6:3-5

3 אם־יוליד איש מאה ושנים רבות יחיה
ורב שיהיו ימי־שניו ונפשו לא־תשבע מן־הטובה
וגם־קבורה לא־היתה לו אמרתי טוב ממנו הנפל׃

4 כי־בהבל בא ובחשך ילך
ובחשך שמו יכסה׃

5 גם־שמש לא־ראה ולא ידע נחת לזה מזה׃

3 A man may beget a hundred children, and live many years; but however many are the days of his years, if he does not enjoy life's good things, or has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he.
4 For it comes into vanity and goes into darkness, and in darkness its name is covered;
5 moreover it has not seen the sun or known anything; yet it finds rest rather than he.

Chapter 6:1-2 was considered in chapter 4 under the subheading "God Who Gives." There, Qoheleth's complaint concerned a rich man who had all the potential of a very fulfilled life, but it was the sovereign act of God that prevented this. Now in verse 3 Qoheleth cites another example of a calamity for a man who at face value possesses two crucial ingredients of the good life (fathering many children, and having longevity (cf. Gen 25:8; Job 42:17). Yet begetting a host of children and living to a ripe old age can lead to great adversity. If the person in this hypothetical example is not given a proper burial and cannot enjoy his wealth, his status is worse than the still-born child who at least finds rest.[325] For Qoheleth, the still-born has no experience of life under the sun, and thus goes to the grave.[326] This total lack of conscious awareness of the puzzling nature of life is, in Qoheleth's view, a distinct advantage.

The syntax of verse 3 is uncertain. The major difficulty surrounds the clause about the burial: וגם־קבורה לא־היתה לו. The question is: to whom does this refer? The still-born, or the rich man? For Crenshaw the clause is anticipatory, thus applying it to the stillborn: ". . . then even it does not have a burial, I say the still-born is better than

[325] It is not stated why the rich man failed to enjoy his riches. Krüger, *Qoheleth*, explores (at 124) some scholarly responses, e.g., death, an illness, loss of property, and a readiness to accept his wealth as a gift from God to enjoy.

[326] Cf. Ps 58:8 [ET 58:9] where we have the words, ". . .like the untimely birth that never sees the sun." In this imprecatory Psalm, the Psalmist believes that a more ignoble calamity could not be imagined for his enemies than the fate of a stillborn child.

he."[327] Zimmerli takes a similar line believing that the above clause originally belonged to verse 5, thus he applies the clause to the stillborn.[328] Other emendations have been made,[329] but the consonantal reading of MT is supported by the ancient versions.[330]

The NRSV, as it stands, is probably right. On this reading Qoheleth's observation amounts to saying that if one has it all - wealth, possessions, an abundance of children, very long life – that is not necessarily a faultless formula that guarantees an enjoyable life. If this good (הטובה) does not satisfy (לא־תשבע), and if one is unable to have a proper burial, then the status of a still-born baby is better off.[331] This message is driven hard into the reader's consciousness by the use of the ever-incisive rhetorical question in verse 6:

6 ואלו חיה אלף שנים פעמים וטובה לא ראה
הלא אל־מקום אחד הכל הולך׃

> Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good – do not all go to one place?

Once again, Qoheleth emphasizes the common fate of all human kind: here both the foetus and the man in question come to the same end.[332] This is the place of darkness (vv 4-5), which is the destiny of all living creatures. The strangeness of the subject matter of these verses contrasts sharply with the joy that God gives to some humans as positively stated in the previous three verses 5:17-19 [ET 18-20].

Qoheleth claims to have had very extensive experience (7:15), coupled with unsurpassed wisdom and knowledge (1:16). But in the scenario outlined in these verses, it is difficult to see how much of what he claims to know comes from empirical observation. Verse 6 states an obvious universal truth: all humans die. Verse 3 ends with a statement, the basis of which is an out-and-out value judgment. It is certainly true that Qoheleth grants to himself exceptional knowledge, but on the other hand, he is still

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[327] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 120.

[328] Zimmerli, *Das Buch des Predigers Salomo*, 198.

[329] For example Gordis, *Koheleth*, vocalizes לֹא for לָא and renders it (at 259), "even if he have an elaborate funeral (on which men lay such stress)." This would read, "… even if he have an elaborate funeral." Scott, *Proverbs & Ecclesiastes*, transposes וגם־קבורה לא־היתה לו to the end of verse 4 and applies it to the still-born (at 231-32). He claims this clause has been displaced in MT, but there is no textual evidence for this emendation.

[330] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 211.

[331] Not having an honourable burial was thought to be a terrible disgrace in the ancient world. Cf. the story of Jezebel in 2 Kgs 9:35 and that of Jehoiachim in Jer 22:19.

[332] The phrase אל־מקום אחד = "to one place" is a reference to Sheol (cf. 3:20: 9:10).

on a par with his fellow humans insofar as human knowledge limitations are concerned. Yet no person could know what he claims to know about the status and experience of the stillborn. These verses are shot through with value judgment, and what he claims to be true could not have been deduced from his own experience.

9:3-5

3 זה רע בכל אשה־נעשה תחת השמש כי־מקרה אחד לכל וגם
לב בני־האדם מלא־רע והוללות בלבבם בחייהם ואחריו אל־המתים׃

4 כי־מי אשר יבחר אל כל־החיים יש בטחון
כי־לבלב חי הוא טוב מן־האריה המת׃

5 כי החיים יודעים שימתו והמתים אינם יודעים מאומה
ואין־עוד להם שכר כי נשכח זכרם׃

3 There is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone. Moreover, the hearts of all are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead.
4 But whoever is joined with all the living has confidence[333], for a living dog is better than a dead lion.
5 The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost.

These verses form part of the unit 9:1-10.[334] At verse 1 the opening reflection confirms that the righteous, the wise, and their deeds are in the hand of God. The phrase "the hand of God" could refer to the actions of the righteous and the wise, or to their deeds.[335] In any case, the scope for human activity is limited, as is clear from verse 1b: "Everything that confronts them is הבל." The reason for this depressing conclusion is that in v 2a the levelling effect of death (מקרה אחד = "one fate"), blows away all human distinctions (v 2b).

The reference to all that happens under the sun (v 3a) is but another reminder of the comprehensive range of Qoheleth's undertakings. Some suggest that the words בכל זה רע = "There is an evil in all, . . ." as a superlative expression, i.e., that this is the most evil situation.[336] This seems unlikely, however. In v 3a Qoheleth again forcefully endorses the reality of מקרה אחד, and immediately in v 3b Qoheleth picks up on the language of 8:11 regarding the proclivity of humankind to do evil. The phrase at the end

[333] I deviate from the NRSV here as I believe 'confidence, certitude' is a better translation.

[334] Scholars differ as to the number of sub-units in this chapter. I agree with Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 139, that verses 1-10 are best taken as a separate section (contra, Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 88, who takes 1-12 as a section. So also Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 155-74; ——,"Qoheleth 1X 1-16," *VT* XXX11, 2 (1982): 158-69.

[335] So Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 168.

[336] See Fox, *A Rereading*, 292, for discussion.

of v 3, ואחריו אל־המתים = "and after that they go to the dead." presses home the ultimate human destiny.

The meaning of the phrase ואחריו אל־המתים is not clear. According to Seow these words have been incorrectly transposed from the following verse. He also translates אחרי as "finality."[337] But this suggestion is not convincing. Weeks views the meaning of אחרי in a non-temporal sense, suggesting that the term is sometimes used to describe the back of something or someone, citing Ezek 8:16 in support. He writes,

> This, I think, makes good sense in the context of the next verse [v 4]: humans keep their backs towards the dead because it is in their engagement with life or with the living that they find assurance in their own value.[338]

This has some plausibility, and it has the added contextual value of concurring with the positive nature of the joy passage in vv 7-9.

Verse 4 strikes a positive and memorable invocation to enjoy life. Verse 4b appears to be an aphorism, but the use of the living dog as a metaphor for the living is quite ironic as the dog was the most reviled of animals in the ANE.[339] On this occasion, Qoheleth highly values human consciousness for it is to be preferred to non-existence. Most commentators acknowledge irony and sarcasm here.[340]At first sight, there is an advantage in being alive (9:4).[341] In v 5 Qoheleth comments on the empirical status of the living compared with the dead. But the advantage of being alive is that they know that they are going to die, while the dead are portrayed as not knowing anything (cf. 9:3,10). The issue of the failure of human memory is highlighted once again (cf. 1:11; 2:16).

With these reflections on death, Qoheleth plummets new depths of despair and foreboding. As Brown observes, "Such is Qoheleth's indictment against a world that

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[337] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 300.

[338] Weeks, Unpublished script on *Ecclesiastes*.

[339] Dogs were associated with death and the underworld (cf. 1 Kgs 21:23-4; 22:38; 2 Kgs 9:30-7). There is some debate as to whether the ל in לכלב is emphatic at 4b. Weeks, Unpublished script on *Ecclesiastes*, renders it '. . . since it seems to a live dog that he is better than a dead lion.'

[340] Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, (at 92) regards the irony here as inescapable.

[341] The term בטחון has attracted some scholarly attention. Does it mean trust, confidence, or hope? Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, states (at 300) that בטחון does not mean something to wish for. He holds that it refers to one's confidence or certitude that something will happen. He adopts 'certitude'. Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, prefers the term 'trust" (at 109), suggesting that 'trust' perhaps is meant as a new word for 'fear of God' (at 112). Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, states that this has little to commend it (at161).

offers nothing more than a tomb to die in."[342] I tend to favour Crenshaw's interpretation.

> No comfort derives from knowing that the dead have already received their rewards and are completely forgotten, for the living will experience the same oblivion. Awareness of such grim prospects can hardly form a basis for hope.[343]

Qoheleth goes well beyond Hebraic traditions in this area in that he believes that physical death is the end of every conceivable means of continuity. It is true that he earlier accepted the traditional valuation of the reputation left by a person after death (cf. 7:1). Yet he concedes that the memory of this quickly fades. "The Israelite's basic longing that he/she might live on as part of the family memory, the collective mind, lay as a shattered dream."[344]

Earlier the view was advanced that the provenance of Ecclesiastes is sometime in the third century BCE. In the Old Testament the concept of death does not envision a clear understanding of life after death that we can discern in later Christian dogmatics. What evidence there is on the subject of death in ancient Israel comes mainly from the Wisdom literature, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes and some Psalms. Shannon Burkes remarks that the traditions of Israel

> . . . could handle the potential disruption death might offer through its own version of immortality, which consisted of several related points: survival through one's offspring, a kind of corporate memory of the just, and the continuation of the people as a nation. Family and name are double insurance against annihilation.[345]

In the historical context, Qoheleth was a man of his time, place and circumstance. He was not, however, just voicing the beliefs of his antecedents or contemporaries. In her comprehensive study, Burkes goes on to state that Qoheleth's understanding of death was in stark contrast to everything else in the Hebrew Bible, but he did not advance any new understanding of life after death.[346] As Whitley observes,

> Death has accordingly a finality for Koheleth which we do not find elsewhere in the Old Testament. Such passages as Gen 37:35; 1 Sam 28:3-19; and Job 3:17-19 envisage some mode of existence for those departed to Sheol, but for Koheleth death seems to indicate complete

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[342] Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 91.

[343] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 161.

[344] Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 162.

[345] Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth*, 32. For a substantial article on this subject see John Day, "The Development of Belief in Life after Death," in *After the Exile: Essays in Honour of Rex Mason* (eds. J. Barton and D. J. Reimer; Macon: Mercer University Press, 1996), 231-57. Applying a Hegelian/Marxist type paradigm, Day writes (at 256), "If Proverbs is the thesis, Job and Ecclesiastes the antithesis, then in addition to the Wisdom Psalms 49 and 73, the book of Wisdom represents the synthesis." Of Ecclesiastes he observes (at 252), "Although it accepts the traditional view of Sheol which is common to much of the Old Testament (e.g. 9:5), the negative consequences which it draws from it are unparalleled in Scripture."

[346] Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth*, 74-80.

extinction in which the fate of man is indistinguishable from that of an animal."[347]

In stating his assertions about the living and the dead, it would have been common knowledge to Qoheleth's contemporaries that they would die at some future time. This was not knowledge established uniquely by Qoheleth's own observation and experience. As for his claims as to the condition of the dead and the nature of their mode of existence, Qoheleth's certainty in this area could never have been established from an empirical base, not by him or any other human.

6.4 Qoheleth's dogmatic claims to knowledge.

Qoheleth makes many statements that could be designated as dogmatic. In this section I am principally concerned with the unambiguous statements that he makes by using the verb ידע = "to know." Of the thirty-six occurrences of ידע, Qoheleth employs this verb on five occasions in a forthright manner, 1:17; 2:14; 3:12; 3:14; 8:12, and once, in 11:9, he presses the imperative form into service. We shall now turn to an examination of these six examples. Interestingly, four of these "I know" statements occur in the first three chapters of the book where there is a very prominent use of the "I" narrative.

As we noted in chapter 1, after a brief personal introduction of himself in 1:12, Qoheleth offers a very resolute introduction as to the nature of his intellectual quest. From the concentrated focus on the natural world (1:4-11) the reader is now transported into the very private thoughts and reflections of the learned sage.[348]

1:17

ואתנה לבי לדעת חכמה ודעת הוללות ושכלות ידעתי
שגם־זה הוא רעיון רוח׃

> And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I know that this also is but a chasing after wind.[349]

There is a threefold occurrence of the verb ידע in verse 17, twice as infinitive, and once as first person singular. This fact alone indicates that Qoheleth is decidedly intent on a

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[347] Whitley, *Koheleth*, 167. See also J. Crenshaw, "The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth." in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (eds. John G. Gammie et al.; New York: Scholars Press, 1978), 205-16; A. Schoors, "Koheleth: A Perspective of Life after Death?" 295-303. He states (at 303) that Qoheleth's picture of death is rather more negative than it is in other texts of the Old Testament: J. Crenshaw, "Beginnings, Endings, and Life's Necessities," goes further when he states (at 99) that Qoheleth's preoccupation with death was nearly obsessive.

[348] Since we have dealt with 1:16-18 in chapter 1 regarding the nature of Qoheleth's quests, our main concern in 1:17 is with the specific epistemic claim that Qoheleth is making.

[349] The NRSV has "perceived" for ידעתי.

very deeply personal quest. His double use of the infinitive construct in such close proximity in one verse is most emphatic as these infinitives are linked to ואתנה לבי = "I applied my mind . . ." (literally, "I gave my heart. . ."). The intensity of his personal enterprise is underscored by the use of two other related infinitives in 1:13. There, the serious intent of his mind is demonstrated by his use of לדרוש = "to seek," and ולתור = "to search out, explore," the instrument by which he will proceed in his quest being בחכמה = "by wisdom."[350]

Just as he announces his experiment in 1:13, and his acclaimed supremacy in the spheres of wisdom and knowledge (1:16), Qoheleth delivers a statement of pessimistic certitude in 1:17b. This is the first time in the monologue that Qoheleth uses ידע by making what could be described as a dogmatic epistemological assertion. This is not entirely a surprise because in the first unit (verses 13-15) Qoheleth concludes in verse 14b: והנה הכל הבל ורעות רוח. This unit (vv 12-15) then closes with an aphorism that emphasizes human inability to affect the world. While a stick *can* be straightened by the skill of a carpenter, Qoheleth still reports that nothing can be measured.[351]

The second unit, verses 16-18, follows a similar pattern to verses 13-15, but in the second unit, Qoheleth's enquiry now moves to wisdom itself, and into its opposites, הוללות ושכלות = "madness and folly." As in verses 13-15, he concludes with an unequivocal pessimism: wisdom and knowledge bring nothing but vexation and pain (verse 18). This manifestly reveals "Qoheleth's distance from more optimistic ideas of human effectiveness."[352] Indeed, when a writer sets out on a new inquiry and delivers his pessimistic conclusions almost immediately, one can expect to hear more of his pessimistic tones as his discourse proceeds.

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[350] According to Delitzsch, *Biblischer Commentar*, at 234, the synonyms דרש and תור do not represent a lower or higher degree of search, but two kinds of searching: one penetrating in depth, the other going out in extent. Gordis, *Koheleth*, at 209, states that לדרוש means "to penetrate to the root of the matter," while ולתור means "to investigate it from all sides." See Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 145, for discussion, and also Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 79. What is certain is that the scope of the investigation is comprehensive, embracing all the deeds done under the sun.

[351] The meaning of this aphorism is not certain. Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes & Song of Solomon* (AOTC 16; Nottingham: Apollos/InterVarsity Press, 2010), comment (at 82) "Qoheleth composes (or quotes) a proverb that echoes chiastically the previous metaphors of breath and wind. The wind's path is crooked and twists from one direction to the other: it just cannot be straight." Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, (13) holds that the reference in verse 15a "should be interpreted broadly: the physically and spiritually crooked." An educational context has been suggested by Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, (74) with reference to the Egyptian, *The Instruction of Ani*, indicating that careful instruction can straighten out recalcitrant students. I think Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, (147) is nearer the mark when he states, "Like Job, Qohelet accepts that there are distortions in the world for which God must ultimately be responsible."

[352] Weeks, "Ecclesiastes," *OBC,* (at 423).

When Qoheleth makes his epistemological claim in 1:17b, שגם־זה הוא רעיון רוח׃ ידעתי, the question immediately arises: what is the referent for the demonstrative in the phrase, שגם־זה? Putting 1:17 in the larger literary context of 1:12-18, we could view verses 16-18 as presenting a narration and evaluation of the enquiry described in verses 12-15. What therefore can we conclude about the semantic range of ידע in 1:17b? The two infinitive constructs are but a common use of ידע whereby an individual sets out on a personal quest for meaning in the world. In brief, there is no epistemological significance to be attached to his use of the two infinitives, "to know" in 1:17 as he has observed nothing in the physical sense. On these two occasions at least, Qoheleth is not making any specific knowledge claims. His use of the infinitives is but to inform his readers of his full intention "to know," that is, he is setting out his credentials in the pursuance of a deeply personal intellectual quest.

However, in 1:17b, Qoheleth makes a categorical claim as to what he knows. The "knowledge" which he dogmatically states he possesses is not theoretical knowledge about life, nor is it a Platonic kind of knowledge, independent of human experience. Qoheleth's knowledge in this instance seems to be based on his experience of wisdom in his ongoing enquiry, yet we do not find any references to experiential data in this verse that may have prompted this negative conclusion. Perhaps "Wisdom" is not the issue here, *per se*, but rather the experience of it. But any attempt to understand how the world is governed is, for Qoheleth, utterly futile. "Knowing" in 1:17b is essentially about his cognitive perception; ידע could, in this context, have the meaning "I came to understand . . ." Qoheleth's claim to knowledge is not "public knowledge" but rather private to him. In this sense, Qoheleth's claim in 1:17b can best be described as personal opinion.

2:14

החכם עיניו בראשו והכסיל בחשך הולך
וידעתי גם־אני שמקרה אחד יקרה את־כלם׃

> The wise have eyes in their head, but fools walk in darkness. Yet I know that the same fate befalls all of them.[353]

After 1:17b, the next occurrence of the first person singular of ידע comes in 2:14. Verses 13-14 bring to light a striking feature of Qoheleth's writing style, namely, the frequent use of the first person singular pronoun placed after the verb. According to Bo

[353] The NRSV has "perceived" rather than "know" for ידעתי as in 1:7. Here, in 2:14 more emphasis is placed on Qoheleth's knowing by the pleonastic use of אני. **N.B**. Ch. 2:13-14 will be considered in chapter 10 in relation to what Qoheleth claims to have seen (וראיתי).

Isaksson, this pleonastic use of the personal pronoun, ". . .gives the sentence an enhanced weight, which may emphasize an emotional expression, an important conclusion, or the introduction of a new line of thought."[354]

These two verses need to be seen in their context. In the section, 2:1-26, the sub-unit, verses 12-17 are pivotal. Qoheleth turns to wisdom, madness and folly (verse 12a). The words חכמה (wisdom), חכם (wise), and חכמתי (I have been wise), together occur a total of six times in this sub-unit (verses 12-17); so also, the words סכלות (folly) and כסיל (fool) are found six times in total. This terminology is entirely in keeping with traditional Wisdom literature, most notably the wise/fool stereotype that constantly crops up in the Book of Proverbs.

Qoheleth introduces two statements of conventional wisdom in 2:13-14a, both presented in typical proverbial style. The contrast between "wisdom" and "folly" is intensified by his use of light and darkness imagery (verse 13a). In Wisdom literature darkness is often a metaphor for the lack of knowledge, or plain stupidity (cf. Job 12: 24-25; 37:19; 38:2). The fool is like a blind man who stumbles as he walks (cf. Prov 3:23; 4:19). But the wise man has eyes in his head, and since he is in the light, he can avoid disaster. Qoheleth is employing the extreme terms of light and darkness here to intensify the orthodox view that wisdom has distinct advantages over folly.

In 2:14b, however, Qoheleth introduces for the first time the idea that the wise man is, after all, no more able to control his ultimate fate than the much berated fool. After his superlative affirmation of the advantage of wisdom over folly, Qoheleth speaks with a most emphatic tone: וידעתי גם־אני = "And yet I know (see/understand/ perceived that . . .)." His use of וידעתי followed by the pleonastic אני amounts to a dramatic denial and reversal of wisdom's alleged superior status over against folly. The sage admits that the wise have advantages over the fools. Perhaps the thought here is that being able to see does not enable the wise to change direction - merely to perceive where they are going. Yet, in the unremitting reality of מקרה אחד = (one fate), death comes to all, whether one is wise or foolish. Succinctly put: the wise die just like fools! As the thought of Qoheleth unfolds in the book, it emerges that the most persistent problem that causes him great anguish of spirit is the negative effects that death has on

[354] Isaksson, *Studies in the Language*, 166-67. But see f/n. 617 in chapter 10 for a qualified observation. T. Muroaka, *Emphatic Words and Structure in Biblical Hebrew* (Leiden: Brill; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1985), adds (at 49) that most of the verbs used with the pronoun concern the psychological activities - meditating, reflecting, perceiving.

one's life achievement.

The direct object of ידע, i.e., מקרה, recurs in 3:19 and 9:2-3, and is only used in Ecclesiastes with reference to death.[355] In Qoheleth's thought it does not denote an impersonal or malignant force, but rather a neutral term meaning simply what happens. Both the wise man and the fool have the same מקרה. To this ubiquitous phenomenon Qoheleth responds by pondering why he should be so wise. The phrase in 2:15a גם־אני = (even me), refers to Qoheleth as the consummate sage, even Solomon. The occurrence of גם (even) in the protasis and ולמה (then) in the apodosis, goes to the heart of the problem for Qoheleth.

When Qoheleth thus adamantly claims in this verse that the wise and the foolish die, he does not bring an unusual insight to what is a universal truth. No other writer in the Hebrew Bible appears to have this very negative and pessimistic outlook on the vicissitudes of human life, especially with regard to the most profound reality that affects every human: the fact that all die. And this, I think, is a prospect that rocks the sage to his existential foundations. So much so that it colours his judgment as he seeks to find meaning to his existence. Only rarely do we detect a chink of light breaking through, notably, in the seven "joy passages."

Finally, this section raises a central question that we will address in passing. Is Qoheleth setting out an anti-wisdom agenda, as James Loader *et al* suggests?[356] This view is hard to sustain bearing in mind the evidence in the book. Seow gives a measured assessment on this issue by saying that the issue for Qoheleth is not just having wisdom, which is a "plus," but desiring a "surplus" (יותר) of it.[357] And according to Michael Fox, in 2:15-16, as in 1:18 and 7:16, "Qoheleth warns against much wisdom, for it opens the eyes to painful realities. Some wisdom, like labour, is necessary and valuable, but too much of either inflicts discomfort and dismay."[358] These comments are supported by Qoheleth's attitude to wisdom in 2:13; 7:11-12, 19; 8:1, 5; 9:1, 13-16, 18a; 10:10. Conversely, wisdom has negative aspects according to Qoheleth, as can be found in

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[355] So Peter Machinist, "Fate, miqreh, and Reason," Some Reflections on Qohelet and Biblical Thought," in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield* (ed. Z. Zevit et al.; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 159-75. (At 166).

[356] Loader, *Polar Structures*, 1-3; Martin Shields, *The End of Wisdom*; ——, Ecclesiastes and the End Of Wisdom," *TB* 50 (1999), 17-39. A negative view of wisdom is also presented by Aubrey D. Spears, "The Theological Hermeneutics of Homiletical Application and Ecclesiastes 7:23-29" (PhD diss., University of Liverpool, 2006), See especially in chapter 5.

[357] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 154.

[358] Fox, *A Rereading*, 184.

1:16-18a; 2:15, 18-20; 6:8; 8:16-18; 9:18b and 10:1b.

In summary, Qoheleth's use of וידעתי (2:14b) is a clear dogmatic assertion, but that does not imply that he alone has arrived at this conclusion. His assertion is neither an expression of theoretical knowledge derived solely from reason, nor did it come from his own peculiar experience of life under the sun. Qoheleth's dogmatic epistemological assertion in this instance is based on universal, and verifiable experience. All humans observe and experience the reality of death around them, as he himself indicates in 9:5. Qoheleth's "knowing" on this occasion is an example of public common knowledge, but he infuses it with his own pessimistic, negative tone. This tone, also evident in 1:17, is set in the context of his ever recurring cosmic theme, הכל הבל ורעות רוח.

Qoheleth's use of the Qal perfect, first person singular of ידע is used on only two further occasions in the book, at 3:12 and 3:14. We will now examine 3:12-14 as these verses comprise a highly significant passage relating to Qoheleth's knowledge claims.

3:12-14

12 ידעתי כי אין טוב בם כי אם־לשמוח ולעשות טוב בחייו׃
13 וגם כל־האדם שיאכל ושתה וראה טוב בכל־עמלו מתת אלהים היא׃

14 ידעתי כי כל־אשר יעשה האלהים הוא יהיה לעולם
עליו אין להוסיף וממנו אין לגרע והאלהים עשה שיראו מלפניו׃

12 I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live;
13 moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.
14 I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him.

Chapter 3 brings about a marked change in both style and tone compared with the previous chapters. The section, 3:1-15 is perhaps the most famous and oft-quoted passage in Ecclesiastes, especially the poem on time, verses 1-8. The sage begins with a statement that everything and every activity has its עת. In popular understanding the poem is taken to mean that every situation is appropriate or fitting (יפה) in its time. After fourteen antinomies are enumerated (vv 2-8), Qoheleth refers to the יתרון question in verse 9, which is couched in very similar words found in 1:3. This rhetorical question predictably anticipates a negative response from the reader. The next verse (3:10) also echoes the contents of 1:13b –referring to the business that God has given to humans to be busy with. According to 3:11, God is Creator of all things, he has placed a sense of the eternal in human hearts, and obscures from humans what he has done.

The bewilderment of the mystery of God's workings in the world (verses 10-11)

is immediately offset by a forceful declaration of certain knowledge. In contrast to 2:14, Qoheleth uses ידעתי without the pleonastic אני in verses 12 and 14.[359] This statement of Qoheleth's knowledge takes the form of a negative "better than" saying;[360] in the light of the fact that man cannot find out what God is doing in the world, Qoheleth opts to exhort his readers to enjoy life as a gift from God, that is, when they are able to do so. The object of ידעתי in 3:12 is therefore an exhortation for human beings to seize the opportunity to enjoy some of life's pleasures – eating, drinking, and the good that stems from their labour – when they can.

Qoheleth's advocacy to enjoy life is not, however, to be taken as a recommendation to plunge into a hedonistic lifestyle in the face of life's frustration and cruelties. He was not in favour of a philosophy based on the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake. This is evident from the contents of 2:11 and 7:2-6. Qoheleth advocates pleasure and enjoyment in the context of a theological framework: God is the giver of all gifts, including enjoyment. The expression ולעשות טוב = "and to do good" normally means doing good in the moral sense (cf. 7:20). But Whybray is certain it has the non-moral meaning to "make, achieve, bring about," equivalent to לראות טוב = "to see good."[361] I tend to agree with this assessment, *contra* Lee who holds that, "Qohelet intimates that the enjoyment of life is indeed a matter of ethical duty."[362]

Thus, the first certitude in 3:12, ידעתי, is concerned with the ultimate source of the ability to derive pleasure in life's journey. With the second assertive claim to knowledge in 3:14, Qoheleth's interest shifts from humanity in verse 12, to divinity in verse 14, i.e., from anthropological to theological concerns. Verse 12 is related to verse

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[359] The verb ידעתי is also implied at the beginning of verse 13: "Moreover [ידעתי = "I know" that] it is God's gift . . ."

[360] For an analysis of this form see G. S. Ogden, "Qoheleth's use of the "Nothing is Better" – Form," 339-50. The אין טוב is also found in 2:24; 3:22, and 8:15. Ogden concludes that one of the features of this form is that "Each example validates the call to enjoyment with the claim that this is man's God-given lot." (At 350).

[361] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 74. The non-moral view is adopted by Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 164; Ginsburg, *Coheleth*, 311; Delitzsch, *Biblischer Commentar*, 265; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 122; T. P. Dale, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (London, Oxford & Cambridge: Rivingtons, 1873), 23; J. Lloyd, *An Analysis of Book of Ecclesiastes* (London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1874), 46; Whitley, *Koheleth*, 34; Peter Enns, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary* (THOTC, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 55.

[362] Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 41. This moral view has the support of the versions, e.g., LXX, Syr, Targ, and Vulg. Others who accept this view include Fredericks & Estes, *Ecclesiastes*, 109; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 81; Treier, *Proverbs & Ecclesiastes* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011, 156; C. H. H. Wright, *The Book of Qoheleth: The Donnellan Lectures for 1880-01* (London: Hodder & Stoughton), 344; Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes*, 133.

11 by the verb עשה = "to make" which refers to God's activity. The contrast between divinity and humanity is sharply evident here, a dichotomy which we have noted earlier to be a defining featuring of Qoheleth's world outlook. Man's finitude and ignorance (verse 11b) can be seen in their true perspective in relation to the limitations of עת = "time."

What a sovereign God does is עולם (eternal) in its dimensions (verse 14). Qoheleth adds emphasis to this by using the ancient formula, עליו אין להוסיף וממנו אין לגרע, antecedents of which are found in Deut 4:2; 13:1[MT] with regards to God's commandments. What Qoheleth is asserting here would have been traditional orthodox belief to his Jewish readers. Although God has made everything appropriate in its time (verse 11a), yet everything that God does is eternal (verse 14a), i.e., not bound by time. Qoheleth then states that whatever God has done has one clear purpose for humankind: שיראו מלפניו (verse 14b).

These two occurrences of ידעתי in close proximity in verses 12 and 14 are an integral component of this section, 3:1-15. The opening, "I know" in verse 12 lends emphasis to, and is balanced by, the second, 'I know' in verse 14, which begins a new thought. The pulse and feeling of these verses are typical of the resigned conclusions already found in 2:24. Also characteristic of Qoheleth's thought is the way he refers to the joy of life in a context of uncertainty and pessimism. Notwithstanding his frequent pessimistic stance, it does not prevent him from making these categorical assertions.

In assessing the epistemological significance of these claims, it is clear that the object of ידע in verse 12 is but a personal statement made by Qoheleth as to how he thinks humans should respond as limited beings in the context of his view of the world. In the light of the fact that Qoheleth cannot find out what God is doing in the world he opts to exhort his readers to enjoy life when they can, and to accept the opportunities to do so as a gift from God.

The source of this knowledge claim is not the result of a sustained argument, based on factual information about life from which he draws logically arrived at conclusions. In terms of epistemology, Qoheleth's invocation to joyous living is viewed as God's gift does not of itself constitute 'knowledge' in any real sense. Quite the contrary, it is (a) the result of a combination of a belief in an unpredictable God, who gives, often arbitrarily, to humans, (b) a view of the world and humanity often tainted by the author's negative and pessimistic cast of mind, and (c) a common-sense view that the best lifestyle choice is to make the most of life's opportunities. Briefly stated, Qoheleth's knowledge in 3:12-13 is well within the realm of private, religious opinion.

At 3:14, we have an example of a penetrating declaration about the nature of God's action in the world. This is a dogmatic epistemological claim, and at the same time, a bold theological one. Qoheleth asserts that there is no possibility that mankind can alter the ways of God: the immutability of divine activity has no necessary dependence on the machinations of men and women. And the practical lesson that humans should learn from this fact is that "they should be in awe of him."

The critical question that arises from the claim made in 3:14 is: what is the source of Qoheleth's knowledge? In other words, how does Qoheleth "know" what he asserts about God is true? The fact is that the assertion or proposition which Qoheleth advances in 3:14 is neither an analytical statement, i.e., a self-evident truth, nor is it a contingent statement, i.e., an empirical proposition which requires for its validation an appeal to sensual experience. Rather, Qoheleth's dogmatic assertion in this instance is essentially a religious, confessional statement about the nature of reality.

It is certainly true that Qoheleth does not explicitly cite any of the great traditions of Israel. And it is also true that he sometimes openly expresses pessimistic, skeptical, and radical opinions that are far removed from Jewish piety. But on this occasion he expresses a point of view very much in keeping with the teaching of Deuteronomy and Proverbs. We conclude, therefore, that regarding the knowledge claims that Qoheleth makes in this important unit - one concerning humanity, the other, the deity - he did not, due to the very nature of the subject matter, arrive at these conclusions by physical observation.

8:12

אשר חטא עשה רע מאת ומאריך לו
כי גם־יודע אני אשר יהיה־טוב ליראי האלהים
אשר יראו מלפניו׃

> Though sinners do evil a hundred times and prolong their lives, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they stand in fear before him, . . .

Qoheleth's use of the first person singular ידעתי is found for the last time in 3:14. The only other occurrence of Qoheleth making a personal claim to knowledge is in this present verse. On this occasion he employs the active participle of ידע, coupled with the personal pronoun אני, a combination that is a unique phenomenon in the book. It comes in the section 8:10-17 that introduces the problem of delayed punishment for evil deeds, which is turn encourages further villainy (vv 10-11).

This passage raises the issue of divine retribution. The conventional view in Wisdom literature emphatically believed in retribution: a good person will have long life and prosperity, and a bad person will be punished (in due time) and will not live

long. In the Old Testament, injustice does give rise to complaints similar to Qoheleth.[363] Indeed, some Wisdom texts also struggle with the problem of divine justice (cf. Ps 73 and the Book of Job). In verse 10a it would seem that Qoheleth agrees that the wicked are not punished. Wickedness thrives because there is no apparent punishment for it (v 11). Immediately following this reflection, Qoheleth confirms the core teaching of the Wisdom tradition (v 12).

It would be atypical for the radically minded sage if he left this orthodox teaching without further comment. This section does reveal the essentially dialectical nature of his writing and thought, for, with deft agility of mind he immediately adds that there is something amiss. Something is הבל here, and that is because the just are treated in life as if they were wicked, and the wicked as if they were just (v 14). The tension between vv 12-13 and 14 is tangible. Then virtually in the same breath, there follows another oscillation in his thought. The cosmic הבל theme (v 14c) is immediately followed by a return to the joy theme in v 15. And that positive exhortation is also immediately followed by a sombre assessment of man's serious limitations in respect of God's doings and actions. This is vintage Qoheleth: the juxtaposition of diverse viewpoints along with the triple repetition of the הבל theme (vv 10c, 14a and 14c) is a classic demonstration of his tortuous line of thought.[364]

How then is the declaration יודע אני = "I know/acknowledge" to be understood in this context? As we have already observed in 1:17; 2:14; 3:12, 14, Qoheleth uses the Qal perfect form ידעתי. Is the change in verbal form in 8:12 significant? According to Bo Isaksson when Qoheleth speaks of himself knowing, he uses a suffix conjugation form everywhere, except in 8:12. Of this form in 8:12, he writes, "The verb form speaks of the kind of knowledge that represented the *comme il faut* teaching of the sages. This traditional wisdom is not acquired by Qoheleth, simply taken over, as most people would have done."[365] On this reading, Qoheleth acknowledges the traditional belief about the fate of sinners and good people, but then circumvents it in verse 14. Hence, all

[363] On this general topic see J. Crenshaw, "Popular Questioning of the Justice of God in Ancient Israel," *ZAW* 82 (1970): 380-95.

[364] Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, refers to the fact (at 351) that the optimistic outlook evident in verses 12-13 is sandwiched between verses 11-14, which negate the orthodox value of the former. He observes, "By now the text has trained the model reader to understand both statements as examples of the narrator's radical subjectivity. In allowing these two observations to stand next to each other, the implied author alludes to the difficulty of wisdom's task, that is, the use of human faculties of observation to come to certain knowledge."

[365] Isaksson, *Studies in the Language*, 67.

is הבל.[366]

Thus, we conclude that on this occasion also, Qoheleth's acclaimed knowledge was not arrived at by observation and experience, but is the personal endorsement of a confessional statement of Jewish orthodox doctrine. Qoheleth is really saying that he "believes" that it will be well for those who stand in awe of God.

11:9

שמח בחור בילדותיך ויטיבך לבך בימי בחורותך
והלך בדרכי לבך ובמראי עיניך
ודע כי על־כל־אלה יביאך האלהים במשפט׃

> Rejoice, young man, while you are young,
> and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth.
> Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes,
> but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.

As we have already considered this verse in chapter 5 under the sub-heading, "God as Judge," we need only concentrate on the last statement of this verse in which we find a rare use of the imperative form of ידע. Essentially, Qoheleth is addressing this young man as to what God will do with reference to his present and continuing ethical conduct. So, in one sense this imperative form of ידע is not referring to what Qoheleth has observed and experienced. Since its meaning here is really futuristic, one may conclude that it does not carry very much epistemological import. Nonetheless, the learned sage comes across to the reader with a large dose of categorical assurance that he does 'know' something about God's moral character and activity. The imperative form drives the message home to the reader: God will judge you. Such a clear directive is based on what Qoheleth claims to know.

Thus one might ask: how does Qoheleth know that God will judge humans, since the judgment of God is never articulated in detail in the monologue? God's judgment, as we have remarked earlier, is something of a mystery to him. Since theological insight of this nature could only be instantiated by some mode of divine revelation – something Qoheleth never claims to have encountered - this dogmatic affirmation of the certainty of God's judgment of human conduct is but another unsubstantiated assertion about the nature of God. The contingent proposition in 11:9c is therefore another knowledge claim of Qoheleth's that has not been, nor could ever be, verified by an appeal to human experience. As with Qoheleth's knowledge claim in

[366] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, comments (at 291), "Thus a gap is opened up in the text between what Qohelet observed and what he knows. The gap represents the immense struggle within Qohelet: how does one resolve the contradiction between what one observes and what one "knows"?"

8:12, so here in 11:9, the source of this knowledge and certainty about God's judgment has no empirical warrant, but is a clear endorsement of transmitted traditional belief.

6.5 Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter we were concerned to discover what Qoheleth claimed to know by examining his use of the verb ידע = "to know." At first blush this verb inherently has great empirical significance. But it was found that Qoheleth used this particular verb on eight different occasions in contexts in which he personally was not asserting any personal knowledge as such. His 'knowing' in these instances were of a very general nature, either mere private opinion or commonly accepted assumptions.

Moreover, Qoheleth's use of ידע in the context of death, at 6:5 and 9:5, is quite extraordinary. The epistemic claims that he makes concerning the status of the dead are claims that no human being on earth could possibly acquire by observation or personal experience. Such claims lack any credible evidential basis. Furthermore, what is really astonishing about the contents of 6:1-6 is that this unit immediately follows 5:17-19 [ET 5:18-20] one of the key joy passages in the book. Here we have irony and ambiguity in equal measure.

When we turned to consider Qoheleth's dogmatic claims to knowledge in 1:17; 2:14; 3:12; 3:14; 8:12, and 11:9 we found these provided more fruitful potential from an empirical perspective. In chapter 3 we outlined the nature of knowledge as justified true belief, that is to say, for one to have knowledge one has to believe some state of affairs to be true, and in addition, there must be good reason [evidence, warrant, justification] to hold that epistemic claim in question. We added one caveat: there should be no defeating propositions to the justification of that belief. We also distinguished between "I know that," and "I know how to" propositions. This distinction is not found explicitly expressed in Qoheleth's thought, but two examples of the "know how to" statements can be found (i.e., by implication) though they are somewhat incidental.

> 6:8b And what do the poor have who *know how to* conduct themselves before the living?
>
> 10:15 The toils of fools wears them out, for they do not even *know [how to]* find the way to town.

For our purpose, the above-mentioned dogmatic six statements are more significant in that they fall into the former category of "I know that . . ." propositions. In summary form these are:

1:17 *I know that* this also is but a chasing after the wind . . .

2:14 Yet *I know that* the same fate befalls all of them . . . (referring to the wise and the fools)

3:12 *I know that* there is nothing better for them than to be happy . . .

3:14 *I know that* whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it . . .

8:12 Yet *I know that* it will be well with those who fear God . . .

11:9 but *[I] know that* for all these things God will bring you into judgment.[367]

It is an interesting fact that the topics touched on in these claims are all crucially important in Qoheleth's thought:

(i) the judgment of God (11:9) (ii) the fear of God (8:12)

(iii) the joy theme (3:12) (iv) the universality of death (2:14)

(v) the *hebel* theme (1:17)[368] (vi) the absolute sovereignty of God (3:14)

Another interesting facet of Qoheleth's language is the fact that the Hebrew term אֱמֶת = "truth," does not occur in the words attributed to him in the monologue, though the phrase דִּבְרֵי אֱמֶת = "words of truth," is found in the epilogue; however, this refers to the quality of Qoheleth's scribal activity and comes from a third hand. A further observation about Qoheleth's language is that the Hebrew word for "belief" in the cognitive sense is not found in the text either. It would not follow from these facts alone, however, that Qoheleth did not believe to be true what he claimed to know. We pointed this out in chapter 3 when we considered Qoheleth's claim about God in 3:14. The real issue with Qoheleth's claims, from an epistemological perspective, is the problem of justification.

It must be kept in mind, as indicated above, that Qoheleth did not approach the exposition of his ideas on God, humankind, and the nature of life under the sun as an epistemologist. It is therefore unsurprising that Qoheleth does not expressly lay bare to the reader his underlying assumptions about the nature of knowledge with all its many facets and distinctions. But there cannot be any doubt that the six dogmatic statements

[367] While the imperative form (ודע) is used in 11:9, the meaning is clear. In using the imperative form Qoheleth is, in effect, making a theological knowledge claim. What he is saying is: "I know that God will bring you into judgment." All italics are mine and are included for emphasis only. The NRSV has "perceived" as a translation of ידעתי at 1:17; 2:14. The verb does have this nuance, but I have used "know" to indicate Qoheleth's personal claims to knowledge more clearly.

[368] Strictly speaking the word הבל does not occur in 1:17. But the phrase רעיון רוח is so very closely bonded in other texts with the הבל word (as at 1:14b), that its effect by association conveys the same negative meaning.

considered above, all of which touch on crucial issues, represent for him justified true beliefs.

In the conceptual framework of foundationalism, referred to at the end of the last chapter, it was suggested that belief in the existence of God - with all the implications of ethical monotheism for practical living that belief in God entailed – was the basic belief to which Qoheleth was unwaveringly committed. This would also account for his consistent belief in God as the judge of humankind, that God must be feared, and that God is the inscrutable sovereign creator of all that exists. The articulation of these epistemic claims represents crucial, indisputable facets of Qoheleth's exposition and they go right to the very heart of his thought.

In our synopsis of epistemological theory in chapter 3 we mentioned three key questions:

(1) What is knowledge?

(ii) How can we gain knowledge? and

(iii) What are the limits of knowledge?

We have already considered (i) and (ii). In the next chapter we will examine what Qoheleth has to say about this last question and it will be found that there is a huge contrast between what we have traversed already concerning his epistemic claims, and what he claims that humans *do not* know. This raises further interesting questions from an epistemological perspective: how did Qoheleth come to know that his fellow humans were so cognitively limited? What were his sources of these claims? To these topics we now turn in our next chapter.

PART 3. QOHELETH'S USE OF THE VERBS ידע AND מצא

Chapter 7: The Verb ידע = "to know" (Part B)

7.1 Introduction: The Rhetorical Question

It has been noted by various scholars how Qoheleth employs a wide variety of literary techniques in his writing style. We have already drawn attention to the fact that verbal repetition is a dominant characteristic of the book, a device that Qoheleth employs to great effect.[369] It was also noticed how the role of ambiguity in the book's language is evident from the opening verses.[370] In fact, Doug Ingram has claimed that Ecclesiastes is ambiguous by design and that this ambiguity is a deliberative didactic device employed by Qoheleth.[371] There is much evidence to support this view.

Izak Spangenberg, on the other hand, believes that, "Qohelet does not merely contain loose ironic statements, but that the entire book reflects an ironic tone."[372] Several other scholars also hold that Ecclesiastes is a carefully crafted document that is laden with ironic turns.[373] And according to Bartholomew, "Ecclesiastes is in this sense an ironic exposure of an empiricist epistemology as always leading one to a *hebel* conclusion."[374]

These observations have some merit in explaining the peculiarities of Qoheleth's literary creation, but Qoheleth's literary toolbox contains many other devices that were

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[369] See C. G. Bartholomew, "Qoheleth in the Canon?!", 4-20, who rightly stresses (at 15) this feature. This is a major theme in Addison Wright's much-cited article on the structure of the book, "The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 30 (1968): 313-34.

[370] Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, speaks of "Ecclesiastes as a Rhetoric of Ambiguity," 126-32.

[371] Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes*. For further elaboration on this notion see his "The Riddle of Qohelet and Qohelet the Riddler," *JSOT* 37 (2013): 485- 509. Cf. also Wilson, "Artful Ambiguity," 357-65.

[372] I. J. J. Spangenberg, "Irony in the Book of Qohelet," *JSOT* 72 (1996): 57-69 (at 69). See also his interesting article, "Jonah and Qohelet: Satire versus Irony," *OTE* 9 (1996): 491-511. This is a comparative study in which Spangenberg states (at 501), "The Book of Qohelet is one of the most dominant ironic writings in the Old Testament."

[373] See E. M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (2d ed. Bible & Literature Series 3; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1981), 168-95; T. Polk, "The Wisdom of Irony: A Study of *Hebel* and its Relation to Joy and Fear of God in Ecclesiastes," *SBT* 6 (1976): 3-17; H. Fisch, "Qohelet: A Hebrew Ironist," 158-78; C. J. Sharp, "Ironic Representation, Authorial Voice, and Meaning in Qohelet," *BI* 12 (2004): 37-68.

[374] Bartholomew, "Qoheleth in the Canon?!" 15.

at his command. One such, for which he shows a particular fondness, is the rhetorical question. "The rhetorical questions permit Qoheleth to highlight once more human impotence when it comes to the grand question of life both present and future."[375]

7.2 Qoheleth's use of the rhetorical question מי יודע = Who knows?

We have thus far examined Qoheleth's general knowledge claims as well as his more personal dogmatic claims where the verb ידע was used. By way of contrast, it now is time to consider what can only be described as the most directly engaging technique which an author can ply on his readers: the use of the rhetorical question. Its main effect is to suddenly draw readers into the writer's world thereby making them intimate participants in the author's discourse. Qoheleth utilizes this literary stratagem to telling effect.

The interrogative מי יודע occurs ten times in the Old Testament. James Crenshaw points out that the presence of the rhetorical question in the Old Testament naturally divides into two distinct groups when viewed from the standpoint of alternative outcomes.[376] Five of them leave a door open to possible responses that will change the situation for human good, (2 Sam 12:22; Joel 11:14; Jonah 3:9; Esth 4:14; Ps 90:11). For example, in Jonah 3:9 the King of Nineveh calls the people to repentance: "Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." A similar use is found in Joel 2:14 which also involves repentance. The remaining five examples seem to assume a closed door to any positive response: Eccl 2:19; 3:21; 6:12; 8:1, and Prov 24:21-22.

For Qoheleth, מי יודע serves a very specific purpose for in all four instances the expected answer is negative. In Crenshaw's terminology, Qoheleth's use of this particular rhetorical question, ". . . functions overwhelmingly as an expression of skepticism. The emphasis falls on an absence of knowledge, and "who knows?" is a denial that anyone can achieve information in the area under consideration."[377] Whether this claim is correct or not depends on how one defines "scepticism." (We will briefly address the question of definition later in this chapter).

The first instance of this interrogative appears in 2:19. In the immediate context,

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[375] Ogden, *Qoheleth,* 104.

[376] Crenshaw, "מי יודע in the Hebrew Bible," *VT* 36 (1986): 274-88 (at 274).

[377] Crenshaw, "מי יודע in the Hebrew Bible," 278.

Qoheleth is concerned with the problem of succession. His mind is deeply troubled by the disagreeable prospect that all his business assets will be inherited by someone else coming after him. The identity of the person(s) to take up the reins after him could well be unknown to him. So he ponders:-

2:19

ומי יודע החכם יהיה או סכל

. . . and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish?

This rhetorical question is actually an affirmation that nobody knows who will inherit this man's property, least of all Qoheleth himself. He simply does not know whether his successor will be wise or not. This reflection leads him to exclaim in 2:19b, גם־זה הבל, which for Qoheleth is a depressing business. As with so many of Qoheleth's observations and reflections, there is a strong hint of irony here. The programmatic question in 1:3 is very much in the forefront of Qoheleth's mind. He simply sees no lasting advantage (יתרון) to his lifetime of toil.

Qoheleth's cosmic theme returns again in 3:19b; this time he contemplates that there is no difference between humans and animals at death. All go to the one place and turn to dust again. Then he moves into reflective mode.

3:21

מי יודע רוח בני האדם העלה היא למעלה
ורוח הבהמה הירדת היא למטה לארץ׃

Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth?

As in 2:19 the expression מי יודע, is equivalent to saying, "No one knows." There is a possibility that Qoheleth was engaging with contemporaries who claimed that humans enjoy a favourable status after death. If this is so, then Qoheleth rejects any view that claimed some kind of differentiation between animals and humans, as applied to "upwards" and "downwards" terminology.[378] Ogden explains, "The significance if the phrase 'going up' is presumably that it mirrors the notion that the divine dwelling place is in the heavens, while the abode of the dead is portrayed as 'downwards' and away from God."[379] Whatever the reality, for Qoheleth, his use of the interrogative effectively puts a damper on such speculation: he simply shrugs his shoulders and says, "Who knows?"

[378] Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 37.

[379] Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 67.

6:12a

כי מי־יודע מה־טוב לאדם בחיים
מספר ימי־חיי הבלו ויעשם כצל

For who knows what is good for mortals while they live the few days of their vain life, which they pass like a shadow?

Qoheleth again poses his testing question in the context of human weakness and ignorance (vv 10-12). These verses seem to have little connection with the surrounding material.[380] In the preceding unit (6:9) we have Qoheleth's favourite refrain, ורעות רוח גם־זה הבל. Now at the beginning of the second half of the book, there is a repeated emphasis on what humans cannot know, cannot tell, and cannot discover.

Seow argues that the first literary unit of this second half of the book extends from 6:10 to 7:14. There is a theological introduction, 6:10-12, and a theological conclusion at 7:13-14, which frames a series of proverbial-type sayings from 7:1-12.[381] These sayings concentrate on what is "good" or "better." Both the introduction and the conclusion lay stress on human limitations and ignorance over against God's determinations and his incomprehensibility.

This rhetorical question, כי מי־יודע מה־טוב לאדם touches on a major concern in Wisdom literature: What is good for humans? Again, with the negative tone of this pointed question, Qoheleth's anticipated answer is negative: no one knows. In this verse he presents his readers with a robust statement of human finitude. Not only is human experience limited, the extent of human knowledge and ability is also extremely finite. Interestingly the use of הבל as applied to human life, the imagery of the passing shadow, with further emphasis on human life condensed into a few days, hammers home the ephemerality of life under the sun. The negative mood that laces this rhetorical question is one of resigned pessimism.

8:1a

מי כהחכם ומי יודע פשר דבר

Who is like the wise man? And who knows the interpretation of a thing?

Both the interpretation and the immediate connection of 8:1 within the immediate literary context throw up a difficult interpretational crux.[382] Some scholars believe that

[380] D. Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 159-65, admits that most scholars see 6:10-12 as a unit, though he proceeds to argue that it coheres with 6:1-9.

[381] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 241.

[382] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, comments thus (at 128), "This verse presents almost insuperable difficulties to the interpreter with regard both to its intrinsic meaning and its connections with its context."

8:1 (or at least 8:1a) belongs to the previous section, 7:23-29.[383] Others hold that 8:1 begins the section 8:1-17.[384] It is also possible to hold that 8:1 stands as an exclamation between two larger units.[385] Realistically, there are two clear possibilities. First, if we read 8:1 as introducing the following unit, verses 2-9, in giving an outline of traditional court wisdom, then one must learn to unquestionably obey one's superiors and obey the rules.

On the other hand, I favour the view that 8:1 should be read in the context of 8:1-17, which ends with an attack by Qoheleth on those who claim to know what they cannot know. Therefore, the opening and closing words of Chapter 8 form an *inclusio* that in essence forthrightly lays out the boundaries of human knowledge. In fact, the whole tenor of this section bears out the negative associations implied by Qoheleth's piercing question: Who knows the interpretation of a thing?

When one moves from considering the personal dogmatic knowledge claims made by Qoheleth, which we considered in chapter 6, to his use of the interrogative pronoun with the accompanying active participle of ידע, the contrast is at once immediate and typical of his unpredictable turn of mind. In total, the interrogative מי occurs seventeen times in Ecclesiastes, sixteen of which are used in rhetorical questions that imply the negative response, "no one." Paradoxically, Qoheleth's declares clearly defined limits on human knowledge, yet on certain occasions he advances very robust dogmatic epistemological claims about God. He shows no restraint when he claims concrete knowledge about God and human existence, but it seems that he does not accord the same cognitive understanding to his fellow humans. Indeed, as Qoheleth's thought unfolds before the reader he becomes more and more dogmatically assertive about man's limitations and ignorance.

7.3 Man cannot know the future

3:22b

וראיתי כי אין טוב מאשר ישמח האדם במעשיו כי־הוא חלקו
כי מי יביאנו לראות במה שיהיה אחריו׃

[383] So Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes*, 180; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 128.

[384] So Krüger, *Qoheleth,* 151, Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 137; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 280; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 79; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 149.

[385] See Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 208. Longman sees this verse as a sarcastic exclamation of frustration that stands between two segments. A. Lauha, *Kohelet*, thinks the verse is a gloss (at 144), but is uncertain as to its connection with what precedes or what follows.

> So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot; who can bring them to see what will be after them?

This verse concludes the section 3:16-22, which deals with human injustice (vv. 16-18) and the common mortality of humans and animals (vv 19-20). The "And I saw" (better "And I realized") statement at the beginning of verse 22 resonates with the *carpe diem* passages in 2:24 and 3:12, which also have the אין טוב formula. Qoheleth also calls upon another of his favourite terms – חלק = "portion, lot." The "portion" which God gives to humans (3:13) refers to the enjoyment in their activities (with no mention of "eating" and "drinking" as found in 2:24 and 3:13). Then in verse 22b, a negative tone emerges. Qoheleth's emphasis on human ignorance is in keeping with his dialectic frame of mind, but it is, nonetheless, both striking and yet vague in its meaning.

The term אחריו = "after him," has occasioned some difficulty among scholars. Delitzsch holds that the term refers to what happens to a person after death.[386] Murphy states that "what will come" refers to what will happen on earth after one's death and not to the next world; cf. 6:12, "under the sun."[387] A different view has been advanced by E. Podechard whereby אחריו is understood to mean what will happen in the future within the individual's lifetime.[388] While all three views are relevant in the book as a whole, in the present context, following a verse that declares human ignorance of what follows death, the first alternative (Delitzsch) is likely in view.[389]

On this passage, vv 16-22, Whybray comments, "Since even man's hope of justice is outweighed by the certainty of death and the unlikelihood that he will be able to experience anything good after death, he should make the most of whatever possibilities for a good life come his way in this world."[390] I agree with E. Lee that the "joy passages" have to be taken seriously, even though they are, in the main, surrounded

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[386] Delitzsch, *Biblischer Commentar*, 273. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, writes that the ending on אחריו may be a petrified (archaic) suffix on an adverb ("afterward"), but it is more likely an ellipsis for "after his death." (at 105). According to J. Lloyd, *An Analysis of the Book of Ecclesiastes,* the term means, "what is in the future." (At 53).

[387] Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 37. So also Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 18. 1983. Repr. Nottinginham/Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 103.

[388] Podechard, *L` Ecclésiastes*, 317-19. See Fox, *Qoheleth*, 199, for a discussion of the issue. Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, observes, "It is too great a refinement to try to determine, as some have done, whether Qoheleth refers to man's ignorance of what will happen on earth after him, or to an entire lack of knowledge after death." (At 110).

[389] Fox , *A Rereading*, 217. Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, believes that אחריו does not mean specially "after death in another world,' but simply "later." He concludes that this seems to be directed at some of Qoheleth's contemporaries whose hopes were for a "portion" that awaited them "later" beyond death. (At 68).

[390] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 80.

by an aura of negativity and pessimism.[391] As Salyer has so aptly noted concerning the first three "joy passages," their use ". . . in the space of just over 20 verses is a way of front-loading the theme for the central part of Qoheleth's discourse, making sure that the reader has been duly trained to answer Qoheleth's rhetorical questions with the appropriate *carpe diem* answer."[392] Thus we may conclude that the interrogative in verse 22b anticipates a negative response: "no one can enable him to see," which reflects the negative answer of verse 21. In this instance, Qoheleth's predilection for emphasizing "man's ignorance of the future" is not in any sense a radical interpretation of any wisdom precept but a well-recognized observation in Wisdom literature and in the Old Testament generally.

6:12b

אשל מי־יניד לאדם מה־יהיה אחריו תחת השמש׃

For who can tell them what will happen after them under the sun?

The first question in this sentence was considered above, now again in 6:12b Qoheleth picks up a theme that resonates throughout the monologue: mankind's inability to discern what will happen in the future. As in verse 12a, Qoheleth's probing question anticipates a negative response. Not only does no one know what is good for humankind (verse 12a), no one can tell man what will happen on earth after he is gone (verse 12b).

The contrast between Qoheleth's attitude to the injustices of his time and the transforming power of the prophetic word of prophets such as Isaiah, Amos, Micah and Hosea, is most remarkable. In this connection, Qoheleth "shows both how profoundly he differs from the prophets whose entire purpose it was to make known God's will for the present and the future and also how his book differs from apocalyptic literature, the purpose of which was to make known what will happen in the future."[393]

For Qoheleth at any rate, man cannot know the future under the sun because life is הבל (verse 12a). Nor does Qoheleth know anything about an afterlife. All this is because God made it incomprehensibly so. As far as Qoheleth was concerned, it appears

[391] Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, esp. 123-139.

[392] Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 304.

[393] Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, 73. In Leo Perdue's view, "Wisdom and Apocalyptic: The Case of Qohelet," in *Wisdom and Apocalypticism in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Biblical Tradition* (ed. F. García Martínez: BETL 168; Leuven, University Press, 2003), 231-58, "Qohelet strongly opposed much of the teachings of the traditional sages, and he was strongly against the major themes of the apocalyptic, including especially knowledge of divine character and activity, eschatological judgement of the righteous and the wicked and life after death." (At 251).

that the futuristic, eschatological proclamations of classic Old Testament prophecy (prefaced by the words, "Thus says the Lord") had no currency in either the mind or the experience of this learned sage. It would appear that, for him, the voice of prophecy was now silent.

7:14

ביום טובה היה בטוב וביום רעה ראה גם את־זה לעמת־זה
עשה האלהים על־דברת שלא ימצא האדם אחריו מאומה׃

> In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider; God has made the one as well as the other, so that mortals may not find out anything that will come after them.

We considered 7:14 in chapter 4, but under the present heading the emphasis is, once again, on man's ignorance of the future (verse 14c). In verse 14a human experience is viewed in two categories: טובה = "good," and רעה = "misfortune, evil, adversity." This is how the sages assessed the realities of life. Here again, Qoheleth emphasizes the dialectical nature of God's sovereign activity by employing גם ראה, but his call to enjoy the good times in life is in keeping with the spirit of the other "joy passages." As Longman puts it, "Qoheleth advises his listeners to enjoy themselves on a good day, while making the best of a bad day. God made both, and no one can change what God has done."[394] Or as Barton has it, "God has so mingled good and evil that man cannot tell what the future will be."[395]

Kathleen Farmer comments that in 3:22 and 6:12 Qoheleth merely questioned the possibility of our knowing what comes after us under the sun. "Here in 7:14 he asserts that God deliberately keeps us from such knowledge."[396] Certainly in the presence of God's mysterious activity humans are impotent. Since man cannot contend with God (6:10), and is unable to straighten what has been made crooked (1:15a), the reader is enjoined to act wisely within the boundaries set by a sovereign God.[397]

There is an alternative translation for the last clause in the Vulgate: "that man may not find just complaint against him." (Cf. similar reading in Symmachus).[398] It is not clear, as Crenshaw has pointed out, how this reading improves the meaning of this verse, 'for the bewildering array of good and evil hardly prevents human beings from

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[394] Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 192.

[395] Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 141.

[396] Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good?*, 177.

[397] The term אחריו = "after him," which occurs in 3:22 and 6:12, refers to what will be in this world. So Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 141; Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 121; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 240, *et al*.

[398] See Whitley, *Koheleth*, 66, for discussion.

finding fault with the creator.'[399] But according to Murphy this rendering yields better sense as it suits the style of Qoheleth's understanding of God who is beyond human calculation. 'There may be a certain implicit irony here: as if God were keeping human beings off balance by an erratic performance.'[400]

8:6-7

6 כי לכל־חפץ יש עת ומשפט
כי־רעת האדם רבה עליו׃

7 כי־איננו ידע מה־שיהיה
כי כאשר יהיה מי יגיד לו׃

> For every matter has its time and way, although the troubles of mortals lie heavy upon them. Indeed, they do not know what is to be, for who can tell them how it will be?

Moving on to 8: 6-7, these two verses comprise four clauses each of which is introduced by the particle כי that have occasioned some scholarly comment.[401] Chapter 8:2-5a offers advice on matters relating to surviving in the royal court. Qoheleth concludes by confirming that the wise man will know the time and the way (verse 5b). His reference to עת echoes the famous poem about appropriate "times" in 3:2-8.

In verse 5b Qoheleth sets forth a commonplace dictum of traditional wisdom, but he cites this only to attack it.[402] The first half of the verse 6 repeats the statement in verse 5b about יש עת ומשפט (cf. 3:1). Then in verses 6-9, as Whybray has noted, Qoheleth radically reinterprets the phrase in terms that he expresses elsewhere, especially in 3:1-15.[403] His conviction is that there is a right time for everything but such times are only known to God who has concealed such information from his creatures (verse 7). Qoheleth again drives home his negative message about human ignorance of the future.[404] As Salyer observes, "Verses 6-7 present yet another blank to

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[399] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 139.

[400] Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 66.

[401] See Schoors, *The Preacher Sought,* Part 1, 106-7; Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 201-3, for discussion.

[402] Fox, *A Rereading*, disagrees. He states (at 279), "In insisting that the future is hidden, Qohelet is using, not challenging, traditional wisdom. Proverbs too insists that man cannot know the morrow (27:1; cf. Sir 11:19), and this is a commonplace of Egyptian Wisdom. But Qohelet alone seems oppressed by the ignorance."

[403] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 132.

[404] According to Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, the claim that no man knows in verse 7, ". . . is not as in 3:22 and 6:12 simply a reference to the fact that the future is unknown, but to the fact that no one ever knows what an irresponsible despot will do." So also Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 90. E. H Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes,* gives two possible interpretations (at 177), "(i) The evil of the man (of the oppressor) is heavy upon him (the oppressed); (ii) though there is a time and a judgment, yet the misery of man is great, because (as in the next verse) he knows not when it is to come."

the reader. Verse 6 reminds the narratee/reader of the limits of time broached in 3:1-8. Verses 6b-8 pull from the text's horizon of values the theme of humanity's epistemological limits (verse 7) and our common mortality (verse 8)."[405]

10:14b

לא־ידע האדם מה־שיהיה
ואשר יהיה מאחריו מי יגיד לו׃

No one knows what is to happen, and who can tell anyone what the future holds? [406]

Verses 12-15 form a sub-unit with no obvious connection with 10:1-11. The contents of 10:1-20 are very similar to the traditional wisdom sayings in Proverbs (cf. 10:8, 21; 15:2, 7; 18:7; Sir 20:13; 21:15-17). This brief collection of proverbs in verses 10:12-15 denigrates folly. What is especially interesting, as Enns has pointed out regarding the meaning of verse 14b, (bearing in mind the near parallels in 6:12; 7:14; 8:7, and 9:1 and 5) is that, "What is different here is that in these other passages ignorance of the future is not restricted to fools, whereas here it is."[407] The object of ידע is מה־שיהיה = "what is to be" - the unknown future. Qoheleth observes that self-destructing fools do not know when to shut up (verses 12b-14a). Then follows the declaration that no man knows what will be after him, which is consolidated by an incisive rhetorical question. And the anticipated answer is, "No man knows." Again it is evident that this formulaic repetition is a trademark of Qoheleth's rhetoric.

11:1-2

1 שלח לחמך על־פני המים
כי־ברב הימים תמצאנו׃

2 תן־חלק לשבעה וגם לשמונה
כי לא תדע מה־יהיה רעה על־הארץ׃

1 Send out your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will get it back.
2 Divide your means seven ways, or even eight, for you do not know what disaster may happen on earth.

These verses (each commencing with an imperative) announce a new literary unit, contrasting with the subject matter and tone of 10:1-20. There is general agreement that

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[405] Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 349.

[406] Some Hebrew MSS, LXX, Symm, Syr, SyrH, and Vulg read משהיה for מה־שיהיה, thus shifting from the future to the past tense. Most scholars follow the MT, which is almost certainly correct. The use of the imperfect לא־ידע makes it unlikely that the past is meant since people do know what has happened (so Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 319). According to Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, he interprets (at 156) מה־שיהיה = "what is to be," as referring to future events in life, and ואשר יהיה מאחריו = "what will be after him," as referring to the future after this life, as in 3:22." But there is no reference to death in this context, מאחריו could be taken to mean "afterwards," which could include the future in this life. So Fox, *A Rereading*, 307.

[407] Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 102.

these two verses belong together, and grammatically and syntactically they attract few problems. However, their interpretation, particularly verse 1, has occasioned considerable debate. Verse 1a is especially well known in popular parlance, but what do the words, "Send forth your bread upon the waters, . . ." mean?

Various proposals have been made. Some scholars think that the sage is encouraging investment in maritime trade;[408]others see in these words a commendation of philanthropy.[409] This approach has in its favour a parallel in the late Egyptian *Instruction of Ankhsheshonq*: "Do a good deed and throw it into the river; when this dries up you shall find it."[410] In other words, one should do a good deed and forget it, then when times are hard, such an act will pay off, perhaps in an unexpected way.

Whatever the exact meaning Qoheleth had in mind, the crucial clause follows in verse 2b, ". . . for you do not know what misfortune may occur on earth." The uncertainties may lie in one's favour (verse 1), but even if one takes necessary precautions, such careful strategies cannot guarantee security (verse 2b). Neither the outcome, nor the effectiveness of one's plans can be taken for granted in an uncertain world.

From an epistemological viewpoint, it is very significant, as Ogden has observed, that "the concepts of 'finding' and 'not knowing' are programmatic and central to the thought of vv. 1-2."[411] [In the chapter to follow we will be addressing these topics, especially with regard to Qoheleth's use of the verb מצא = "to find"]. In these two verses, especially in 2b, as far as Qoheleth is concerned, the limits of human cognition have been firmly set.

11:6

בבקר זרע את־זרעך ולערב אל־תנח ידך
כי אינך יודע אי זה יכשר הזה או־זה
ואם־שניהם כאחד טובים׃

In the morning sow your seed, and at evening do not let your hands be idle; for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.

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[408] So Gordis, *Koheleth*, 329-30; Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 159-60; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 158-59; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 256; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 337; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 178-79; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 106-7, and others. A. H. McNeile, *An Introduction to Ecclesiastes* (Cambridge: CUP, 1904), states (at 84) that, "There can be little doubt that the words refer to trading – to those "who do business in great waters."

[409] So Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 335; Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 181; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 191-93.

[410] Lichtheim, *AEL*, 111, 174.

[411] Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 200.

With this verse, Qoheleth draws this segment to a conclusion. Following on from 11:1-2, the sayings in 11:3-5 deal with rain, falling trees, sowing and gestation. In verse 6 Qoheleth returns to the theme of sowing (cf. verse 4). In fact verse 6 is similar both in form and meaning to verses 1-2.[412] Gordis believes verse 6 is a warning against indolence;[413] certainly it is an exhortation to be active.[414] But Qoheleth goes further than mere exhortation as he provides a motive for action in 6b.

Some scholars have taken the words, *Sow your seed*, to refer to sexual procreation. H. Graetz, following the Talmud and Midrash (*Yebamoth*, 62b), takes it to mean "Beget your children in youth and even to old age, whether in or out of wedlock."[415] More recently, Anthony Perry has taken a similar line of thought.[416] Both views are possible, but on balance the context here is principally agricultural.[417] A. D. Power suggests that "morning and evening" in verse 6 are to be taken figuratively, i.e., from youth to old age.[418] I take the whole verse to be an illustration of what happens in the farming community. Fox takes "morning" and "evening"/ "this or that" to be a merism, thus including the whole day.[419] But it is unlikely that sowing was to be carried out from morning until evening without interruption.

Be that as it may, the essential grammatical meaning of verse 6, closing as it does this unit, is clear. Notwithstanding human ignorance about life under the sun, especially regarding what will happen in the future, one must remain active. There is no point waiting around for the best moment (verse 4). Since no one knows what will happen in the future, one must get on with life's activity and hard work. With this philosophy of life one has a better chance of good success. Verse 6, in effect, recapitulates the advice given in verse 1 and rounds out the teaching of this unit: despite human ignorance of divine mysteries (verse 5) and the impossibility of knowing what will happen in the future, one should compensate for this by being busy with multiple

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[412] As noted by Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 160.

[413] For example, the imperatives in this verse, "Sow your seed," and "let not your hand go slack" recall those in verses 1 and 2, "Send forth," and "Give a portion."

[414] Gordis, *Koheleth*, 322.

[415] Cited in Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 184.

[416] A. T. Perry, *Dialogues with Kohelet: The Book of Ecclesiastes* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 161.

[417] See Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 204 for further details.

[418] Power, *Ecclesiastes*, 119.

[419] Fox, *A Rereading*, 315.

activities.

Qoheleth's advice is motivated by uncertainty. For him one can never know how things turn out; nor is it possible to understand the action of God – it is beyond human calculation. Yet, one cannot feel paralysed by such reflections. Despite his pessimism, Qoheleth is no advocate of laziness or inactivity; in this respect he stands firmly in line with a traditional value found in Wisdom literature. Fox succinctly sums up verse 6: "In structure and message, 11:6 recapitulates 11:1f. and thereby rounds out the unit with its central teaching: compensate for ignorance by preparing for multiple eventualities."[420]

7.4 Man cannot know what God is doing in the world

11: 5

כאשר אינך יודע מה־דרך הרוח
כעצמים בבטן המלאה
ככה לא תדע את־מעשה האלהים
אשר יעשה את־הכל׃

> Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything.

Seow has correctly seen this segment as another of Qoheleth's rhetorical set-ups.[421] In verses 3-4 the impression is given of the human ability to know. But these verses are surrounded by a frame of negativity in v 2 and vv 5-6, thus emphasizing human cognitive limitations.

In the interpretation of 5b the question arises: are two distinct entities referred to, e.g., (i) the unknown course of the wind, רוח, and (ii) the development of the human embryo? Since רוח means "wind" in 4a, does the meaning stay the same in 5a, or is the latter to be rendered life-breath? Fox opts for the latter thus giving the sense of one illustration.[422] But as Barton points out, the phrase, אשר יעשה את־הכל can be rendered, "who makes both."[423] This would give the following translation, "As you do not know what is the way of the wind or how the bones are formed in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of God, who does all things."[424] Either way, as Crenshaw has

[420] Fox, *A Rereading*, 315.

[421] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 344.

[422] Fox, *A Rereading*, 314-15.

[423] Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 183-4.

[424] The MT supports two illustrations, although the syntax is awkward. As Gordis argues, *Koheleth*, (at 331-32) if two illustrations are referenced here one would expect the copula *waw* to begin the clause commencing with כעצמים thus giving וכעצמים. However, parallel comparisons introduced by כ

noted, "Emphasis certainly falls on human ignorance, whatever the number of divine mysteries."[425] Just as man is ignorant of the causes of wind change, so also is he cognitively limited in his understanding of the development of the embryo in a woman's womb.

This is but another forceful reminder of human ignorance (temporality) in the face of the mystery of God's sovereignty (eternality). Of this pericope, 11:1-6, Seow aptly sums it up: "Qohelet moves from the elements of nature, to the wonders of life coming into being, ultimately to theology: wind is unpredictable (11:4), the life-breath is a mystery (11:5a), and God is inscrutable (11:5a)."[426] It is an undeniable fact that the topic of man's ignorance in the face of a sovereign and distant God is a crucial characteristic of Qoheleth's thought, especially, as we observed earlier, in the latter half of the book.

7.5 Qoheleth and Scepticism

Given that Qoheleth adamantly places these restrictions on human knowledge, there is much discussion in the scholarly literature in respect of Qoheleth's alleged scepticism. This topic, however, runs into the same problem of definition as we found with "empiricism" in chapter 3. In her comprehensive study Annette Schellenberg refers to the lack of a definition of scepticism in Qohelethian studies.[427] She admits that pinning down an acceptable definition is far from easy, and so her approach is to explore Qoheleth's ideas as they unfold. James Crenshaw does, however, venture the following definition: "On the one hand, skepticism addresses itself to a specific theological situation; in short, it signifies a crisis of faith in God. On the other hand, the skeptic also isolates a wholly different kind of bankruptcy – the loss of faith in human beings."[428] This seems a rather esoteric understanding of scepticism. W. H. U. Anderson holds

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without the copula *waw* are found in Deut 1:17 and Song of Songs 1:5. The MT is supported by the Targum, LXX and Vg.

[425] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 180.

[426] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 345-6.

[427] Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis*, 45-50. At page 47 she is critical of Martin A. Klopfenstein, "Die Skepsis des Qohelet," *TZ* 28 (1972): 97-109, who proceeds to discuss Qoheleth's scepticism without attempting to define the term. But this critique can be applied to other commentators. However, she recognizes the difficulty of arriving at a satisfactory definition and adopts her own solution by exploring Qoheleth's ideas from which she draws her own conclusions.

[428] Crenshaw, "The Birth of Skepticism in Ancient Israel," in *The Divine Helmsman: Studies on God's Control of Human Events, Presented to Lou H. Silberman* (ed. James L. Crenshaw and Samuel Sandmel; New York: Ktav, 1980), 1-19, (at 9).

scepticism to be, "That disposition which attacks dogmatic assertions (of truth or absolute knowledge) with doubt and questions."[429] This definition, like Crenshaw's, is too generic and very narrowly focused. Anderson's terminology is too limiting due to the very strong terms he employs, though he does catch the importance of doubt and a questioning spirit, which are implied in scepticism.

In a very insightful essay, John F. Priest accepts that scepticism is best understood as, ". . . an intellectually articulated challenge to the ultimate legitimations of society; that is, a radical questioning of the religious, philosophical or ethical presuppositions upon which society rests."[430] He describes how pre-Exilic life in Israel was undergirded by, (i) the notion that she was a covenant society living in compliance with divinely sanctioned customs and commandments, and (ii) a view of history that saw in the outworkings of history the purposeful activity of their God. These notions were gradually fused together over time. After the Exile, these twin themes were radically called into question. As Priest puts it, "This bifurcation of this fusion during and after the Exile opened the door to articulated Israelite skepticism . . ."[431] These are interesting ideas but his working definition of scepticism is linked too closely to a religious, ethical perspective. However, when he states that the scepticism of Qoheleth ends as pessimism, pure and simple, I believe he is nearer the truth about Qoheleth's outlook on life.[432]

It is Michael Williams who helpfully distinguishes between philosophical and practical scepticism.[433] The philosophical sceptic holds as irrefutable the view that knowledge is impossible. On the other hand, the practical sceptic questions received opinion, and will suffer from doubt or uncertainty but can still maintain that certain knowledge is possible in life's ongoing journey. Qoheleth's epistemic claims are far removed from the ideas one finds in scholarly disputations relating to philosophical scepticism. If the description of Qoheleth as a sceptic is to hold then he could be

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[429] Anderson, "What is Scepticism and Can It Be Found in the Hebrew Bible?," *SJOT* 13 (1999): 225-57, (at 233). For a more general and useful discussion of scepticism see Michael Williams, "Skepticism," in *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, 35-69.

[430] Priest, "Humanism, Skepticism, and Pessimism in Israel," *AAR* 36 (1968): 311-26, at 319.

[431] Priest, "Humanism," 321.

[432] Priest, "Humanism," 324.

[433] Williams, "Skepticism," 35.

appropriately viewed as a practical sceptic, as defined above.[434]

From the evidence thus far surveyed in this study, for Qoheleth certain knowledge is possible as he claims to have a wide-ranging knowledge about God. But what he does deny is that humans can have accurate knowledge in certain defined areas of life (examined in subsections 7.3 and 7.4 above). Qoheleth does not explicitly invite his readers to suspend belief, but that is what occurs when he poses four rhetorical questions concerning a problem of succession (2:19); the destiny of the human spirit after death (3:21); what is good for humans (6:12); and the problem of interpretation (8:1).

7.6 Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter our interest centred on three aspects of Qoheleth's exposition: (i) his use of the rhetorical question, מי דימע = Who knows?, (ii) his claim that man cannot know the future, and (iii) his assertions that man cannot know what God is doing in the world. It was found that the vast bulk of this evidence came from the second half of the book where Qoheleth comes to adopt a more negative tone and stance as to what his fellow humans know, or do not know. In examining all four rhetorical questions relating to the verb ידע, Qoheleth's conclusions were negative on every count. He aggressively grabs the attention of the reader by deploying the rhetorical question as an instrument to reinforce his negative outlook.

Under the two remaining headings Qoheleth keeps up the pressure in order "to accent the theme of humanity's epistemological limitations."[435] In stating that humans are incapable of knowing what God is doing in the world, and in emphasizing man's inability to know the future, it cannot be concluded that Qoheleth is in any meaningful sense a radical, unorthodox Jewish sage. The Hebrew Bible, along with extant Near Eastern literature, is replete with such observations concerning human finitude. In this respect, Qoheleth, in reaching these negative conclusions, was mainly giving vent to

[434] For possible influences on Qoheleth see Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 161-216. He holds to a third century dating for the book and socially situates Qoheleth in "the educated aristocracy in upper-class Jerusalem." (at 177). He further states (at 184) "The philosophical tradition most akin to Qoheleth's worldview was that of Greek Skepticism.", but he does acknowledge that unlike the Greek sceptics, Qoheleth believed in the existence of God. Perdue makes a valiant attempt at placing Qoheleth in the larger zeitgeist of the pervasive influence of Hellenization. His string of rhetorical questions (at 183) to bolster his arguments sounds like special pleading. At one point (at 178) he claims "The joy or happiness that comprises the central teaching of this book is often found in Greek philosophy." Yet no argument is presented to defend this assertion. That the joy theme is a central teaching of the book is a topic in much dispute among commentators.

[435] The phrase is from Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 366.

beliefs that would have been held by many of his contemporaries.[436]

From these observations, one may ponder whether Qoheleth reached these conclusions about human limitations on empirical grounds? To answer this question, I think we need to go back to the beginning of the book. In chapter 1.1, I drew attention to what I believe is a very important factor in the thought of Qoheleth, namely, that his particular understanding of the world has a direct bearing and influence on his epistemology. In 1:2 we saw how the fivefold emphasis of the *hebel* theme was immediately followed by his programmatic, rhetorical question in 1:3, a question that was concerned with the possible profit attached to human toil. This question is not immediately addressed in the following verses, but in the narrative that follows in chapter 2 the issue surfaces about human toil and the material outcomes that may ensue from it. This is so much a serious predicament in the mind of Qoheleth that he repeats the יתרון question in 2:22, and again in 3:9.

In considering the experiences of Qoheleth in chapter 2, it emerged that what gave him particular anguish was the fact that as a man of inventive entrepreneurial achievement, he had accumulated a considerable personable fortune in the form of real estate and material possessions. This fact alone would not cause cognitive problems for most people. But for Qoheleth, we found that the real problem was not the amount of wealth he had accrued from his business ventures, with all the immense toil that was involved in realising it; no, it was the deeply disturbing reality attached to his own mortality: he did not own his property in perpetuity because on some future occasion he would be taken from it. The heir to his fortune might not be known to him, and could be a wise person or a fool, and this twin realization was like rubbing salt on the wound, as it were. In sum, the problem that caused Qoheleth such inner torment was the impossibility of outright ownership.

It is amazing that before Qoheleth came to properly introduce himself in 1:12 he gave expression to his pressing concerns at the very beginning of the book, which must have conveyed to his readers the huge significance he attached to these ideas, ideas and thoughts revolving around the key terms of הבל, עמל, and יתרון. It would be impossible from this point in time to know how Qoheleth's original readers would have viewed

[436] As Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 132-47, has amply demonstrated. He writes, ". . . much of what seems radical in Ecclesiastes, when it is read as part of the biblical canon, seems much less unusual when it is considered in the context of ancient literature more broadly." (At 136). This is especially the case with the Greek lyrical poet, Theognis, some of whose sentiments are reminiscent of Qoheleth's observations. Weeks goes on to observe (at 140) that "Qohelet may have seemed far from shockingly new and radical to the original readers of the book."

Qoheleth's attitude to human achievement and property ownership. It is doubtful if many people connected with his ideas. For what we find in these early expressions of his thought is an esoteric understanding of life that is essentially very self-centred. High human achievers in life would, on the whole, be only too willing for their family members, or relatives, to take over the reins in due time, thus sustaining the family enterprises for another generation. This family dimension is wholly missing in the sages's outlook.[437] By whatever means one may venture to account for such views in an acknowledged wise man (12:9), his peculiar understanding of the world is, I believe, a leading factor in shaping his ideas on God, human knowledge, and human achievement.

We have surveyed a diverse range of claims that Qoheleth presents about human limitations concerning the future, and God's activity in the world. On both counts it is difficult to see how he could have reached these assertions by an empirical methodology. Thus, for example, when Qoheleth posed the rhetorical question in 6:12a, "Who knows what is good for mortals . . .?" he already gave the answer to it in the joy passage in 3:22. But Qoheleth's advocacy to enjoy life, which he repeats at various intervals in the text, cannot be deemed to have an empirical basis. There is no doubt that he experienced pleasure in eating, drinking, and enjoying the fruits of his toil (cf. ch. 2). But this well meaning advice is, in essence, mere personal recommendation: in a word, personal opinion.

When Qoheleth adamantly confirms that (i) no human can know what will happen in the future, and (ii) humans cannot know what God is doing in the world, such declarations are not derived directly from sense experience. Of course, Qoheleth's assertions about the future and God's activity contrasts sharply with the claims made by the prophets who spoke as "Thus says the Lord." Not only did the prophets tell disobedient Israel what was going to happen, they imparted knowledge to Israel regarding what God was going to do in the future with reference to their destiny. Divine disclosure, while prominent in the prophetic literature, is, as we pointed out, completely absent in the life of Qoheleth. In his time the authentic voice of the historic prophets was silent. This leaves us with one conclusion about Qoheleth's claims about human limitations. He did not arrive at these conclusions *via* divine revelation, nor by empirical means, but by his own intuition; and many Old Testament writers comprehensively

[437] Frank Zimmermann, *The Inner World* states (at 2) that, "All the signs point to the fact that Qoheleth was a married man and had a child, a son. Zimmermann's reason for this opinion is less than adequate. I think that it is more likely that Qoheleth was unmarried; he appears to me that he was far too self-centred to be married.

confirmed that intuition. In brief, Qoheleth's assertion about human limitations was innate, and reflected commonly held public knowledge. But what is unusual about Qoheleth is the very intense manner by which he expresses his epistemic claims.

It is now time to move forward to consider another important verb which has an obvious epistemological dimension, namely, the verb מצא = "to find."

PART 3. QOHELETH'S USE OF THE VERBS ידע AND מצא

Chapter 8: The Verb מצא = "to find"

8.1 Introduction

In this chapter, and the following two, I propose to carefully consider a crucial aspect of Qoheleth's epistemological methodology: his repetitive use of two very important verbs, which, by their very nature, have great potential in demonstrating to what, if any extent, he can be termed an empiricist. Unquestionably the frequent use of these two verbs - מצא = "to find," ראה = "to see," – point to a man enamoured by experiential data. In this chapter, our concentration will be focused on Qoheleth's use of מצא = "to find."

8.2 The verb מצא: 3:11

Integral to the whole process of determining any theory of knowledge is the concept of "finding." In Qoheleth's case, we have a man who was deeply committed to an intensely personal quest to seek out wisdom and knowledge. And like all researchers, Qoheleth had a very strong sense of intellectual curiosity, of that there is no doubt.

As already indicated in chapter 6, the verb מצא occurs seventeen times in Ecclesiastes.[438] Its equivalent in Greek is εὑρίσκω = "I find," from which we derive the term "heuristic," meaning discovering things for oneself. This verb fittingly reflects Qoheleth's intellectual quest as set out in 1:17; 7:25, and 8:16. When he launches out to arrive at חשבון = "the sum of things" (7:25), the verb מצא would undoubtedly be central to his enterprise.

Of the seventeen instances of מצא, four are not empirically significant. For example, in 9:10 there is the injunction, "Whatever your hand finds to do, . . ." where the imperfect is found (תמצא). In 9:15 the assertion is made that a poor man was found (מצא) in the city, which he eventually saved from its enemies. Then there is the well-known instruction in 11:1 where the assurance is given that if one sends forth one's bread upon the waters, in the course of time תמצאנו = "you will find it." Again the imperfect is used. And finally, in the epilogue, 12:10 the author, writing in the third person, says בקש קהלת למצא דברי־חפץ = "Qoheleth sought to find pleasing words," where

[438] See the exhaustive study by S. Wagner, מצא, in *TDOT* V111 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986): 465-83. For an overview of this verb see Schoors, *The Preacher Sought*, Part 2, 171-76.

the infinitive is in evidence. The remaining thirteen occurrences are all germane to our inquiry as to the nature of Qoheleth's epistemology. Remarkably, nine of these thirteen occurrences are found in chapter 7. Of the remaining four references to מצא, three are found in 8:17, and one in 3:11. Thus we have the following to consider: 3:11; 8:16-17, and 7:14[439], 23-29. Epistemologically, these three passages, especially the latter, are crucially important in the exposition of Qoheleth's thought.

3:11

את־הכל עשה יפה בעתו גם את־העלם נתן בלבם מבלי אשר
לא־ימצא האדם את־המעשה אשר־עשה האלהים מראש ועד־סוף׃

> He made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put eternity[440] into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

The verb מצא can, of course refer to the simple physical act of finding, as in the exclamation, "Look, I have found a watch!" Fox's translation renders the meaning of מצא as "to grasp," and I think correctly, as in this verse מצא is cognitively significant, i.e., it is used in its intellectual sense, meaning "to grasp, to understand."[441] As Schoors has observed, this verb belongs to the semantic field of knowledge denoting research and experiential knowledge, especially when one considers the appropriate context of Qoheleth's self-proclaimed intellectual quest.[442] The simple connection of "seeking" and "finding" God is present in both Testaments (cf. Matt 7:7).[443] The author of Isa 55:6

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[439] Chapter 7:14 was considered in chapter 4 under the sub-heading, "God as Creator," and in chapter 7 under the sub-heading, "Man cannot know the Future." In this latter case the verb מצא appears in the Qal imperfect form.

[440] I see no good reason to follow the NRSV here with regards to the translation of העלם. This term is found seven times in the book: 1:4,10; 2:16; 3:11,14; 9:6; 12:5. The sense of "eternity" is found in the immediate context at 3:14, and throughout the book.

[441] Fox, *A Rereading*, 192. See also A. Ceresko, "The Function of Antanaclasis (מצא= "to reach, overtake, grasp") in Hebrew Poetry, Especially in the Book of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 44 (1982): 551-69. In four passages, 7:14; 7:23-24; 7:29 and 8:17, Ceresko suggests that מצא should be taken in its intellectual sense "to grasp, learn, understand." He explores the way Hebrew poets and Qoheleth subtly exploit the ambiguity inherent in this verb through the rhetorical figure of antanaclasis, i.e., the repetition of the same word with a different meaning. Ceresko claims quite a range of meanings for מצא: (arrive, reach, overtake, seize, grasp, understand, find, acquire). Schoors, *The Preacher Sought*, Part 2, has pointed out (at 176), that Ceresko's overall thesis of a very expansive semantic range for מצא is based more on the putative translation of Ugaritic cognate verbs rather than on semantic analysis. However, I do agree with Ceresko's claim that in four cited passages above, מצא has the meaning, "grasp, understand" in the intellectual sense.

[442] Schoors, *The Preacher Sought*, Part 2, 172.

[443] See the interesting article on "searching" and "finding" by H. Spieckermann, "Suchen und Finden: Kohelets kritische Reflexionen," *Bib* 79 (1998): 304-331. Spieckermann's study is an overview of Old Testament texts dating from the time of the exile, related to the issue of searching and finding God and noting the use of the verbs מצא and בקש in the process. For example, in Deut 4 any one who searches

cautioned his readers to "Seek the Lord while he may be found, . . ." which implies that there is a fitting time (Eccl 3:1-8) for the Lord to be found: he may be found, but he may not. Job was also in some difficulty about the hiddenness of God, according to Zophar in his speech in 11:7. And the prophet Hosea warned the people that they could seek the Lord, but he would not be found (5:6). These few examples point to the fact that Qoheleth was not unique in his finite understanding of God's nature and activity in the world.

The unique phrase מבלי אשר לא־ימצא = "yet they cannot find out . . ." presents another *crux interpretum*.[444] It is important how this is interpreted, as Ogden has observed, due to the fact that it determines how one views the divine actions.[445] Does this phrase introduce a purpose clause, or a result clause? If it is the former, then since God has placed העלם in the human heart, humans would be unable to understand God's activity. If, however, the latter understanding is to be preferred, reference is being made to the limitations of human knowledge.[446] I am persuaded that the phrase should be rendered as a purpose clause thus meaning that it was God's intention that man would never fully be able to comprehend his activity, past, present or future. This interpretation tends to fit in better with Qoheleth's cutting claims elsewhere about man's epistemological limitations and the actions of an inscrutable deity.

This puts Qoheleth in a very different position when one compares his negative knowledge claims with those of the prophets when they spoke as "Thus says the Lord." There is a vast epistemological chasm between Qoheleth and the knowledge claims made in Isaiah 46:10 where the Lord declares "the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done."[447] On Qoheleth's part, the epistemological deficit is

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for the Lord will find him, while in Ezekiel 34, God goes in search for man. Spieckermann demonstrates that in these and related texts, to search and find God are premised on the assumption that God allows himself to be found. See also Wagner, *TDOT*, 477-78, where he states that later Wisdom Literature reflects on the possibility and impossibility of finding God, most notably in Job and Ecclesiastes.

[444] For a discussion of this phrase see Schoors, *The Preacher Sought*, Part 1, 147-48.

[445] Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 60.

[446] LXX, Vulg, Targ, and Syr render the phrase as a result or final clause. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, (at 98) suggests that there appears to be paronomasia between מבלי and בלבם, which might account for Qoheleth's selection of this rare negative particle. He adopts the purpose clause theory, rendering the phrase, "because of which . . ." By contrast, Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 60, adopts the latter approach, as does Batholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 167, *et al*. The diverse responses of various scholars to difficult interpretational issues in Qoheleth is but a reflection of their overall stance as to whether Qoheleth was an optimist (so Ogden, Bartholomew, Lauha, Whybray, Fredericks, Lohfink), or a pessimist (so Crenshaw, Longman, Anderson).

[447] Similar statements are found in Isa. 41:22-23, 26; 42:9; 44:7-8; 48:3.

staggering in its negativity by comparison, running counter to much of the Old Testament affirmations of faith and to the revelation of God to Israel. Leo Perdue's summation is notable in this context.

> The inability to discern divine activity undercuts both the theologies of salvation history and cultic ritual, which represented and reactualized in sacred drama deeds of divine redemption. And the failure to perceive a coherent pattern for historical time, so evident in prophetic and historical texts in Israel, results in the fragmentation of experience and the loss of collective and individual identity. The human quest for identity and self understanding within a common tradition requires the integration of temporal phases (past, present, and future) as a unity. . . . . With the loss of memory, experience does not achieve unity through time. Rather, experience fragments into disconnected pieces of isolated perceptions. All that remains is the immediacy of the present moment.[448]

This assessment does bring out something alluded to earlier to the effect that Qoheleth was regarded as something of a loner, a man disengaged from the core sinews of Israel's statehood, history and institutions. Hartmut Gese has perceptively observed "According to Koheleth, the essence of the person is determined not only in that one perceives oneself as an individual but also in that one sets oneself against world affairs as a stranger to the world."[449] When one considers the self-absorption of Qoheleth, which is evident in the "I" narrative throughout the monologue, it is easy to envisage Qoheleth as a man who is disenchanted, detached and alienated.[450]

In verse 11a God's creative activity is acknowledged, עולם is placed in man's heart (11b), and the consequence is that man cannot comprehend the nature of divine activity. Francis Holland takes עולם to mean "darkness/ignorance" and interprets verse 11 in the fuller context of 3:1-15 as follows: "In the face of this deliberate withholding of ontological knowledge (this heart of darkness) which overshadows the Time Poem, humanity has little choice but to seize the moment (*carpe diem*), which itself is at the disposal of God who may deny it . . ."[451] This is a perceptive interpretation since it seeks to put Qoheleth's claim in 11c into its fuller context, namely, the poem on

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[448] Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*: *The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abungdon, 1994), 217-18.

[449] H. Gese, "The Crisis of Wisdom in Koheleth," in *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (Issues in Religion and Theology 4 (ed. J. L. Crenshaw; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983): 141-53 (at 143).

[450] On this aspect see N. K. Haden, "Qoheleth and the Problem of Alienation," *CSR* 17 (1987): 52-66. Haden links the modern notion of alienation with Qoheleth's use of הבל. "Perhaps the greatest and most significant affinity between the modern dilemma of alienation and Qoheleth's experience is to be found in the word "vanity" (*hebel*)." (at 56). James G. Williams, "What does it Profit a Man?, 179-93, on the other hand believes that the word עולם is at the centre of existence. עולם is the component which makes the human species distinctive: it gives man a link with God. Yet God's nature and activity (work) remains a mystery. This leads to "the unhealable alienation of man from the world" (at 182). Hartmut Gese, "The Crisis of Wisdom," offers (at 148-9) another interpretation by suggesting that man's alienation in the world is overcome through the fear of God.

[451] Francis Holland, "Heart of Darkness: A Study of Qohelet," *PIBA* 17 (1994): 81-10, (94-5).

appropriate times (verses 1-8), God "doing" and "giving" (verses 10-11), and the invocation to joy (verses 12-13).

So addressing our principal question: what is the basis of these claims, especially in verse 11c, from an epistemological viewpoint? Thomas Krüger writes:

> "If human beings cannot fully comprehend the work of God (v. 11b), the statement that God "made everything beautiful in its time" (v. 11a) cannot be "empirically verified." It cannot be derived from experience but rather formulates a perspective-taken from tradition (Genesis 1) -that makes the interpretation of experience possible."[452]

In other words, Qoheleth in this section, especially in verses 10-15, is but giving vent to his own doctrinal, confessional statements about humanity's epistemological nature and the activity of the deity. Once again we can observe that Qoheleth's observational powers (i.e., his optical mode of perception), which are so emphatically stressed in the monologue, played no part in making such a claim that is found in verse 11c. In this instance there was no empirical base for making such a claim. Rather, it was grounded in inherited tradition and teaching, the conduit for which were acoustic signals (auditory), rather than by visual (optical) stimuli.

8.3 Introduction to 7:23-39

In this critically important section Qoheleth once again engages himself with innermost reflection as he had done earlier (cf. 1:16; 2:1, 15a; 3:17-18). This time he speaks with devastating candour and lays bare his consciousness to the reader. In Craig Bartholomew's assessment these verses "are an important crux for understanding Qohelet's epistemology and Ecclesiastes as a whole."[453]

7:23-29

23 כל־זה נסיתי בחכמה
אמרתי אחכמה והיא רחוקה ממני׃

24 רחוק מה־שהיה ועמק עמק מי ימצאנו׃

25 סבותי אני ולבי לדעת ולתור ובקש חכמה וחשבון
ולדעת רשע כסל והסכלות תוללות׃

26 ומוצא אני מר ממות את־האשה
אשר־היא מצודים וחרמים לבה אסורים ידיה
טוב לפני האלהים ימלט ממנה וחוטא ילכד בה׃

27 ראה זה מצאתי אמרה קהלת
אחת לאחת למצא חשבון׃

[452] Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 88.

[453] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 269.

28 אשר עוד־בקשה נפשי ולא מצאתי
אדם אחד מאלף מצאתי
ואשה בכל־אלה לא מצאתי׃

29 לבד ראה־זה מצאתי
אשר עשה האלהים את־האדם ישר
והמה בקשו חשבנות רבים׃

23 All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me.
24 That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?
25 I turned my mind to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the sum of things, and to know that wickedness is folly and that foolishness is madness.
26 I found more bitter than death the woman who is a trap, whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are fetters; one who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her.
27 See, this is what I found, says Qoheleth, adding one thing to another to find the sum,
28 which my mind has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found.
29 See, this alone I found, that God made human beings straightforward, but they have devised many schemes.

Qoheleth invokes in the space of only eight verses, the language of "finding/not finding" with passionate rhetorical force that is unparalleled in the book. The writing in this segment reflects a man totally obsessed with his intellectual enterprise as can be seen from the following terminological data.

מצא ("find") occurs an amazing eight times in this segment (at 24, 26, 27 (2x), 28 (3x), 29), and nine times in Chapter 7, cf. 7:14

בקש ("seek") is found three times (at 25, 28, 29)

חשבון ("calculation, sum") is used two times (at 25, 27)

חשבנות ("devices") once at 29 (plural form of חשבון?)

תור ("search") appears once at 25

נסיתי ("test") once at 23

ראה ("see") is found twice in the imperative form at 27, 29

ידע ("know") also occurs twice in the infinitive form at 25

סבב ("turn") once at 25

These facts profusely demonstrate that this passage is very rich in experiential data. As Eric Christianson has commented, "This grouping of 'quest' verbs suggests that the forthcoming conclusion is paramount, for Qoheleth has enlisted all of his powers of observation to discover it."[454] However, as for determining the meaning of this crucial passage there is, unsurprisingly, little or no consensus among scholars.

It can, I suggest, be truthfully said that while there are several passages in

[454] Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 94.

Ecclesiastes that pose serious problems for the exegete, this pericope takes the notion of a *crux interpretum* to a new level. Roland Murphy views this unit as "one of the more difficult and perhaps one of the more notorious passages in Ecclesiastes."[455] According to Stuart Weeks, much of this passage "is desperately obscure,"[456] and in Norman Whybray's judgment, there is no question that the sequence of thought in this unit is, at times, very difficult to follow.[457] Few scholars would dissent from these observations. Despite the acknowledged difficulties, my aim will be to attempt to ascertain the general sense of the passage and in doing so to concentrate on exploring Qoheleth's use of the verb מצא and its related terms listed above.

8.4 7: 23-24

This unit is the first time, since 1:12-2:26, that we find Qoheleth presenting a first-person report of (i) his stated objectives, (ii) his methodological execution, and (iii) his findings (outcome). While the passage bristles with interpretational problems, as noted above, James Crenshaw offers a neat summary of the main issues to be addressed: "This section discusses two profound mysteries: wisdom and woman. Both mysteries defy understanding, wisdom because of its remoteness, and woman because she cannot be found."[458] This assessment is only partly correct, as it is clear that Qoheleth's understanding of man (אחד אדם in v 28, and האדם in v 29) is also a very significant topic.

To what does the term כל-זה = "All this" in verse 23 refer? The immediate reference appears to be the preceding section, i.e., the wisdom dialogue in 7:1-22, but there is lexical similarity with 1:13. In both texts, the verb נסיתי = "I test," and the noun בחכמה = "by wisdom" occur. Also, as Fox has noted, the words in 1:13 - נעשו תחת השמים לע כל-אשר are equivalent to מה-שהיה in 7:24, and this latter phrase refers to the same thing as זה in verse 23, i.e., "all that happens in life."[459]

Qoheleth affirms at various points in his autobiography that he has wisdom, and that he carried out his investigations by wisdom (בחכמה). In fact, he makes the stupendous claim that he had acquired more wisdom than any of his predecessors

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[455] Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 77.

[456] Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 100.

[457] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 123.

[458] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 144.

[459] Fox, *A Rereading*, 263. So also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 270.

(1:16), and that it remained with him as he became rich (2:9). Yet in 7:23 he states that אמרתי אחכמה = "I said I will be wise," which is then followed by his denial of human understanding that suggests he did not succeed in his determination to become wise.[460] Fox proposes a solution to this seeming contradiction by suggesting that there is a difference between the wisdom Qoheleth aimed at but did not reach, and the wisdom he did possess. He writes, "Only in 7:23 and 8:1a does Qohelet use a form of הכם to indicate the unobtainable type of wisdom, and he does this in order to create a semantic paradox which seizes the reader's attention."[461]

In a recent exposition of this passage Aubrey Spears picks up on this putative semantic paradox in verse 23 and offers a sustained narrative critical reading of the passage.[462] For him the result of this semantic paradox is only resolved in verse 29. His reading rejects Fox's attempt to explain the alleged "explosive paradox" in verse 23 by advancing two types of wisdom. Instead, Spears believes that,

> In vv 23-24 the reader was disoriented by the destabilizing confession of Qoheleth's lack of wisdom. Immediately, Qoheleth began to recast his entire journey by describing his quest in terms that set before the reader the moral weight of wisdom and folly (v 25), and the moral condition of Qoheleth, himself (v 26). V 27 then teasingly initiated a reorientation with regard to the nature of Qoheleth's "wisdom." Finally, in v 29 this reorientation is complete, as Qoheleth utilizes a skilful wordplay to identify his own search as an evil scheme that has distorted his "uprightness." Thus, the reader is presented with the answer to the lingering question since v 26: What is Qoheleth's transgression? His transgression is his search![463]

Spears concludes by saying that the reader is led on a journey to experience Qoheleth's ironization of his own empirical epistemology. "It is his commitment to the autonomy of individual reason that has led Qoheleth down the path to Folly. God is not to blame for Qoheleth's failure (v 29). The source of blame is Qoheleth's empiricized search for "Wisdom"."[464]

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[460] This verse contains the one single instance of the cohortative (אחכמה) in the monologue. According to Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (at 145), "It expresses strong resolve, indicating that the determination to acquire wisdom was no flippant remark. Qohelet intends to submit to personal discipline in order to reach a worthy goal. But he achieved only the recognition that he had set the sights too high."

[461] M. Fox and B. Porten, "Unsought Discoveries," 28.

[462] Spears, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 122- 95. Spears also refers (at 177) to the semantic paradox in verse 23 as "an explosive paradox."

[463] Spears, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 186.

[464] Spears, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 187-88. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, follows a similar line of reasoning. He writes (at 269), "In Eccl 7:23-29, the reader is led on a journey to experience Qoheleth's ironization of his own empirical epistemology." Also (at 275) he observes, "Ecclesiastes 7:23-29 demonstrates that starting with an autonomous epistemology is not wisdom but folly and will lead one not to truth but right into the arms of Dame Folly."

I am not convinced by this thesis. Spears, like Martin Shields,[465] does not present a rounded view of Qoheleth's understanding of wisdom. Qoheleth is openly acknowledged as a wise man, as is clear from the epilogue in 12:9 (ויתר שהיה קהלת הכם), and though Qoheleth found that wisdom was ineffective in various areas of life, he also made many positive comments about its utility (cf. 2:13; 7:11, 12, 19; 8:1b, 5; 9:1, 13-16, 18a; 10:10). Wisdom is Qoheleth's avowedly preferred methodology by which he relentlessly pursues his intellectual enterprise (1:13; 7:23). In Qoheleth's judgment, as in Job's, there is much that escapes human cognizance. It is, therefore, very difficult to see how Qoheleth's search for wisdom should be categorized as "a transgression," or "an evil thing," as Spears asserts.[466] Roland Murphy's view on this issue is most apposite.

> Obviously Qoheleth was a sage in the traditional sense; the entire book testifies to his deep roots in the wisdom tradition. But the tests he put it too made him realize that he was not truly wise or did not possess the wisdom he sought for. Because he could not understand what God was doing in the world (3:11; 8:17), his affirmation of failure in v 23 is quite in order. He does not distinguish between degrees of wisdom, but it is clear that he set his sights higher than the tradition, and he is all the more strict in his judgment (e.g., 8:17b).[467]

Gordis refers to "*hokmah par excellence*" as against practical Wisdom.[468] I do not think this attempt to solve the contradiction is convincing, as it is difficult to find such a distinction in Ecclesiastes. As Weeks has observed,

> What we do not find elsewhere in Ecclesiastes, however, or anywhere else in biblical literature for that matter, is the notion of some special wisdom *par excellence*, which can be applied successfully to philosophical or cosmological questions in a way that 'ordinary' wisdom cannot. Nothing that Qohelet has said or will say, furthermore, leads us to suppose that he would at any stage have accepted the possibility either of some special or of 'normal' wisdom permitting humans to understand the workings of God or the world.[469]

Verse 24 proceeds to expand on the inability of Qoheleth to comprehend מה-שהיה = "that which exists," a phrase which "seems to refer to the true inwardness of things, the reality below all changing phenomena."[470] Qoheleth intensifies this notion of human

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[465] Shields, *End of Wisdom*. According to Shields wisdom gets a bad reception in the OT, apart from Proverbs. (At 7). He states that the epilogist (12:9-14) is the author of the book and uses Qoheleth's words in the monologue to discredit the "wisdom movement." (See 47-109). Shields' thesis is not convincing due to his flawed understanding of the wisdom tradition.

[466] Spears, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 186.

[467] Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 72. Fox, *A Rereading*, cites (at 264) Murphy's view approvingly.

[468] Gordis, *Koheleth*, 280.

[469] Weeks, Unpublished script on *Ecclesiastes*.

[470] Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 146.

finitude by the spatial metaphor of 'depth', (עמק ועמק = 'and deep, very deep'),[471] an idea echoed in Job 28:12-22. The word עמק connotes something unsearchable, impenetrable, as in Ps 64:7 [MT]. The verse ends with the rhetorical question, "Who can find it?" which "acts as an assertion that no one can reach out far enough to touch wisdom or penetrate deeply enough to lay hold of it. Qohelet generalizes from his own experience: if I cannot be wise, no one can."[472]

8.5 7: 25-29

Verse 25 opens with the verb סבותי אני ולבי, literally, = "I turned, and my heart, . . ." which seems to point to a change in a new direction, a new arena of experience.[473] The intense seriousness, and strenuous aspirations of his investigations is clearly communicated by a string of infinitives, all laden with experiential value, notably, לדעת (x2), לתור, בקש. The object of this focused activity was חכמה וחשבון = "wisdom and solutions/calculations."[474] In v 25b Qoheleth seeks to determine the difference between wisdom, the evil of folly, foolishness, and madness. The syntax here is very difficult.

In verses 26-29 Qoheleth ratchets up the rhetorical temperature with an intense and unparalleled deployment of the verb מצא that appears six times in these two verses. Of these, one is in the infinitive form, and of the remaining five, three confirm a positive outcome from his quest, but on two occasions his search ends with negative success. "In his quest for the abstract, all he finds, though, are people: the dangerous woman of 7:26, the one man in a thousand of 7:28, and the human behaviour described in 7:29."[475]

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[471] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, states (at 145) that the repetition of this adjective constitutes a superlative (cf. GKC, §133k); so also Gordis, *Qoheleth*, 281, Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 260, contra Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes*, who states (at 180) that the duplication of an adjective like עמק does not amount to a superlative, citing GKC, §133l in support.

[472] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 145. Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes*, take a contrary view. Fredericks writes (at 183), "His [Qoheleth's] rhetorical questions in 7:24 and 8:1 are motivating challenges to the wise, not sighs of cynical fatalism." The different attitudes demonstrated in these two accounts is explained by the fact that Crenshaw views Qoheleth as having a dark vision of reality, while Fredericks displays more optimism about Qoheleth's outlook on life.

[473] The frequently used term לב = "mind, heart," normally takes the accusative particle את (cf. 2:20). The phrase is difficult without emendation, but it has the support of LXX and Syr. BHS suggests inserting the verb נתן thus giving ונתון לבי לתור, so Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 202, who cites 1:17 as a precedent. On the other hand many MSS, Targ. and Vulg. read בלבי = "in my heart."

[474] In the Hebrew Bible, the term וחשבון is found only in Ecclesiastes. It also occurs in 7:27 and 9:10. For a discussion see Schoors, *The Preacher Sought,* Part 2, 445-57.

[475] Weeks, *Ecclesiastes: OBC*, 426.

Verses 23-25 give a very strong indication to the reader of the intensity with which Qoheleth brings to his journey of exploration, which is strongly reflected by the reiteration and diversity of the verbs denoting intellectual effort. A crucial issue to address in verse 26 is the meaning of the term, האשה = "the woman." Whoever is in mind here, the description of the woman points to a very powerful and dangerous one as intimated by the terms "snares," = (מצודים), "nets," = (חרמים), and "fetters/bonds," = (אסורים). On a first reading of this passage one could easily draw the conclusion that Qoheleth had a negative attitude about women. As Graham Ogden has noted, many commentators hold that Qoheleth does not trust the female, or certain types of women.[476]

Hence, the charge of misogyny has been laid against the learned sage. But how is the term, האשה = "the woman," to be interpreted? Is it to be taken in a literal or metaphorical sense? Various proposals have been offered. Some regard the reference to include all women in general.[477] Specific kinds of woman such as a harlot, or an adulteress, have also been suggested.[478] Others think that a particular kind of woman is in view, e.g., Qoheleth's wife.[479] Fox takes the meaning in a literal sense and is categorical in his understanding of the passage: "Despite the valiant efforts of some exegetes, this passage remains irreparably misogynistic. The fact that Qohelet lists woman alongside other pleasurable things in 9:9 (and, for that matter, 2:8) does not buffer the acidity of the present passage."[480]

According to William Brown, Qoheleth esteems the male over the female, even

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[476] Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 130.

[477] So Ginsburg, *Coheleth*, 387; Delitzsch, *Biblischer Commentar*, 326-28; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 282-84; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 204; Fox, *Qoheleth*, 242; ———. *A Rereading*, 266-69; Zimmerli, *Predigers Salomo*, 208-9; Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 225-38; Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 101-02;——, "War Kohelet ein Frauenfeind? Ein Versuch, die Logik und den Gegenstand von Koh., 7:23-8:1a herauszufinden," in *La Sagesse de l'Ancien Testament* (ed. M. Gilbert; BETL 51; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1979), 259-87; Zimmerman, *The Inner World*, 29-30.

[478] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 146; Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 116; Shields, *The End of Wisdom:* 187; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 125; O. Loretz, *Qoheleth und der alte Orient: Untersuchungen zu Stil und theologischer Thematik des Buches Qohelet* (Frieburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1964), 115, 205; I. Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, *Song of Songs* (The NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 154, 157; Hertzberg, *Der Prediger*, 157; Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 147.

[479] Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, 205.

[480] Fox, *A Rereading*, 266. I think one cannot summarily dismiss the implications of 9:9 in the way Fox does. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, comments (at 146) that, "the unflattering attitude toward women is balanced by awareness of the joys of a happy marriage. Qohelet also encourages enjoyment of the woman whom one loves (9:9)."

by a little, and is therefore "misogynistic to the core."[481] And Tremper Longman's conclusion is that Qoheleth is a misogynist.[482] From another angle, Mark Sneed views Qoheleth as in a deconstructed mode.[483] He states that the many experiential verbs found on this passage imply mastery (in Freudian terms). According to Sneed, "Women represent the irrational for Qoheleth. He avoids them as he would Dame Folly. Scholars have attempted to rescue the famous passage of 7:25-29 from its misogyny, but to no avail."[484]

It is difficult to see how such comments are justified from a reading of the passage in question. There is no clear textual warrant for regarding Qoheleth as viewing women as being irrational. And the claim that Qoheleth avoids women as he would Dame Folly, is but another example of the diametrically opposed interpretations that this book elicits from commentators. For example, both Spears and Bartholomew hold that Qoheleth was captured by Dame Folly.[485] Yet Sneeds states the contrary! On the other hand, some scholars have sought to salvage Qoheleth's reputation from the charge of being a woman hater.[486]

The allegation that Qoheleth was a woman hater is, I suggest, rather overdone. One cannot easily dismiss, as Fox does, the very positive reference to woman in the "joy passage" in 9:9 (and possibly in 2:8). An out-and-out misogynist would be very unlikely to give expression to the sentiments of human love between a man and a woman that is movingly presented in 9:9.

However, if we place this passage in a wider hermeneutical context outside Ecclesiastes then it could be helpful to consider the influential personification of

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[481] Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 84.

[482] Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 206. Longman elaborates (at 207) that Qoheleth's comments are full of tensions and "thus I have characterized him as a confused wise man whose voice is not to be identified with the teaching of the canonical book." D. Garrett, "Ecclesiastes 7:25-29," *CTR* (1988): 309-21, has endeavoured (at 311) not only to staunchly defend Qoheleth's reputation but also "to defend the Bible from the accusation of misogyny." For him the context of chapter 7 refers to marriage and what Qoheleth is doing is merely acknowledging the fact that sometimes men experience grief in their marriage relationships. This is a strained reading of the text as the notion of marriage is foreign to the passage.

[483] Sneed, "(Dis)closure in Qoheleth: Qoheleth Deconstructed," *JSOT* 27 (2002): 115-26. See also his "Qoheleth as "Deconstructionist," " *OTE* 10 (1997): 303-11.

[484] Sneed, "(Dis)closure in Qoheleth," 122.

[485] Spears, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 192; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 274.

[486] For example, N. Lohfink, "War Kohelet ein Frauenfiend?," 259-87;——, *Qoheleth,* 100-03; K. Blatzer, "Women and War in Qoheleth 7:23-8:1a," *HTR* 80 (1987): 127-32; T. Krüger, " "Frau Weisheit" in Kol 7:26," *Bib* 73 (1992): 394 -403; J. Y. S. Pahk, "The Significance of אשר in Qoh 7,26: "More Bitter Than Death is the Woman, *If* She is a Snare," in Schoors, *Qoheleth in the Context of Wisdom*, 373-383.

wisdom in Prov 1-9 where there is a significant correspondence between the woman mentioned in verse 7:26 and her counterpart in that work. Verse 26 refers to האשה = "*the* woman," which suggests that the reader would know who the woman is. Furthermore, the feminine noun, הסכלות = "the folly," in verse 25, is the most likely referent in the immediate context. The identity of the woman could therefore be taken to mean the personification of Folly in Prov 9:13-18. Just as in Proverbs the one who pleases God is said to be able to escape from the nets of folly, "but he who is offensive shall be taken by her." (7:26). On this reading, we may conclude that Qoheleth has succeeded in the second part of his stated search.

Verse 27 is most unusual particularly because of the third person insertion, 'says the Qoheleth.' Various explanations have been advanced for this phenomenon,[487] but I adopt the simple solution that the author, very conscious of Qoheleth's intensity at this stage of his endeavours, is but being emphatic in indicating the significance of his findings to date. As Fredericks puts it, "It is a climactic point of some sort, and probably indicates a more profound moment of reflection."[488]

Verse 28 has attracted much attention and has invoked some unusual interpretations.[489] It is not easy to grasp the meaning of this difficult verse due to certain ambiguities. One issue concerns the interpretation of the relative pronoun אשר. Some commentators regard it as referring back to חשבון = "solution/answer" at the end of verse 27 as the relative particle. However, in Murphy's view, it could be regarded as introducing a new statement that points to something that Qoheleth did not find. "Our translation indicates that he rejects a saying that is demeaning to women. V 29 contains his verdict on all human beings, men and women alike, and would be anticlimactic after a misogynistic statement."[490]

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[487] Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, states (at 344) that the interruption is dramatic. According to Salyer, the implied author earlier lampooned Qoheleth in the so-called Royal Experiment (Chapters 1-2) where the verb תור was used. It now appears in 7:25 , and he adds (at 344), "By having the narrator refer back to the verb תור used in 2:3, the implied author deftly resumes that lampooning here." In Salyer's view Qoheleth employs a radically self-centred epistemology, and views Qoheleth as a misogynist. He writes (at 346), "All attempts to lessen the misogynist effects of the text should therefore be seen as misreadings of the text's intention. The point of the text is to let such sentiments speak for themselves." How texts speak for themselves is not clear from Salyer's analysis. It seems to me that texts have to be interpreted, and that demands intentional activity on the part of the exegete.

[488] Fredericks & Estes, *Ecclesiastes*, 185.

[489] See references at f/n. 486, above.

[490] Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 77. A similar point is made by Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, (at 147), "The assertion in 7:29 that God made humankind upright favors this interpretation." However, he goes on to state that this understanding of woman does not seem to harmonize with the misogynism underlying 7:28,

In interpreting verse 28a it had been traditionally assumed that Qoheleth found no "good" or "wise" women, and in many translations, liberties are taken to introduce a moral-type adjective, such as "upright" before אדם and אשה, as in the NIV.[491] But this translation, while it may add some clarity, has no basis in the Hebrew text whatsoever.[492] In any case, as Whybray has so perceptively noticed, "The commentators, in interpreting it [verse 28] have failed to notice that it *does not state what it is* that the speaker has sought, and which he has, or has not, found in his extensive research. . ."[493]

In trying to resolve the impasse in explaining this verse, Seow states that the remark in verse 28b is intrusive in the passage: "The sudden polemic is out of place, for the passage is concerned with the dangers of Folly and the elusiveness of Wisdom."[494] He further observes that the word אדם for "man" as opposed to "woman" is out of character for Ecclesiastes, as in all other instances where a specific person is mentioned איש is used. Also, in the very next verse אדם is employed and there it refers to all humanity.

Moreover, Seow also holds that, in terms of logic, verse 28b contradicts verse 29, the "only" at the beginning of verse 29 makes sense only when it follows verse 28a directly – without the intrusive comment in verse 28b. Thus, "Omitting v 28b, the reader would not miss a beat. We conclude, therefore, that verse 28b was a marginal gloss that had been inadvertently incorporated into the body of the text."[495] Seow's concluding remarks on this unit are: -

> Thus vv 25b-26 are balanced by vv 27-28a. The former concern Folly; the latter concern Wisdom. It appears, however, that in the end neither Folly nor Wisdom is a real option for the mortal: the one is deadly, but the other is elusive. It is in such a crazy game of hide-and-seek that humans find themselves. They are pursued by Folly, a pernicious hunter from whom they must try to escape but cannot, even as they try desperately to find the one who will keep them safe, namely Wisdom. But wisdom eludes.[496]

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where women are responsible for their own distortion." This comment only has some force if one assumes that there is misogynism underlying 7:28b.

[491] The NIV renders 7:28b as follows, ". . . I found one [upright] man among a thousand, but not one [upright] woman among them all."

[492] So Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good?*, 179; Weeks, "Ecclesiastes," 426.

[493] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 127. (Original italics).

[494] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 274.

[495] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 274.

[496] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 275.

This interpretation has one serious flaw: there is no warrant to posit the theory of a gloss with respect to the explanation of verse 28b. It is all too easy to obviate difficult passages in this book by advancing the glossator theory, which lacks any consistent external criteria whereby an objective judgment can be made.

Qoheleth has not found the חשבון but he emphatically claims in verse 29 that he has come to a considered judgment about humans. This is made very clear by the unusual use of לבד = "only/alone," which is the only occurrence in the Hebrew Bible where it introduces a main clause.[497] It is as if Qoheleth was drawing to the reader's attention the heightened awareness of his discovery.

In interpreting verse 29, attention has been brought to bear on the meaning of the terms ישר and חשבנות. The former term, which has the meaning "to be straight, upright, level," is, in Hertzberg's opinion, devoid of any ethical content where it is used of human beings (as here); it simple means, "simple, uncomplicated."[498] This seems unlikely in the context. When used of humans in the Hebrew Bible, in most cases ישר does have an ethical and religious connotation.[499] Even though God has made humans upright/straight, they have proved unable to remain upright - והמה בקשו חשבנות רבים. This sentence is also susceptible to different interpretations.

Two issues are important to note. First, how is והמה to be interpreted? If ו is to be taken as the adversative "but," then humans have fallen from this high moral status (ישר) and have sought out חשבנות רבים "many devices."[500] Some see an illusion here to Genesis 6:5 where human wickedness is described prior to the Flood, which is

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[497] Fox, *A Rereading*, 271.

[498] Hertzberg, *Prediger*, 159.

[499] So Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 127; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 207; Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 134. Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, observes (at 186), ". . . [Gen 3] where humanity was created morally upright but fell to its spiritual and physical death." Fox, *A Rereading*, 272, renders חשבנות רבים = "great solutions," and also views ישר in a non-moral way. He observes, "He [Qohelet] is, rather speaking of a flaw common to humanity generally, namely the tendency to seek answers and make calculations. Qohelet is the prime example of this, for he sought a חשבון and got himself all tangled up in the computations."

[500] According to BDB, 364, the term חשמנות is the plural of a singular noun, חשבון = "device, inventions." Contra Gordis, *Koheleth*, 281. Gordis holds that חשמנות has the meaning of "devices" in verse 29 and in 2 Chronicles 26:15 (the only other reference to this term in the Hebrew Bible). However, in 2 Chronicles the context points to the meaning of "war machine." Nevertheless, the Septuagint reads λογισμοὺς πολλούς (many arguments) and the Vulgate *infinitus . . . quaestionibus* (with many questions) thus taking חשבנות in its primary sense of "calculations" or "questioning." Since חשבנות presents a contrast to ישר in the context, Whitley's rendering is ". . . but they pursued many *questionable things*." *Koheleth*, (at 70).

feasible.[501] But if ו is merely viewed as an ordinary conjunction – "and" – then the meaning could have a more positive nuance. Since man has been created upright then humans "have gone on from that point to search out many ways to explain things,"[502] This implies that "חשבנות are not base schemes of the human mind, a departure from its 'upright' state; they are attempts to deduce meaning (cf. v. 25). This leads to the conclusion that Qoheleth takes a positive view of humanity and of the struggles to comprehend existence?"[503]

In summary, what did Qoheleth find, and what did he not find? There is no doubt that he was in a serious mood of searching, as the language of this unit makes abundantly clear. In verse 26 he claims to have found (i) a dangerous woman "more bitter than death."; (ii) one man in a thousand, in verse 28a; and (iii) in verse 29 he has found all humans corruptible, even though God made them upright. But he did not find "a woman among all of these" in verse 28b. Overall, we conclude that Qoheleth finds it virtually impossible to find wisdom, which he sought so incessantly, and he continues to be perplexed about what is going on in the world.

8.6 8:16-17

8:16-17

16 כאשר נתתי את־לבי לדעת חכמה ולראות את־הענין אשר
נעשה על־הארץ כי גם ביום ובלילה שנה בעיניו איננו ראה:

17 וראיתי את־כל־מעשה האלהים כי לא יוכל האדם למצוא
את־המעשה אשר נעשה תחת־השמש בשל אשר יעמל האדם
לבקש ולא ימצא וגם אם־יאמר החכם לדעת לא יוכל למצא:

16 When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how one's eyes see sleep neither day nor night,
17 then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out.

[501] So Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 207; Daniel J. Treier, *Proverbs: Ecclesiastes*, 196. Longman notes the term מחשבת = "thoughts" is related to חשבנות as both words are formed from the verbal root חשבון = "to think, to calculate."

[502] So Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 134. However, the majority of commentators adopt the adversative meaning, which I suggest is the correct interpretation.

[503] Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 134. This conclusion is in keeping with Ogden's view of Qoheleth as an optimist rather than a pessimist. I very much doubt that Qoheleth had a wholly positive view of humanity, 3:18; 4: 1-3; 4:4; 5:1[ET]. As Ellen Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* writes (at 205), "Humanity is the sole part of creation that can "devise many schemes" (v. 29) and willfully depart from the intention of its Maker. Moreover, Koheleth's experience suggests that moral perverseness is overwhelmingly more common than integrity."

These two verses bring to a conclusion the discourse of 6:10- 8:17. In presenting his case Qoheleth finishes with an intense rhetorical flourish that disallows any concession to epistemological certainty about understanding God's activity in the world. In this brief unit Qoheleth reiterates the severe limitations of human cognition that are expressed elsewhere (3:11; 7:14, 25, 27-28).[504] In fact these two verses are laden with the three key verbs of epistemological significance: מצא (3x), ידע (2x), and ראה (2x). In addition, the verb בקש is found in 17b, and in 16b Qoheleth describes his goal in language reminiscent of 1:13; 2:12, and especially 7:25, 28, 29. In this, another crucial epistemological passage, there is a growing intensity of expression with Qoheleth's dogmatic assertions to such an extent that they virtually jump off the page.

George Barton and other scholars see verse 16b as the protasis, and verse 17 as the apodosis, with the last part of verse 16 regarded as a parenthesis. Fox translates verse 16 as such, thus leading smoothly into verse 17.[505] An interpretational issue here concerns the subject of the phrase אינני ראה = "he does not see." Fox states that since there is no antecedent for the third person, and emendation to the first person is called for.[506] Thus, he regards Qoheleth as the subject, indicated by the person pronoun "my." This has the effect of eliminating the tension between the first person in verse 16a and 17 and the third person in 16b.

Leong Seow proposes another solution to the problem. The clause in verse 16b is disruptive and in his view it properly belongs immediately following "under the sun" in verse 17.[507] Understood in his way, this rendering also makes good general sense. Seow notes that deprivation of sleep is a motif in the ancient Near East for religious fervour; people who describe their total dedication to certain tasks speak of their efforts day and night and how they deprive themselves of sleep.[508] This means that the emphasis here is on the sage's complete commitment to the task of finding out the

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[504] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, suggests (at 138) that these two verses may have been an editorial insertion placed here to give a more systematic presentation of Qoheleth's thought. This is not, however, necessary. The verb מצע in this context is used in a very negative sense and is linked to the preceding context, and in what follows. As noted by Krüger, *Qoheleth*, (at 163) the theme "limited knowledge" is taken up later in 9:1, 11-12, and plays an important role in previous texts, especially in 7:23-29.

[505] Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 157. Ogden, Qoheleth, writes (at 153), "Presumably, people are so preoccupied with their business that they never have the chance to sleep or rest properly." For the unique expression "seeing sleep" see Whitley, *Koheleth*, 77; Barton, *Ecclesiaastes*, 157; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 157.

[506] Fox, *A Rereading*, 289.

[507] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 276-77, 289.

[508] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 289.

mystery of the nature of divine activity in the world.

Graham Ogden has forwarded a different interpretation. Since Qoheleth says sleep was in his eyes, day and night, he was therefore unable to see. If Qoheleth himself is the subject, then he failed to see or comprehend as he had hoped. This frustration was due to the fact that there was always sleep in his eyes. Ogden takes 'sleep' as a metaphor for blindness to facts (Prov 20:13; Job 14:12). Consequently, Qoheleth confesses that he was so obtuse, so blind, that he could not see the answer.[509] This is not a persuasive solution to the problem; I agree with Fox on this issue as the tone of his translation seems more in keeping with the remarks in 7:23f, i.e., it is impossible to understand "what God makes happen."[510]

The certainty expressed in verse 17 is laced with a triple dose of מצא, which sets forth in the most dogmatic terms the limits of human knowing. The verse begins with the verb ראיתי = "I saw" which has the meaning "I realized", thus indicating a mental state of personal reflection in respect of כל-מעשה האלהים = "all the work of God." It is to be noted that the verb בקש = "to seek" is grammatically linked with מצא, which would point to the depth of Qoheleth's intention to pursue his intellectual quest. Also worth mentioning is the presence of the verb ידע = "to know" (in both verses 16 and 17). These infinitives are not related to what Qoheleth claims to know, however, but refer to his mental state as to what he intends to undertake.

In assigning meaning to each of the occurrences of מצא, Anthony Ceresko translates the first and third occurrences as, "to grasp, to understand." But in the second occurrence, he explains that the context and the collocation of מצא with בקש call for the translation, "to find." Thus he renders 17b, "However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find."[511] He argues that Qoheleth is using מצא in antanaclasis mode here, i.e., the repetition of the same word in two senses. But as Schoors has observed, בקש is used here in denoting intellectual research and thus מצא is to be understood as "to grasp,

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[509] Ogden, *Qohele*th, 153. The observation by K. Galling, *Der Prediger*, is worth citing here. "Das singuläre Bild vom "Nichtsehen des Schlafes" ist für die Nacht unter gegebenen Umständen verständlich; aber: wer sucht des Tages den Schlaf!" (at 113) – "The singular image of the "not-seeing of sleep" is understandable for the night under the circumstances, but whoever seeks the day to sleep!" There is a tinge of irony in verse 16 due to the fact that when one's eyes are open they cannot see if they are closed for sleep! See Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon*, 206.

[510] Fox, *A Rereading*, 289. Ogden's proposal to take the term sleep as a metaphor seems strange when the term is juxtaposed with "day and night." As Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun*, has noted (at 153), ". . . the *not seeing* here can hardly refer to the search itself, as it is immediately followed by the claim *and I saw*."

[511] Ceresko, "The Function," 567.

understand."[512]

Qoheleth makes reference in verse 17 to כל־מעשה האלהים = "all the work of God."[513] His stupendous claim is that he has considered (וראיתי = "then I saw") all of this. This is a personal statement he makes about his intellectual enterprise. But reference is also made to אשר נעשה תחת־השמש = "all that happens under the sun." This is applicable to a more collective audience: mankind. Is the "work of God" (divine activity) and "all that happens under the sun" (human activity), one and the same activity, or are two separate entities in view?

Norman Whybray signifies that Qoheleth here equates the work of God with the work done under the sun, that is, God controls the events of human history.[514] James Crenshaw holds that this verse "equates God's work with activity on earth – elsewhere Qohelet only implies that whatever occurs is God's doing."[515] Daniel Fredericks charts the parallels of 8:16-9:1 with similar material in 1:13-2:3 and 7:23-29 and concludes that the distinction between divine and human actions is fairly clear, but in verses 16-17, the works of God are in view.[516] Norbert Lohfink makes the following observation on verse 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 especially 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.[517]

In response to this claim, Thomas Krüger writes,

> . . . the text can be understood in the sense that within the framework of "what is done under the sun," both human and divine activity occur without the difference between the two being erased: because the realm of "what is done under the sun" comprises, among other things, divine activity that (at least in part) escapes human knowledge (cf. 3:11; 11:5), this realm is not completely transparent for human beings.[518]

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[512] Schoors, *The Preacher Sought*, Part 2, 176.

[513] The expression, "the work of God" is also found in 7:13 and 11:5. In 3:11 Qoheleth speaks of "the work which God does" which is the object of a negative clause which stresses man's ignorance.

[514] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 139. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, also agrees. He writes (at 293), "The mention of "all that has been done under the sun" anticipates the many references to the activities of the righteous and the wicked, as well as the activities of God. . . . (and, at 294), "Thus, vv 10-17 elaborate on what is meant by "all that is done under the sun" – that is, activities human and divine."

[515] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 157.

[516] Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes*, 205.

[517] Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 110-111.

[518] Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 164.

Krüger gives an alternative explanation whereby verse 17a is aimed at the situation in 3:11, that the limits of human knowledge go back to the actions of God, which by implication acknowledges that the activity of God does not coincide with that of human beings, but rather sets its limits. In other words, on this interpretation, Qoheleth pointedly attributes to the sovereign action of God the human limitation of understanding divine activity.[519]

I am inclined to agree with this latter approach which is also adopted by Fox when he translates thus, ". . . man cannot grasp anything that God makes happen, that is to say, the events that occur under the sun, . . ." But it must be acknowledged that Qoheleth nowhere insists that man is in a state of absolute ignorance, and he himself gives expression as having grasped and found many things: "Qohelet is asserting that no one can understand the rationale of events in life as a whole."[520] A similar view is expressed in the famous poem by Paul in 1 Cor 13:12: "Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood."[521]

8.7 Summary and Assessment

When a writer sets out on a personal investigation and announces his "findings", it will be evident that the verb מצא = "to find" will have obvious experiential importance, especially when that verb is densely used in the space of seven verses. This term, of course, can attract a semantic range that allows the author a certain linguistic flexibility. Thus we observed that מצא can refer to the physical act of finding an object, as in someone saying, "Look, I have found my watch." There is also the meaning that מצא has the sense "to grasp, understand," as in 3:11.

It is very difficult, however, to see how Qoheleth could have come to the

[519] This interpretation is followed by A. Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis*, 131-35; contra Luca Mazzinghi, "The Verbs מצע and בקש in Qohelet," in *The Language of Qohelet in its Context: Essays in Honour of Prof. A. Schoors on the Occasion of his Seveneth Birthday (*eds. A. Berlejung and P. van Hecke. BETL 164. Louvain, Paris and Dudley, MA; Peeters and Dept. of Oriental Studies, Louvain, 2007), 91 -120, who states (at 112), "Here [v 17] Qohelet does not want to affirm that God must be considered directly responsible for the epistemological limit that afflicts man. The impossibility of understanding the action of God leads directly to the failure of knowledge and human activity. The problem is on man's side, not on God's." Wagner, *TDOT*, (at 478) states that "The expression "work" must be taken in the broad sense of God's activity in nature, the cosmos, and history, activity that comes about unquestioned and uninterrupted according to its own plan and meaning, without any human being – and be he ever so wise – being able to fathom and understand it . . ."

[520] Fox, *A Rereading*, 289. Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes,* make a similar point (at 205), "Qoheleth hardly argues anywhere that we can know nothing about God and what God does." As we discovered in Chapters 6 and 7, Qoheleth made many knowledge claims about the deity.

[521] The major difference between Paul's statement about human limitations and Qoheleth's is that Paul's is situated in an eschatological perspective, but this dimension is missing in Qoheleth's.

conclusion he did in 3:11 by empirical means, for it is not a state of affairs that is verifiable (or falsifiable) by human experience. The first part of the verse –"He [God] has made everything suitable for its time . . ." is a theological claim that is in keeping with Israelite monotheism. The last part of the verse affirms that humans ". . . cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." also concurs well with the witness of other Old Testaments writers. The novel claim by Qoheleth in this verse is that God has ". . . put eternity into their minds, . . .", a claim not found elsewhere in the Old Testament.

Given these observations, the conclusion to be drawn is that in making the claims in 3:11, Qoheleth is essentially declaring a personal belief about the nature of God's transcendence, and human finitude. It therefore does not constitute a proposition that can be viewed as a true belief that is justifiable in epistemological terms, as explained in chapter three. The sage certainly *believes* what he writes about God and human limitation, and he certainly holds that what he believes is *true*. But the statement made in 3:11, from an empirical perspective, cannot be accorded *justified* status, due to the fact that the state of affairs so described is beyond the boundaries of human experiential knowledge. Other criteria relating to epistemic justification may be found to enhance the status of these claims, and this is an issue that will be considered later in this study.

In 8:16-17 the claim that a wise man cannot find out what is going on in the world is not a new theme, but it is delivered with a rhetorical force and intensity that brilliantly captures the attention of the reader. These two verses are a most emphatic denial of the availability of human knowledge. Verse 16 tells us nothing about how Qoheleth reached his conclusion regarding his insomnia; this opinion is another instance of hyperbole, as is his claim to have seen all the things done under the sun and observed all the work of God. Verse 16 is immediately followed by ". . . a crescendo of skepticism, three times accenting the phrase, "not find out." "[522] Here we have rich irony for we have a declaration of certain knowledge on Qoheleth's part decisively pointing out the serious knowledge limitations of the wise.

There cannot be any doubt that מצא is a key word in this pericope, and Qoheleth's thrice-fold use of these staccato-type assertions conveys to the reader the impression of a man whose mind is steeped in dogmatic certainty, as well as resigned negativity. There clearly is a strong experiential/knowledge dimension to the verb מצא,

[522] Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 352.

and the inclusion of the experiential related verbs, ידע, ראה, and בקש, - within the scope of two short verses - assuredly points to a man passionately striving for epistemological certainty.

Notwithstanding these dogmatic assertions about God and human kind, it is difficult to conclude that Qoheleth reached these conclusions on empirical grounds. Man's limitations are common knowledge in Old Testament literature, and since human beings are universally recognized as cognitively limited, Qoheleth's strident claims in 8:16-17 are not instances of specific knowledge emanating from his peculiar personal experiences under the sun.

Finally, 7:23-29 is a passage that strikes the reader as being saturated with a plethora of experiential language: Qoheleth seeks, searches, tests, finds, turns, sees, and wants to find the sum of things. What was Qoheleth looking for, and what did he find? The "I" narrative comes to the fore especially in these verses: "I tested", "I turned", "I found" (x4), "I have not found" (x2). The strongest sense of intellectual enquiry pervades this pericope; the only other comparable section of the book where Qoheleth's ego is so prominent and intense is in Ch. 2.[523]

When Bartholomew writes, "Verses 23-39 are an important crux for understanding Qoheleth's epistemology and Ecclesiastes as a whole.",[524] I would agree with the first sentence of this assessment, but not the second part of his claim. This latter view tends to attach an importance to these verses that somehow transfers over to the rest of the book. That, I suggest, is not so. Bartholomew describes Qoheleth's epistemology as "autonomous."[525] He further explains that Qoheleth is engaged in a quest for "certain knowledge resulting from logical analysis of personal experience and observation."[526] He goes on to indicate that Qoheleth epistemology is one of general autonomy, not just empiricism.[527] "Observation is a major element in Qoheleth's epistemology but so too are experience and reason."[528] In other words, I take it to mean

[523] See Isaksson, *The Language*, 167 for the frequency of the suffix conjugation forms used by Qoheleth. Ch. 2 stands out above all others in this respect.

[524] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 269.

[525] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 271.

[526] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 274.

[527] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 275.

[528] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 55.

that Bartholomew holds that Qoheleth was an empiricist in his methodology. From the evidence thus far educed from Qoheleth's epistemic claims it is submitted that this appraisal cannot stand up to critical scrutiny, and I will in due course return to this issue towards the end of this thesis to substantiate my view.

When we turn to consider the language and intent of 7:23-29, first impressions suggest that a strong case can be made out that Qoheleth was deeply involved in pursing his own, deeply personal quest by an empirical methodology. The experiential richness of the language would appear to confirm this. Yet on reflection, two factors militate against this perception. First, Qoheleth refers to God in v 26c ('one who pleases God escapes her), and in verse 29 (. . . I found that God made human beings straightforward (upright), . . .'). These are claims to divine knowledge that do not have, nor could ever have, an experiential grounding. If anything, they are counter-experiential.

Secondly, how one interprets this very challenging passage will be crucial to any assessment of the nature of Qoheleth's knowledge claims. Thus, if we take this passage in a literal sense we will more than likely come to view Qoheleth as an irredeemable misogynist, thus following scholars like Fox, Brown, and Longman, *et al*. But if we broaden our hermeneutical vision by extending the literary context of this pericope to the personification of wisdom in the book of Proverbs, then our conclusion would lead to a different understanding. I favour the latter interpretation. The essence of Qoheleth's problem was that he was engaged in an intellectual exercise to find Lady Wisdom, which turned out to be a notable failure. He sought wisdom by the methodology of wisdom and hopelessly exclaimed, "but it was far from me."

Following on from this important verb in Qoheleth's lexicon we will turn to examine the verb ראה = "to see" that potentially has even greater experiential significance due to its very high visibility in the monologue. This task will occupy our attention in chapters 9 and 10 to follow. A summary of this material with concluding remarks relating to this key verb will be given at the end of chapter 10.

PART 4. QOHELETH'S USE OF THE VERB ראה

Chapter 9: The Verb ראה = "to see" (Part 1)

9.1 Introduction

It is a very noteworthy fact that the author of Ecclesiastes uses the verb ראה = "to see" with phenomenal regularity. Not only is it employed a staggering total of 47 times; it also enjoys a wide distribution throughout the book, occurring in every chapter in one form or another.[529] In her monograph, Annette Schellenberg has noted that its relative frequency underscores the fact that its intensive use in the book exceeds its average use in the Old Testament by a factor of 3.5.[530] She further remarks that this is all the more surprising in that this verb is well attested in other Wisdom literature.[531] On these facts alone it is true to say, in the words of one commentator, "Qoheleth is deeply interested in experience and observation. The author is a keen and intelligent observer and commentator, both of the material world and of human behaviour."[532]

What is unusual about Qoheleth as a writer is that he invites his readers to see things, but he does not, on the whole, invite people to hear things, or be told things. What he does not do is to say, "I have heard that," or "I have learned that." As earlier noted, Qoheleth never, at any point, uses the verb שמע in the first person to refer to his own personal activities, as Pierre Van Hecke has observed.[533] Antoon Schoors has quite correctly pointed out that ראה, in combination with שמע expresses the totality of perception.[534] The phenomenon of the frequent parallelism of these two verbs in the

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[529] According to H. F. Fuhs, *TDOT*, 212, there are over 1300 occurrences of ראה in the Old Testament, of which 1129 are in Qal form. Fuhs states (at 213) that the verb occurs in all the books of the Old Testament except Zechariah, and that the usage of the verb in Ecclesiastes as opposed to Proverbs is noteworthy as it is found 47 times in the former shorter book, against only13 in the latter, which is a much more substantial work. According to Schoors, *The Preacher Sought*, Part 2, 59, ראה is found a mere three times in Proverbs.

[530] Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis*, 181.

[531] Contra, Fuhs, *TDOT, 213*. See f/n. 529 above.

[532] B. Boyle, " 'Let Your Garments Always be White' (Ecc 9:8): Time, Fate, Chance and Provident Design According to Qoheleth," *ABR* 55 (2007): 29-40, (at 29).

[533] P. Van Hecke, "The Verbs ראה and שמע in the Book of Qohelet: A Cognitive-Semantic Perspective," in *The Language of Qohelet in its Context: Essays in Honour of Prof. A. Schoors on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (OLA 164; eds. A. Berlejung and P. Van Hecke; Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters en Departemant Oosterse Studies, 2007), 203.

[534] Schoors, *The Preacher Sought*, Part 2, 59.

Hebrew Bible raises the question as to the relationship between 'seeing' and 'hearing.' Kraus once commented, ". . . in early Hebrew tradition hearing takes undisputed priority over seeing and all other forms of sense perception."[535] There is no question that "hearing" would take precedence over "seeing" in certain domains such as instruction and learning the law. But the act of 'seeing' was vital in the very early traditions of the patriarchs, most notably with Abraham, and later with Moses at Mt. Horeb.

However, as Fuhs has noted, when ראה and שמע occur together, ". . . the texts either refer to a unitary personal act of perception (Dt. 29:3[4]; Isa. 6:9ff.; Jer. 5:21; Prov. 20:12; Eccl.1:8) or establish the priority of seeing over hearing (Gen. 45:27; I K. 10:7; Ps. 48:9[8]; Job 42:5)."[536] In Ecclesiastes the only time that these two cognitively related verbs occur together is at 1:8. "The eye is not sated with seeing, nor the ear filled by hearing" (1:8b).[537] Thus, from the very outset, Qoheleth emphasizes the generally acknowledged limitations of human perception.

Qoheleth is acutely interested in what is happening תחת השמש = "under the sun," a phrase which is repeated twenty-nine times.[538] Schellenberg has pointed out that the critical difference between "hearing" and "seeing" is that the latter term is distinguished by "the immediacy of the experience" (die Unmittelbarkeit der Erfahrungen).[539] "Hearing" is a mode of perception that is, by its very nature, mediated and thus indirect; "seeing," by contrast, is at once immediate and very direct. There is no doubt that the immediacy of "seeing," as opposed to "hearing," is, for Qoheleth, foremost in his perception of the world. In Van Hecke's opinion,

> . . . it is precisely the intentionality and focusability of the visual perception that favoured the use of ראה as persuasive cognitive term in the book of Qohelet. While שמע as a cognitive term is more receptive, viz. understanding what is given, ראה implies activity and intentionality which fit very well with Qohelet's project of active examination and observation, as it is expressed by many of the first-person verbs in the book.[540]

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[535] Cited in Fuhs, *TDOT*, 216.

[536] Fuhs, *TDOT*, 216.

[537] In both cases the verbs are in the Qal infinitive construct form.

[538] The similar phrase תחת השמים = "under heaven," occurs three times at 1:13; 2:3b; 3:1; and על־הארץ = "upon the earth," occurs five times at 5:1 [MT]; 7:20; 8:14,16; 11:2.

[539] Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis*, 181.

[540] Van Hecke, "Verbs ראה and שמע in Qohelet," 214. Van Hecke's interesting article highlights the fact (at 211-212) that the Hebrew verb שמע has both a static meaning ("to hear") and an intentional, active meaning ("to listen to"), though the two meanings are not always distinct. In a similar way, ראה has both a static, perceptual meaning "to see" and an active, intentional meaning "to look at."

Since 'hearing' is by its very nature a largely passive experience it plays a minor role in Qoheleth's very activated enterprise. It becomes clear from examining the textual evidence that Qoheleth's observations derive from a very focused and intentional intellectual quest for an understanding of the world. Consequently, these occurrences of שמע are not significant for our study. I will, therefore, turn to consider Qoheleth's very deliberate observational outlook that is reflected by his use of ראה, but before doing so, I would like to make some general observations about the act of seeing.[541] Our specific interest is to explore the semantic range of the verb ראה.

9.2 Some Remarks on "Seeing"

In chapter 1 we drew attention to Qoheleth's view of the world. For Qoheleth, events in the world have to be perceived within the framework of things really never stopping, even if there were immensely long intervals between their occurrences. These events will reoccur as they have in the past (1:9-10). For Qoheleth, the natural phenomena "serve as evidence for his conclusion that human perception is necessarily limited (1:11)."[542] Thus, what Qoheleth "sees" in the world is fundamentally conditioned by his world-outlook.

Expressions of "seeing" can be but something visual:- "I saw that it was snowing." could simply refer to a mere visual experience of a natural phenomenon. Similarly, when Qoheleth makes the observation that when a tree falls to the north or to the south, it will lie where it falls (11:3b), at least two of his senses are engaged, namely, optical and auditory perception. Since this phenomenon is common or public knowledge, Qoheleth would not have been the first person to arrive at this conclusion purely by his own observation and quest for knowledge.

But consider the following: "I saw a whole new way of looking at the problem." In this situation someone is expressing something fundamentally cognitive that he or she has arrived at by his or her own individual experience and use of reason. This new knowledge presumably came about as the result of insight from observation, experiment and reason. However, it should not be assumed that where one has a purely visual experience that this is of necessity distinct from cognitive activity; both may, or may

[541] My remarks in this section were stimulated by J. Barr's, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*: ———, *Comparative Philology*; S. A. Groom, *Linguistic Analysis of Biblical Hebrew* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004); and discussions with my supervisor, Professor S. Weeks.

[542] Weeks, *An Introduction*, 114.

not be, inextricably tied to each other.[543] Thus, in 2:13 Qoheleth writes, "Then I saw that wisdom excels folly . . ." this statement implies that Qoheleth came to a conclusion on matters of personal interest that was consonant with traditional wisdom thinking. In this instance there is no indication that Qoheleth had engaged in physically seeing some phenomenon. Here, the sage is engaged in cognitive reflection and critical evaluation, and not necessarily in an empirical act of seeing (Cf. 2:24). But in 4:1, 8:10 and 10:7 Qoheleth reports that he has seen something visually.

Consider the statement, "When I saw the secret door, I saw how I could extricate myself from the burning building." Both instances of "saw" in this sentence are different in meaning, but the sentence is tied together by the two "saw" verbs. Hence, "saw" is not being used to describe the same phenomena –the first use is a visual sighting of a physical object; the second use is of cognitive signification because it involves consideration, realization, comprehension and understanding of a perceptual and practical problem. In this example, the second "saw" verb could be equally rendered, "I realized" or "I came to the conclusion." In this example, the empirical act of seeing cannot be separated from the cognitive activity of critical evaluation.

One is also mindful that in the study of words there is always the danger of the "dictionary fallacy," by which I mean, when a Hebrew word is converted into an equivalent English word the assumption might be made that somehow the English word is going to be absolutely equivalent to the Hebrew term. For example, when Qoheleth states, "I see," is this an indication of an object that he only physically sees with his eyes, or is it something of cognitive significance? In 1:14 he states, "I have seen everything that is done under the sun; . . ." Here, "I have seen. . ." could be rendered, "I have examined." If Qoheleth's claim is meant to be true experientially, then that statement cannot be true. Is he exaggerating, lying, or is he using the word "see" in a different way? It is most unlikely that the sage is deliberately lying, but he is quite capable of employing hyperbole as a literary technique. Thus, if one says that there are some cases where Qoheleth is said to have "seen" something, does "seen" have this sense everywhere it occurs?

With the term ראה one could easily not appreciate what is going on with its

[543] It is important to note that the Fuhs, *TDOT,* 214-15, and Schellenberg, *Erkenntnis*, 183, hold that visual perception is the most important source of information on which knowledge is based. However, they add that the distinction between sensory perception and cognition is very difficult to make. Van Hecke, "Verbs ראה and שמע in Qohelet," (at 213) adds that though visual perception might constitute an important portion of the information feeding our cognition, it is not the only source, and arguably maybe not the most important, as much of our cognition information is acquired by hearing.

manifold meanings. For example, in 1:10 Qoheleth declares, "See, this is new?" The demonstrative term זה = "this" has no obvious antecedent. It could be anything. To exclaim, "Look, I have found a pencil!" is purely visual. But the statement, "Look at the mess we are in now!" does not necessitate taking the imperative "Look" to refer to a visual experience; it has the meaning "consider/ think about." The speaker is cognitively engaged. The meaning of "looking at" in English and Hebrew is going to be determined by the implicit or explicit object. And when Qoheleth simply says, "This," in 1:10 it means that "Look/See" could have any one of a range of appropriate meanings, depending on what one thinks "This" refers to. It could refer to "physical visualization," it could be "mental consideration," it could be "cognitive" – "comprehension." The understanding of the verb most likely will be specified by the context, but it may be left open. In our example above in 1:10, it is difficult to know if ראה is "comprehension," "visualization," or whatever, without knowing what זה = "this" is.

Following on from these observations, it would, therefore, not be good linguistic practice to use the context of one verse to determine the meaning of the same word in another verse (cf. Qoheleth's use of הבל, for instance). Qoheleth could be claiming to see something visually in one verse, but that does not mean that if he uses the same form three verses later, he is saying that he necessarily saw something visually. There could be a range of reasons that are only made more precise by the contextual information. It would be easy to accept that Qoheleth's use of ראה was important in his outlook due to its prominent position in the book, but to attempt to assign a single meaning to it on the basis of those places where Qoheleth actually saw an object or phenomenon, would be to commit a semantic error that could skew the interpretation of the passage(s) under review.

From the above considerations, it is clear that the verb ראה is a multivalent term, and, in one way or another, it is possible to render the verb by any of the following.[544]

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[544] Loader, *Polar Structures*, discusses (at 18-28) the various genres present in Ecclesiastes and identifies a *Gattung* or basic literary unit by the term, "observation." This is defined by sentences that contain ראה and ידע, and a few other related verbs. He remarks (at 25) that "observation is marked by a first person singular style." This presupposes that ראה = "to see, observe," has the same meaning throughout the book. In a similar fashion Stephan de Jong, "A Book on Labour: The Structuring Principles and the Main Theme of the Book of Qoheleth," *JSOT* 54 (1992): 107-16, in presenting an analysis of the structure of the book, holds (at 108) that there is an alternation of "observation" and "instruction" complexes throughout the entire book. Michel, *Untersuchungen*, after a more lengthy study of the issue states (at 21), "Das Verb ראה kann hier nur, "(prüfend) betrachten" bedeuten,. . ." Thus for him, ראה can only mean "to consider, examine." While I would not deny that Michel's rendering of ראה does work in many instances, it cannot be fully reconciled to Qoheleth's diverse employment of the term throughout the book.

"I saw (the empirical act of seeing)"

"I realized."

"I considered."

"I found"

"I perceived"

"I experienced."

"I understood."

"I learned."

"I came to the conclusion."

"I observed (critically)."

"I examined."

"I recognized."

"I discovered."

Since ראה is deployed so widely in the book, it is clear that Qoheleth has a deep and intensive interest in "seeing," whatever that entails.[545] On that premise I now propose to examine Qoheleth's claims to knowledge by exploring what he claims to have "seen." I regard the following statement by Fuhs as providing a sound procedure to follow: "The acts of apprehension generated by ראה thus cover a broad and complex range of meanings . . . The nuances of each text must be examined individually."[546]

9.3 Common Forms of ראה

On the face of it, the 47 occurrences of the verb ראה in Ecclesiastes strongly suggest that the author has a deeply absorbing interest in experiential data. *Prima facie*, that would point to a strong empirical methodology on Qoheleth's part. Whether this view can be sustained remains to be proven, however. Noting above the many subtle shades of meaning that this verb attracts, and bearing in mind its strong association with human perception, it would not be surprising to learn that not all of its 47 occurrences refer to what Qoheleth claims to have seen. The fact is that ראה only occurs 21 times in the

[545] Ogden, *Ecclesiastes*, states (at 43), "The verb *ra'ah* is one of Qoheleth's key words, and regularly applies to his observation of life. It speaks of more than casting a casual eye over things; it connotes a scientific and empirical examination of the realities of human life." How regular is regular? I shall endeavour to show, in this and the next chapter, that while ראה is a prominent verb in Qoheleth's lexicon, his deployment of it is far short of "scientific and empirical."

[546] Fuhs, *TDOT*, 216.

monologue with Qoheleth as subject.[547] It is, therefore, a startling fact that over half of the 47 occurrences of ראה are not directly related to Qoheleth's epistemic claims. One would not have expected that over half the occurrences of this verb are employed in a variety of common usage. The 21 instances of ראה that remain to be considered are all germane to the sage's epistemology. It is now time to examine these in this and the next chapter. First of all we will consider three scenarios in which Qoheleth appears to make some astounding claims as to what he "saw."

9.4 "Seeing" Everything That Is Done Under The Sun

On three separate occasions Qoheleth makes claims with universal implications. As noted on chapter two, at the very commencement of the monologue he writes,

1:14

ראיתי את־כל־המעשים שנעשו תחה השמש
והנה הכל הבל ורעות רוח:
I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and chasing after wind.

After some critical reflection on the natural world in 1:4-8,[548] we now are confronted with Qoheleth's reflection on human experience encapsulating "the entirety of human doing."[549] Issuing such a comprehensive declaration of this commanding nature so early in his speech raises the notion in the reader's mind that no mortal is capable of "seeing" everything under the sun.[550] Qoheleth, of course, is well able to employ hyperbole to persuade his readers of his very idiosyncratic approach to the problems of life.

In verse 13b, he mentions the heavy burden that God had put on the human race, and in this verse that ends with the הבל theme, ". . .we are provided with a preview of things to come, and the words of Qohelet from here and throughout the book to 12:7

[547] These are 1:14; 2:13, 24b; 3:10, 16, 22; 4:1, 4, 7, 15: 5:12 [MT]; 5:17 [MT]; 6:1; 7:15; 8:9, 10, 17; 9:11, 13; 10:5, 7.

[548] Ogden, *Qoheleth*, observes (at 39-40), "We are left with the clear impression that the object of his research refers to all human activity, rather than to situations in the natural world, a fact which correlates with the basic question asked in 1:3."

[549] Fischer, *Beobachtungen*, 76. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, writes (at 72) "True to the teaching of the sages, Qohelet proceeds by personal observation, eyes open to reality as it presents itself. Unlike his predecessors, however, Qohelet claims that he has taken note of everything that transpires on earth."

[550] As Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, puts it (at 273), "While the probable intent of such a claim was to authorize the narrator's right to speak, its actual effect is to raise suspicion in the reader who correctly surmises that such a claim is beyond any single 'I'." And (at 277), "A man who claims to have experienced all things can hardly be expected to partake of humility."

must be understood in this light."[551] But all that this verse tells us is that Qoheleth reached his own, very personal negative conclusions about all that happened under the sun.[552] We are, as it were, in the realm of personal opinion, not verifiable observations that inexorably lead to public knowledge that has been, and can be, empirically validated. The frustrating aspect of this statement is that Qoheleth does not spell out to the reader how he came to such a conclusion, nor is there any specificity as regards to what he actually did see.

It is interesting to observe that at the beginning of the monologue, Qoheleth has not engaged in an extensive and sustained examination of seeking and searching out by wisdom all that is done under the sun (cf. 1:13). The programmatic verse in 1:3, and God's gift to human kind of ענין רע with its implied negative answer in 1:13b, and the emphatic הבל conclusion in verse 14, is substantive evidence that reveals a man who already had his mind made up about the nature and consequences of his very private enterprise.

7:15

את־הכל ראיתי בימי הבלי
יש צדיק אבד בצדקו ויש רשע מאריך ברעתו׃

> In my vain life I have seen everything; there are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evil-doing.

It has been well said that the section 7:15-29 provides some of the more startling glimpses into Qoheleth's thinking,[553] a view that, at least, has been heavily endorsed in our consideration of 7:23-9 in chapter 8. Qoheleth has by now established a configuration of observation and reflection, and once more, in this segment 7:15-18, he highlights another case of life under the sun that warrants the attention of his readers.[554]

Most commentators view verse 15 as the beginning of a new section.[555]

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[551] Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 39. This ties in with the observation that the themes and ideas presented in 1:2 to 3:15 foreshadows the key topics that are addressed later in the book.

[552] Regarding the "events that occur under the sun," the question arises as to what this entails. According to Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, (at 13) "The "deeds" are the events that make up the fabric of human life, and they are inseparable from the "work" of God that will be explicitly mentioned later (7:13; 8:17).

[553] Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 82.

[554] Ellermeier, *Qohelet 1*, understands (at 74) this section to be a reflection composed of (i) observation, (ii) rhetorical questions to admonitions (verses 16-17), and (iii) advice (verse 18).

[555] So Whybray, "Qoheleth the Immoralist? (Qoh 7:16-17)," in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (ed. John G. Gammie et al.; New York: Scholars Press, 1978), 191-204, esp. at 202. In his 1989 commentary, *Ecclesiastes*, he changed his position (at 119-20) and now suggests that verse 15 may be an independent short *pensée.*

Qoheleth claims to have seen everything (את־הכל ראיתי), whereupon he immediately signals his despair and negativity by the uncharacteristic way he applies his favourite הבל theme to his life - בימי הבלי.[556] Qoheleth thus moves to consider another of his observations introduced by the ever-recurring root ראה. Fox's translation limits this to refer to the general observation relating to the righteous and the wicked, i.e., "I have seen both of these things."[557] (Cf. 2:14 for similar use of כל). Conversely, it could mean "everything" in the sense that "I have seen everything in my הבל life" (cf. 1:2; 12:8). Whatever may be the case, what follows amounts to a contradiction of the traditional theory of retribution (verse 15b), which then opens the way for the advice tendered in verses 16-17.

So once again, when Qoheleth uses the verb ראה in 7:15, it refers to observation and reflection.[558] In some instances, which we will consider shortly (4:4, 7, 15, and 8:10), Qoheleth's observation is accompanied by a הבל conclusion. However, in 7:15 no recourse is made to the negative cosmic theme, and in verse 18 Qoheleth appears to revert to a more orthodox position by emphasizing the importance of "fearing God."

The claim that Qoheleth makes at the beginning of this verse – that he has seen everything - seems very overblown as he posits a singular state of affairs. Furthermore, in making this statement about the righteous and the wicked, there is an issue about causation. Qoheleth is very clear-cut in his assertion that "righteous people" actually bring about their own demise. This assumes a causative connection. How is it possible to prove on an evidential basis that a righteous person brings about one's demise? No reasons are offered.

Even more bizarrely, he states that "wicked people" extend their days by being evil. How can any man or woman be in a position to know that one reality – wicked people doing evil acts – is causatively connected to another – having a long life? Such a putative state of affairs is beyond human proof. In this instance, Qoheleth did not "see"

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[556] As Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, has it (at 339), "Qoheleth's jaded mood is evident in his characterization of his own life as another example of *hebel*, with *bîmê heblî* ('my brief days') presumably referring to the fleeting or transitory qualities of breath which underlies the metaphor latent in the term."

[557] So also Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 120; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 252; Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 121; Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, 86; Schoors, *The Preacher Sought*, Part 2, 69. Contra Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, who says (at 80) that Qoheleth's "purview is global." It should be noted that Qoheleth's admonitions apply not only to righteousness and wickedness but also to wisdom and folly.

[558] Ogden, *Qoheleth*, states (at 119) that "Observation and reflection are of the essence of the sage's methodology, and the term ראה is Qoheleth's term for this . . ."

something physical in the optical sense. This statement is but another example of a personal opinion that did not emanate from an empirical epistemology.

8:17a

וראיתי את־כל־מעשה האלהים
כי לא יוכל האדם למצוא את־המעשה אשר נעשה תחת־השמש

. . . then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun.

In chapter 8 we considered this statement in the context of 8:16-17 when examining Qoheleth's use of מצא = "to find." Here our concentration is on what Qoheleth claims to have seen. Schoors has observed that, "The syntactical situation of ראיתי is rather complicated."[559] However, our proposed resolution of identifying the object of ראיתי agrees with Krüger (see chapter 8) in that Qoheleth attributed to the sovereign action of God the human limitation of understanding divine activity.[560] In saying that Qoheleth saw (ראיתי) man's ignorance of divine activity, he was simply saying that he "realized" the severe limits of human cognition. In other words, Qoheleth came to a conclusion drawn from foundational premises about the nature of God and man that can only be viewed as a personal statement of belief. It is therefore very difficult to describe Qoheleth as an empiricist in this instance. Such an all-embracing theological statement is not verifiable in an empirical sense.

9.5 ראה In The Context Of The Joy Passages

In three of the seven "joy passages," 2:24; 3:22 and 5:17 [ET 5:18], the verb ראה is found six times.

2.24

אין־טוב באדם שיאכל ושתה והראה את־נפשו טוב
בעמלו גם־זה ראיתי אני כי מיד האלהים היא׃

There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God

In chapter 4 we examined 2:24-26 as the first "joy passage" concentrating on God's giving. In 2:24b Qoheleth concludes with his personal statement:-"This also, I saw, is from the hand of God," where the particle זה refers to the "better/than saying" in part (a) of the verse. The term טוב in v 24a is another favourite word of Qoheleth's and is a direct response to Qoheleth's aspiration as expressed in 2:3b ". . . until I might see what was good for mortals to do under heaven during the few days of their life."

[559] Schoors, *The Preacher Sought*, Part 2, 71.

[560] See chapter 8, f/n. 519.

Diethelm Michel is correct when he concludes that Qoheleth is not referring to an observation, i.e., the verb does not indicate the empirical act of seeing.[561] However, while he understands ראיתי as meaning "consider, examine," (here and throughout the book), I believe ראיתי is better rendered, "to realize."[562] The use of the pleonastic אני with ראיתי lends a very emphatic tone in the context of what is the first sustained theological reflection in the monologue. What is very interesting about the surrounding context of this joy passage is that in chapter two there are more occurrences of the הבל theme than in any other chapter in the book, appearing seven times in all.[563] Verse 24 is, by itself, a very positive theological statement, but it is set in an arena of negativity found in the preceding verses, and especially in verse 26, where the arbitrary nature of God's giving is followed by the הבל theme. We therefore conclude that Qoheleth's act of seeing in this verse is essentially a theological observation that is impossible to verify – or falsify – by human experience.

3:22

וראיתי כי אין טוב מאשר ישמח האדם במעשיו כי־הוא חלקו
כי מי יביאנו לראות במה שיהיה אחריו:

> So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot; who can bring them to see what will be after them?

We have already considered 3:22b in chapter 7 under the sub-heading, "Man Cannot Know the Future." Here in 3:22a we have a positive recommendation from Qoheleth that humans should enjoy their work "for that is their lot/ portion." This verse is the climax of the section 3:15-22 and echoes similar comments found in the two previous joy passages, 2:24-26 and 3:12-13. But the phrase כי־הוא חלקו = "for that is their lot" is the new ingredient. חלק is one of Qoheleth's important terms, occurring 8 times in the book.[564] According to Kurt Galling this term as used by Qoheleth is but a technical term for the space assigned for human existence.[565] Seow gives this a concrete socio -

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[561] Michel, *Untersuchungen*, "Auch das habe ich betrachtet (!), daß dies aus der Hand Gottes kommt." = "I have also considered this to come from the hand of God."

[562] So Fox, *Qohelet*, 335.

[563] 2:11, 15b, 17b, 19b, 21b, 23b, and 26b. It is also interesting to note that the phrase often associated with הבל, - גם־זה הבל ורעות רוח - is found in 2:11, 17b, and 26b. Also in 21b, הבל is joined with the phrase ורעה רבה to describe a succession problem.

[564] 2:10, 21; 3:22; 5:17-18 [ET 5:18-19]. 9:6, 9; 11:2. See Schoors, *The Preacher Sought*, Part 2, (198-200). According to Schoors (at 200) the term has the typical meaning of referring to "man's portion in this life under the sun, which mainly consists in the enjoyment potential of one's wealth, but which also includes such things as human feelings."

[565] Galling, *Prediger*, 89. "חלק ist für Q. *geradezu terminus* technicus für den der menschlichen Existenz zugewiesenen Raum." Galling's definition is too broad and lacks specificity.

economic setting in the Persian period suggesting that the term refers to a plot of land or other valuable assets.[566] The term literally means "portion/lot," but Qoheleth uses it in different ways.[567] Generally, however, it has a positive meaning in Ecclesiastes. One final point, the use of the asseverative כי = "indeed/surely," (also found in 3:12, and in 2:24) reflects the seriousness of his call to enjoyment.

As with the previous two joy passages above, in 3:22a Qoheleth is not engaged in an empirical exercise. He is well inside the boundaries of expressing private opinion when he, once again, issues this positive call to enjoy life under the sun. In other words, the use of the verb ראיתי in this verse does not of itself indicate that Qoheleth literally observed a physical phenomenon. Qoheleth's advocacy of enjoyment in this context is an uplifting, personal response to the depressing reality attached to the litany of human wickedness, injustice, and the common fate of animals and humans described in 3:16-21.

5:17
הנה אשר־ראיתי אני טוב אשר־יפה
לאכול־ולשתות ולראות טובה בכל־עמלו
שיעמל תחת־השמש מספר ימי־היו
אשר נתן־לו האלהים כי־הוא חלקו׃

> This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot.

The verb ראיתי occurs twice in this verse. First, it is found in the perfect form, אני טוב אשר־ראיתי = literally, ". . .what I myself have seen to be good." The use of the pleonastic אני, and the interjectionary "הנה" at the beginning of the verse, adds a very emphatic tone to Qoheleth's claim. The second occurrence of ראה is in the infinitive construct form, ולראות טובה = literally, ". . . and to see the good," but normally rendered ". . . and find enjoyment."

The contents of this verse are another direct response to Qoheleth's experimental outlook recorded in chapter 2:3b, similar to the sage's response at 2:24 noted above. The meaning of ראה in both forms is not confirmation of a physical act of 'seeing.' In

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[566] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 132-33. But see Schoors, *The Preacher Sought*, Part 2, (198-200). According to Schoors (at 200) the term has the typical meaning of referring to "man's portion in this life under the sun, which mainly consists in the enjoyment potential of one's wealth, but which also includes such things as human feelings." For a fuller discussion of the meaning of חלק see Fox, *A Rereading*, 109-11.

[567] For example, it refers to riches in 2:21 and 11:2, i.e., something in one's possession only during this life. But see 9:9, where חלק means neither riches nor land. And in 9:6, where, according to Fox, *A Rereading,* 293, "Man's portion includes his feelings, among them his love, hatred, and envy. One who has these has a "portion in all that happens under the sun."

keeping with our comments under the sub-heading 9.2 above, the verb ראה could be rendered "I found" in both cases. Indeed, ראיתי could also be translated, "This is what *I know* to be good." But whether this verb is to be rendered "know," "see," or "find," there cannot be any doubt that Qoheleth is not in engaged in an empirical experiment. In these three instances the verb ראה does not refer to the empirical act of seeing. The meaning is rather indicative of a very personal reflection whereby Qoheleth came to "discover/realize" or "reached a conclusion" how humans should live their lives on earth.[568] In all three cases, it is not possible to view Qoheleth as an empiricist due to the fact that the advice he offers is his own personal recommendation.

We will now proceed to the next chapter to examine the remaining occurrences of ראה, which will be followed by a summary and an assessment of this important verb in Qoheleth's epistemology.

[568] Contra Michel, *Untersuchungen*, who, as noted earlier, prefers to render ראה throughout by "consider, examine." But he still posits (at 190) the possibility of the meaning "to realize" in 5:17. See Whitley, *Koheleth*, (at 55) who renders ראיתי "I have discovered."

PART 4. QOHELETH'S USE OF THE VERB ראה

Chapter 10: The Verb ראה = "I see" (Part B)

The remaining occurrences of the verb ראה to be considered in this chapter fall into three categories:

(i) Evils Observed,

(ii) Wisdom Observed, and

(iii) Socio-Political Realities Observed

10.1 Evils Observed

There are five occasions where Qoheleth claims to have seen examples of evil/wickedness.

5:12-13 [ET 5:13-14]

12 יש רעה חולה ראיתי תחת השמש
עשר שמור לבעליו לרעתו׃

13 ואבד העשר ההוא בענין רע
והוליד בן ואין בידו מאומה׃

12 There is a grievous ill that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owners to their hurt,
13 and those riches were lost in a bad venture; though they are parents of children, they have nothing in their hands.

This observation comes in the passage 5:9-16 [ET 5:8-15] that appears to be a separate unit focused on the acquisition and retention of wealth with its associated problems. The inadequacy of riches is clearly spelt out in verse 9. The next verse comments on the accumulation of wealth that results in a vacuum in the life of the owner. The immediate response to this state of affairs in verse 10b is an echo of the programmatic question in 1:3 and 3:9. The vacuum is further emphasized in verse 11 where the labourer enjoys his sleep but the rich cannot get their sleep due to the worry of losing their wealth.[569]

Verse 12 triggers a discussion that ends at verse 16. Qoheleth begins with the existential particle יש that gives the impression that an objective fact is to follow. As Antoon Schoors has noted, "Qoheleth often uses יש to introduce a case which

[569] Gordis, *Koheleth*, notes (at 252) that, "The guarding of wealth entails anxiety and care."

exemplifies what he has seen under the sun."[570] In robust language reference is then made to רעה חולה = "a grievous evil." This phrase "communicates to the reader something of Qoheleth's emotional horror of the thought of having it all and not having any personal peace."[571] Here ראיתי has the meaning of "I observed/perceived." But the question arises, what was the grievous evil that Qoheleth observed? Are two separate evil situations envisioned in the verses that follow, or just one?

Bo Isaksson presents two assessments, though he does remind the reader that this is one of those passages that offers the interpreter two possibilities without sufficient evidence to choose only one.[572] The first view is that verses 12-13 provide a single example of one person whom Qoheleth has observed. Secondly, verse 13 explains the "sick misfortune" of verse 12. Isaksson favours the view that verse 13 "constitutes a general statement in connection with the preceding verse. The scenario in 5:13 serves to depict the general truth about the vanity of labour."[573] Longman opts for another interpretation based on the repetition of רעה חולה in verse 15a. He states "Qoheleth gives two different scenarios, both of which are evil and which are united by the futility of wealth."[574] The first scenario in verse 12 describes the tragedy of the person who hoards all his money; the second in verse 13 refers to riches lost through an unspecified adventure. The situation so depicted is evil[575] as it brings harm to the individual.

The Hebrew text of verses 13-14 is ambiguous for it is not clear which statements refer to the father and which to the son. Whatever the case, the essential point is that Qoheleth's purpose was to draw attention to the reader with dramatic emphasis, 'the futility of an obsessive devotion to money-making by pilling up a series of exaggerated expressions of misery, thus providing an effective contrast to his recipe for happiness in the verse which follows.'[576] The last three verses of chapter five are a

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[570] Schoors, *The Preacher Sought*, Part 2, 181.

[571] Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 319. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, observes (at 88), Qoheleth's purpose in citing this case is to bring the theme of materialism's inability to answer human need into direct relationship to his search for *yitrôn* (5:15)."

[572] Isaksson, *Studies*, 95.

[573] Isaksson, *Studies*, 96.

[574] Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 166.

[575] The so-called "evil" does not necessarily infer immoral actions to the person who caused the loss.

[576] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 102.

ringing approval of the joy theme.

This pericope once again reveals how deeply Qoheleth feels about human toil, and the wealth it can generate. Yet he becomes disconsolate when he reflects on the effects of bad business decisions that lead to cataclysmic loss, for both father and son. "The fact that the victim had a son who would normally have inherited his father's fortune and social position increases 'the grievous evil.' "[577]

In this scenario Qoheleth mixes value judgment with observational facts. He has clearly known and observed wealthy people but he does not elucidate as to how riches can cause (רעה) misery/distress to someone. This assessment is the sage's personal opinion, a value judgment. Bankruptcy alluded to in verse 13 is a catastrophe for anyone, especially where a family is involved; but need that misfortune act as a premise upon which Qoheleth draws his ever-recurring הבל conclusion? Given Qoheleth's entrepreneurial successes as recounted in chapter 2, which were not achieved without onerous toil and stress, it seems odd that Qoheleth is unable to bring himself to appreciate that, notwithstanding the extenuating circumstances of a failed enterprise, a person with a strong and steely character could rise to a new challenge and start again, as many people have done, then and since. In other words, a הבל conclusion does not ineluctably flow from the scenario outlined in these verses.

6:1-2

1 יש רעה אשר ראיתי תחת השמש ורבה היא על־האדם׃

2 איש אשר יתן־לו האלהים עשר ונכסים וכבוד ואיננו חסר לנפשו
מכל אשר־יתאוה ולא־ישליטנו האלהים לאכל ממנו כי
איש נכרי יאכלנו זה הבל וחלי רע הוא׃

1 There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy upon humankind:
2 those to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that they lack nothing of all that they desire, yet God does not enable them to enjoy these things, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous ill.

These two verses appear in the unit 5:9 [ET 5:8] – 6:9, which can be described as a reflection on possessions.[578] Once again the particle of existence (יש) introduces another example of an evil (רעה) at the commencement of verse 1, and at the end of verse 2 the said example is worthy of the double description, הבל and וחלי רע.[579] These verses mirror

[577] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 123.

[578] See Fredericks, "Chiasm and Parallel Structure in Qoheleth 5:9-6:9," *JBL* 108: 17-35, for a detailed rhetorical analysis of this unit.

[579] A number of MSS read רעה חולה but this is viewed as a scribal accommodation to link it with a similar phrase in 5:12 [ET 5:13]. See Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 104, and Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 134. The ancient versions endorse the MT.

5:17-18 [ET 5:18-19], sharing similarities but also significance differences.[580] Commenting on 6:1-2, William Brown writes "This example constitutes an arbitrary reversal of what is described in 5:17, in which Qoheleth claims wealth and its enjoyment as gifts of God."[581]

Qoheleth's observations are certainly in stark contrast to the scenario depicted in 5:17-19. Several important points are made. First, it is God who gives עשר ונכסים וכבוד = "wealth, and possessions and honour." Second, these three terms are found in their application to Solomon in 1 Chr 1:11-12, though as Ogden has noted, the more obvious parallel is with Qoheleth's own description of his own success in 2:1-8.[582] And third, despite having all these material riches, and leaving nothing to be desired, this man was unable to enjoy it all.

The evil referred to in verse 1 is depicted as ורבה היא על־האדם׃ = "and it lies heavy upon mankind." This phrase, which is uncertain in meaning, is unusual and appears again in 8:6. Gordis supports the translation of רבה as "common, prevalent."[583] This would view the term as referring to quantity, but it also can denote qualitative greatness. Both views are possible since this evil can afflict any person at any time. In 2:24-26 Qoheleth refers to an arbitrary deity who permits some to enjoy what they possess, but not others. But, ironically in 6:1-2, a stranger (נכרי) will be favoured to enjoy the benefits.[584] The term נכרי usually means a foreigner or non-relative, though it could mean someone inside the family. There is uncertainty in reference here as there is in determining the causes thwarting the man's enjoyment of his fortune. Whatever the reality is in both instances, the fact remains that Qoheleth's theological assumption is that all material wealth, possessions and the accompanying social status derive from

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[580] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, (at 224-25), summarizes these as follows: (i) one is positive, (5:17-18); the other [6:1-2] negative; (2) one is universal, the other particular; and (3) one indicates the rule, the other the exception to the rule. Isaksson, *Studies in the Language*, at 122, elaborates on item (3), "Therefore, the general rule that people are allowed to enjoy their wealth is an expression of the sole grace of God. In 6:1-2 on the other hand, the evil that is considered, and which weighs heavily on man, is the possibility of exceptions to the rule."

[581] Brown, *Ecclesiastes,* 64.

[582] Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 96.

[583] Gordis, *Koheleth*, 257. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, opts for "frequent" (at 169).

[584] It is an interesting fact that the verb נתן = "to give" occurs a total of twenty-five times in the book. Twelve times it is used with God as the subject. As Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, has pointed out (at lxviii), God is very active in Ecclesiastes. With reference to mankind, the object of God's giving includes, "an evil task" (1:13b); "wisdom, honour and joy," (2:26a); "gathering and heaping," (2:26b); "to the one who pleases God," 2:26c; "business to be busy with," (3:10); "a consciousness of the eternal," (3:11); "the days of one's life," (5:17[ET 5:18]; 8:15; 9:9); "riches, wealth, possessions," (5:18 [ET 5:19]); 6:2); "the spirit of life," (12:7).

God's sovereign hand.[585]

Qoheleth makes several references to wealth and the implications of its possession for humans in the monologue, but these two verses are soaked with negativity: the spirit of the joyfulness of life is completely absent. To assess the situation so described with terms like רעה, ורבה היא על־האדם, נכרי, הבל, and וחלי רע, leads one to the conclusion that Qoheleth's evaluation of life stems, not so much from an empirical base, but is located in his own theological presuppositions and psychological predilections.

8:10

ובכן ראיתי רשעים קברים ובאו
וממקום קדוש יהלכו וישתכחו בעיר אשר כן־עשו
גם־זה הבל׃

> **10** Then I saw the wicked buried; they used to go in and out of the holy place, and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity.

The rendering given by the NRSV of this verse represents a common understanding of Qoheleth's observation. But as Krüger as noted, "Verse 10 is among the most difficult verses to understand in the book of Qoheleth."[586] The verse begins with ובכן, which means "thus/then," and is only found elsewhere in the OT in Esth 4:16. Its function here is to introduce a new section. That much is clear, but the rest of the verse as a whole is far from certain in its meaning.

The real difficulty is determining what Qoheleth saw. Is Qoheleth making an observation about the wicked (evil), or is he highlighting the different outcomes between the wicked and the righteous? There is no doubt, as John Jarick has noted, "Koheleth undoubtedly began by talking about the wicked (MT רשעים, LXX ἀσεβεῖς) but was he still talking about such people towards the end of the verse?"[587] Scholars are divided on this question.

As it stands the MT is very difficult to decipher. Many scholars have sought a clearer meaning by adopting an emendation to the text. For example, Murphy renders the verse: "Then I saw the wicked buried. They used to come and go from the holy

[585] Treier, *Proverbs & Ecclesiastes*, comments thus (at 177), "Given the ascription of divine agency, it almost appears as if God is to blame, preventing these folks from enjoyment by withholding the power to do so. Such is an instance of probably the most difficult theological conundrum within the book: God's sovereign determination not to allow certain people to enjoy their wealth being termed "evil."

[586] Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 159.

[587] Jarick, *Gregory Thaumaturgos' Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes* (SBLSCS 29; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 211.

place! But those were forgotten in the city who had acted justly."[588] This translation retains the verb וישתכחו = "were forgotten," but it emends the text by supplying the adverb "justly," the equivalent of which is not found in the Hebrew text. Scholars who adopt the opposite view, like Longman, have their translation referring only to the wicked: "Thus, I observed the wicked buried and departed. They used to go out of the holy place, and they were praised in the city where they acted in such a way."[589]

Stuart Weeks suggests that the term קְבֻרִים = "buried" or "tombs," was mistaken for the original word קְרֻבִים = "approaching, coming near."[590] His rendering is, "And then I saw wicked people who approach and enter a holy place: they walk about and are praised in the city for having done so. This too is an illusion."[591] Weeks goes on to suggest that Qoheleth is probably implying that when the wicked present themselves and linger before God at the holy place/Temple, they almost invite retribution – "tempt fate," as it were – and that when none comes, they leave safely with their reputations actually enhanced.

This is presented by Weeks as a tentative explanation and it is a plausible attempt to resolve a very difficult text. It should be noted, however, that the הבל conclusion points to a situation that for Qoheleth is frustrating and troubling. There is also the fact that the preceding and following verses indicate some kind of injustice that is being referred to. In that light I think Whitley's rendering is persuasive, "And then I saw the wicked brought to their graves, while the righteous depart life without decent burial, and are forgotten by the community."[592]

The juxtaposition of the righteous and the wicked is found elsewhere in the book and the behaviour and circumstances of both groups causes Qoheleth great anguish. In any case, whatever the meaning of this verse, the important issue is that Qoheleth saw a

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[588] Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 79. So also Ginsburg, *Coheleth*, 398-99; Delitzsch, *Biblischer Commentar,* 338-39. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, seems to favour the balance of the wicked being contrasted with the righteous (at 136); Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 276; Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 105; Whitley, *Koheleth*, 76; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 295; Fox, *A Rereading*, 282: Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 158. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, seems to accept this interpretation (at 146-7). Contra, Power, *Ecclesiastes*, 102-103.

[589] Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 216. So also Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 153; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 289; Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes*, 188, 190; McNeile, *Ecclesiastes*, 106; Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes*, 178-80; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 153.

[590] Weeks, Unpublished script on *Ecclesiastes*. This was earlier suggested by F. C. Burkitt, "Is Ecclesiastes a Translation?" 25-26. This suggestion is followed by many commentators. For a discussion of the issues see J. Serrano, "I Saw The Wicked Buried," *CBQ* 16 (1954): 168-70 and Whitley, *Koheleth*, 74-76.

[591] Weeks, Unpublished script on *Ecclesiastes*.

[592] Whitley, *Koheleth*, 76.

situation that involved, at least, the wicked, who were the subject of public praise when that should not have been the case. For Qoheleth, the resultant incongruity was another instantiation of הבל.

In this instance it is safe to say that Qoheleth physically observed people in the city, in a literal sense. Other sages, I am sure, would have had occasion to observe such goings-on as well. But observing the burial of wicked people in a holy place, when previously such individuals were applauded in the city, does not necessarily have to lead to a הבל conclusion. This is but another example of a very negative conclusion that is driven by Qoheleth's pessimistic outlook on the world.

10:5-7

5 יש רעה ראיתי תחת השמש
כשגגה שיצא מלפני השליט׃

6 נתן הסכל במרומים רבים
ועשירים בשפל ישבו׃

7 ראיתי עבדים על־סוסים
ושרים הלכים כעבדים על־הארץ׃

5 There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as great an error as if it proceeded from the ruler:
6 folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place.
7 I have seen slaves on horseback, and princes walking on foot like slaves.

Once again Qoheleth employs the particle of existence (יש) to introduce another phenomenon that he has observed "under the sun." This is yet one more of his example stories in which Qoheleth identifies an "evil" which, on this occasion, is situated in the higher echelons of society. In verse 5 notice is given that a ruler (who is not specifically mentioned) is responsible for an error (כשגגה),[593] the results of which lead to social and political instability in the body politic (verses 6-7).

The issue at stake seems to be in the nature of unwise appointments made by the ruler. Fredericks suggests that this mistake is "probably a directive that put inept people in responsible positions – the same thoughtless, culpable sort of mistake that the fool gives as his useless defence to the temple (5:6)."[594] That may be so, but whatever the exact circumstances that Qoheleth has in mind, the *Sitz im Leben* is one where, "The

[593] The consonant כ on שגגה is, in Crenshaw's view, *Ecclesiastes* (at 170) to be understood as asservative (cf. GKC §118x). So also Gordis, *Koheleth*, who states (at 319) that the kap in כשגגה is not to be rendered "like, as," but "indeed." See also Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 98. Contra, Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 181-2. Various attempts have been made to indentify the ruler but without success, see Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 171.

[594] Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes*, 221. The term כשגגה denotes a thoughtless error, the kind of behaviour associated with a fool. Thus error could be rendered oversight. See, Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 181.

world seems to have gone mad; the normal order of things seems to have been turned upside down."[595]

What appeared to be happening in Qoheleth's society was that he observed a reality that constituted a reversal of expectations. The rich were demoted while fools were elevated to high positions in the governance of the county. Yet, a ruler was expected to be wise and to promote and implement principles of justice in society; indeed, the ruler (King) was held to be the source and fount of justice. But slaves are now on horses, the ownership of the latter signifying wealth and social prestige; and members of the ruling classes (princes) now walk on foot likes slave (verse 7).[596]

This observation is but a negative evaluation of wisdom, or to put it more directly, it represents a deconstruction of traditional wisdom.[597] As Leo Perdue comments,

> This classic depiction of a "world upside down," in which the normal social order has become topsy-turvy, subverts the structured world of the sages, where the wise succeed and prosper and the fools fail because of their own stupidity. The absurdity of the present social order demonstrates the impotency of wisdom to steer a rational course toward certainty and well-being.[598]

Not for the first time did Qoheleth utilize an example story to expose the vulnerability of wisdom. Notwithstanding, Qoheleth is but pointing out that in his society, decisions that are made at the highest level can come to destabilize the social order eventually leading to political and social chaos.[599]

As Salyer has noted, the unit 10:5-7 represents the last observation in the book.[600] With the observed level of inversion in society, one might have expected

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[595] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 325. Many scholars refer to the scenario depicted in 10:5-7 as "a topsy-turvy world." R. Van Leeuwen, "Proverbs," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (ed. L. E. Keck, 5:17-264, Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), comments (at 254) "it is an instance of the world upside down, a pattern of inversion or chaos that is found throughout the world from ancient times to the present." See also Van Leeuwen, "Proverbs 30:21-23 and the Biblical World Upside Down," *JBL* 105 (1986): 599-610. For a remarkable parallel to this unit that occurs in the Egyptian *The Admonitions of Ipuwer*, see Lichtheim, *AEL* 1, 149-62.

[596] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes,* comments (at 322) that, "Horses were costly and were used mainly for military purposes or to carry nobles and kings."

[597] So Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 322. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, remarks (at 101) "There may be a middle - or - upper class scale of values reflected in these judgments. At the same time they illustrate the uncertainty of the courtier, despite wisdom: things do not turn out the way one expects."

[598] Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 231.

[599] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, discusses well (at 324-25) these aspects of this unit. For a useful discussion on societal issues see Krüger, *Qoheleth,* 183-85. See also in this vein, Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 126; Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, (at 221), where he observes this unit raises questions about 'elitism' in the ANE world, a social concept Qoheleth seems to endorse.

[600] Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 363.

Qoheleth to invoke his הבל conclusion, as he did in 6:1-2 (though not at 5:12-13). However, on this occasion his observation is one of deep self-interest:- "The only value expressed here is the well-being of the economically advantaged, a position that is hardly attractive."[601] Chapter 10:5-7 is, therefore, another example of Qoheleth's observations, in this instance, one that is conditioned by his own social class and personal outlook. In none of these four units (5:12-13; 6:1-2; 8:10, and 10:5-7) can it be said that Qoheleth derived his propositional statements from an exclusively empirical base. They are statements made principally reflecting his personal assumptions, observations, and opinions.

10.2 Wisdom Observed

Under this heading we will consider 2:13-14a, and 9:13; both refer to the significance of wisdom, but in very different ways. In 2:13-14a there is a positive appreciation of wisdom.

2:13-14a

13 **וראיתי אני שיש יתרון לחכמה מן־הסכלות**
כיתרון האור מן־החשֵׁךְ׃

14a החכם עיניו בראשו והכסיל בחשך הולֵךְ

13 Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness.
14a The wise have eyes in their head, but fools walk in darkness.

We examined 2:14 in chapter 6 under the sub-heading, "Qoheleth's Dogmatic Claims to Knowledge." Our main concern there was to determine what Qoheleth claims to have known. Here, the question is focused on what Qoheleth claims to have seen in verse 13.

In verse 12, Qoheleth turns (ופניתי אני) to observe (לראות) wisdom, madness and folly, which, particularly with the pleonastic use of אני, indicates that he is intent on conducting an investigation as thorough as possible. The context in which this positive appraisal of wisdom is given is important. A brief reference to madness and folly is made in 1:17, and now at 2:13-17, the sage returns to the same topic by first considering the relative worth of wisdom and folly. This is immediately followed by the problem associated with successors to property (2:18-23).

It is a most salient feature of the passage 2:12-23 that the term הבל occurs an amazing five times. Very noticeable also is the prominence of another of Qoheleth's key words- עמל, which in its noun and verbal forms is found no less than nine times. Another word typical of the sage is קרה = "to meet, to befall," and the related noun מקרה

[601] Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 363.

= "accident, chance." The former occurs in 2:14, 15; 9:11, while the latter is also found in 2:14, 15; 3:19 (x3); 9:2, 3.[602] Thus, the very positive approval of wisdom in 2:13-14a is surrounded by a wall of negativity; and in 2:14b we have what is arguably the most effective put-down on wisdom in the book – the wise and the foolish die.

When Qoheleth states that he "saw" (וראיתי אני) the superiority of wisdom in verse 13, we may ask how was this conclusion reached? Wisdom is an abstract quality, which by definition cannot be visually seen by the naked eye. To claim that one has seen wisdom is to say that one has seen an example of wisdom in action. But assessing what is and what is not wisdom is a value judgment. Whether Qoheleth is citing a proverb or not in this instance is immaterial, the key issue is that these verses are a set-up that leads to his reflections on death, a familiar topic that surfaces in verses 14b-23. Qoheleth concludes by saying that he hates life (v17) as well as toil (v18), and for humans, life is full of pain, vexation, and insomnia. This is another example of Qoheleth's dogmatism that ends, once again, with a הבל conclusion. Qoheleth's 'seeing' in this case had not an empirical foundation *per se*. His belief does not measure up as secure knowledge but is the result of his own instinctive opinion.

9:13

גם־זה ראיתי חכמה תחת השמש וגדולה היא אלי׃

I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me.

This verse introduces another example story (cf. 4:7-8), which Etan Levine describes as a burlesque of governmental "sagacity."[603] Neither is this anecdote bereft of a strong hint of irony.[604] In the story, Qoheleth pointedly focuses on wisdom and its effectiveness, a story that is built on striking contrasts. In verse 14 reference is made to a small city (עיר קטנה) which was surrounded by a powerful king (מלך גדול). The outcome of this stand-off appears to be obvious as it was overwhelmed with great siege works (מצורים גדלים). This suggests that a large army was on stand-by. Despite the hopeless outlook, the city is saved by the actions of a poor, wise man. No details are given, but his skilful use of wisdom highlights its value. In a way, this example story is linked to 9:11 where the sage observes, "the battle is not to the mighty." Against insuperable odds the wisdom of a poor, wise man effected the successful lifting of the

[602] For a stimulating article on מקרה see Peter Machinist, "Fate, *miqreh*, and Reason," 159-75.

[603] Levine, "The Humor in Qohelet," *ZAW* 109 (1997): 71-83 (at 77).

[604] So J. Lavoie, "La philosophie politique de Qo 9,13-16," *ScEs* 49 (1997): 315-28 (at 27). See K. Dell, *The Book of Job as Sceptical Literature* (BZAW 197; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991). For her, (at 144) verse 16a gives the moral of the story but Qoheleth gives his own modification at verse 18b.

siege.[605]

Yet, this striking fact remained for Qoheleth, a fact that burdened him greatly (verse 13b, = וגדולה היא אלי): in the face of the power of the poor man's wisdom, the fickleness of humans ensured that no one remembered his incredible achievement (verse 15c). Poignantly, Qoheleth writes, "Yet no one remembered that poor man." Verse 16 closes this unit in a traditional manner "I said, "Better wisdom than might," yet the wisdom of the poor man is held in contempt, and his words are not heard."

This anecdote well illustrates wisdom's power (wisdom is better than might – verse 15a), and its vulnerability (no one remembered the poor wise man – verse 15b). In the two remaining verses of this chapter, Qoheleth confirms the desirability of wisdom when comparing the wise with fools (verse17), but adds a qualification in verse 18b, to the effect that while wisdom is better than war, "but one bungler (וחוטא אחד) destroys much good."

Again we can detect that Qoheleth is not setting out in this example story to make an observation in an objective, empirical sense. He has a point of view about wisdom that here is qualified. This passage is really another set-up for Qoheleth to vent his own very personal opinion about wisdom, and he comes to that task with a negative pedigree that is evident from the early material of the book.

10.3 Socio-Political Realities Observed

In a series of passages Qoheleth makes a range of observations and reflections on the political and social realities of his time.

3:16

ועוד ראיתי תחת השמש
מקום המשפט שמה הרשע
ומקום הצדק שמה הרשע׃

Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well.

[605] The phrase ומלט־הוא has occasioned scholarly discussion. Some argue that the verb refers to the sage's potential, rather than his actual success. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, notes (at 310) that the verb מלט (Piel perfect) is used here to indicate a hypothetical situation (what might have happened). See also Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 148. Whybray holds that the translation "he could have delivered the city) fits in well with the next verse (verse 16); also Hertzberg, *Der Prediger*, 186-7. Contra Gordis, *Koheleth*, states (at 311) that the hypothetical interpretation is "ruled out by the rest of the verse, "and no one remembered the poor man," which would be meaningless if no saving act had actually taken place." Fox, *A Rereading*, also prefers the interpretation (at 300) that no one remembered what Qoheleth had in fact accomplished, which I think is correct.

Qoheleth introduces a new topic by the use of ועוד ראיתי = "Furthermore/moreover, again, I saw (observed)," which, in Barton's view "is but loosely connected with the survey of times and seasons."[606] The next unit, 3:10-15, is deeply theological in tone, the deity being referenced no less than nine times. From reflections on God as creator and giver, Qoheleth now moves to present his first (but not his last) reference in the monologue to the presence of injustice in human affairs.

The sage identifies a serious problem in human jurisprudence: where one expects to find justice (presumably equitable judgments in law courts) the ugly features of injustice and wickedness are prominent, and where one looks for righteousness (presumably in Temples) there is also wickedness. The repetition of שמה הרשע not only indicates the seriousness of the matter for Qoheleth, but adds a certain poignancy and solemnity to his observation.[607] As Gordis puts it, ". . . the repetition of the phrase הרשע שמה has a sombre power, reflecting the intensity of Koheleth's feeling on the subject."[608] It is important to note that, as Whybray has observed, Qoheleth is not asserting that corruption is endemic in society in perpetuity.[609] But the sage does claim that he has observed instances of injustice and political corruption.

Qoheleth responds in verse 17 to this state of affairs: just as there is a time for everything (cf. 3:1), so there must be a time for God's judgment, as stated in verse 17b. The fact that Qoheleth insists on the reality of divine judgment would, I suggest, have been a common view in his day, but in the context of 3:16-21, we are in the realm of theological affirmation. We have tentatively suggested that the injustice and the wickedness alluded to in verse 16 is that of the law courts and Jewish piety. Yet there is some ambiguity attached to what Qoheleth actually saw, or observed. But whatever the exact nature of the phenomenon he claims to have observed, it is very interesting to note that his assertion in verse 17 about the certainty of God's judgment, is not a proposition that was extrapolated simply from his observation. Qoheleth has the habit of setting his observations in line with a worldview that he has established in part, or entirely on dogmatic or doctrinal grounds.

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[606] Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 108. Weeks, *Ecclesiastes*, states (at 68) that 3:16 "moves on both to a different topic and to the more disconnected style that characterizes the rest of the monologue."

[607] So Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, 42.

[608] Gordis, *Koheleth*, 234.

[609] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 77. Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes*, observes (at 134), "We enter on another phase of the seeker's thoughts. The moral disorder of the world, its oppressive rulers, its unjust judges, and its religious hypocrisies, oppress him even more than the failure of his own schemes of happiness."

The reality of God's judgment would have been a fixed point in the mind of Qoheleth's contemporaries. But on Qoheleth's part there is not an iota of empirical evidence presented anywhere in Ecclesiastes for the assertion that God judges humans. What in fact Qoheleth is doing is not using observation as the basis of belief; he is setting observations and beliefs next to each other in order to draw conclusions about things that cannot be seen.

4:1

ושבתי אני ואראה את־כל־העשקים
אשר נעשים תחת השמש
והנה דמעת העשקים ואין להם מנחם
ומיד עשקיהם מח ואין להם מנחם:

> Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed - with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power – with no one to comfort them.

Qoheleth now moves to highlight a second injustice. In 4:1-3 there is a brief but moving treatment of human oppression. The sage claims to have seen "all the oppressions under the sun." This sounds like hyperbole, though Fredericks suggests that Qoheleth "did not see *all* the oppression, only all *kinds* of it."[610] Whatever the case, in this unit Qoheleth "was passing, to use modern terms, from egoism to altruism, thinking more of the misery of others than of his own enjoyment."[611] It is undoubtedly true that this verse offers a penetrating observation of injustice of one group lording it over others.[612]

While there is a lack of detail as to the nature of the oppression and the identity of the oppressors, yet Qoheleth's use of language is striking. There is (i) a threefold use of the root in עשק;[613] (ii) the dramatic use of והנה = "And behold," the placement of which is used at a crucial point in the verse to create maximum emotional impact; (iii) the inclusion of the very emotive words 'tears' and 'comfort;' (iv) the skilful repetition of the phrase ואין להם מנחם. And finally, there is the change from the prose to the poetic form (from 1a to 1b). "All these features combine to produce an effect of emotional

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[610] Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes*, 128. (Original italics). According to Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (at 186), "the author intends to convey the sense that he saw the persuasiveness of oppression."

[611] Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes*, 138.

[612] From a sociological perspective, Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, observes (at 68-69) that 4:1 is about "the exploitation, by wealthier classes, of the people settled on the land and of the handworkers living in cities. . . . The use of violence was not at all excluded, especially in the case of debt slavery." A similar, though more extensive analysis along this line is F. Crüsemann, "The Unchangeable World: The 'Crisis of Wisdom' in Koheleth." in *God of the Lowly: Socio-Historical Interpretation of the Bible* (eds. Willi Scottroff ; Wolfgang Stegemann. New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 55-77.

[613] "The iteration "rings like a knell of doom." (Kirk), cited in Gordis, *Koheleth,* 239.

intensity which is rare in Qoheleth."[614]

This observation of the debilitating effects of the actions of powerful elements in society gives rise to a depressing reflection on Qoheleth's part (verses 2-3). There is no doubt that death and its negative effect on human achievement is something that deeply troubles Qoheleth. But he now expresses the opinion that the dead are better off than the living (verse 2), and in verse 3, he goes further by saying that it is better to have never existed, thus avoiding seeing the evil that exists under the sun. As Loader has put it, "No man could put the futility of life and the dead-end despair of man in words more bitter than these."[615]

Both 3:16 and 4:1 are concerned with the miscarriage of justice. As in 3:16, here also in 4:1, Qoheleth claims to be an eye-witness (ראה) of the social polarity that exists between the oppressed and the oppressors. It is to be noted, however, that the sage's despair and empathy is not derived from direct suffering, but solely from his own private post of observation. Schellenberg comments that 4:1-3 is best described as observation with free reflection (Beobachtung mit freier Reflexion).[616] Qoheleth refers to an empirical reality, political and social oppression, which he poignantly observes, but he then proceeds to make this observation the starting point for further reflection. In other words, the main point is not that there are oppressions; rather, for Qoheleth this observation acts as a hook on which to hang his major point - in the presence of such evil, one would be better off dead, or better still, that one was not born at all.

There is no necessary logical connection between his observation and the negative and despairing conclusion he draws from that observation. Just as we noted in our comments on 3:16 above, in this instance Qoheleth makes a personal observation, whereupon he advances a statement of his own personal opinion about the living and the dead. But that depressing conclusion voiced in 4: 2-3 is in no way essentially

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[614] Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, comments (at 114) that, "The deep emotion which the tears of the oppressed excited in Qoheleth is evidence of his profound sympathies with the lower classes." Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, holds (at 304) that in this verse, "Qoheleth is at his rhetorical best here, rising to new heights of character." See also Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*. Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being*: *A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (trans. J. M. Hanks; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), comments (at 82-3), "He [Qoheleth] does not say "they have no comfort," but rather "they have no comforter" (4:1). Abstract comfort in such a situation would amount to still another illusion, or vanity."

[615] Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, 48. Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, suggests (at 160) that "it is ironic that only someone living could experience and express the conviction about being better off nonexistent; Eccl. 4:3 deconstructs itself."

[616] Schellenberg, *Erkenntni*s, 169. Schellenberg's study highlights three different types of argumentation: (a) by induction, as in 1:13-15; (b) falsification, as in 7:15-18; and (c) observation with free reflection (Beobachtung mit freier Reflexion).

derived from the descriptive social comment presented in verse 1. His conclusions stem not from the pathos of the oppression of the poor but are the arbitrary, depressing opinions that are a reflection of his own privileged outlook.

Qoheleth was not in a unique position to observe human greed and social injustice in his day. In previous times the social prophets of the eight-century BCE invoked the judgment of God on their fellow Israelites for their unjust treatment of the poor. The result was the eventual destruction of both Judah and Israel. On this occasion, despite his lamentations for the oppressed, Qoheleth offered no programme of political and social reform. He appears as a distant, objective observer: he bewails the stark reality, but offers no hope for change. In this instance there is no doubt that Qoheleth "saw" something in the physical sense. But the raft of negative conclusions that he drew from the abuses of political power do not logically follow from an empirical base.

4:4

ראיתי אני את־כל־עמל ואת כל־כשרון המעשה כי היא
קנאת־איש מרעהו גם־זה הבל ורעות רוח׃

> Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from one person's envy of another. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

On this occasion Qoheleth enters the arena of social comment by imputing motives to his fellow humans. When Qoheleth states that ואני ראיתי = "And I saw. . ." he is not referring to the physical, empirical act of 'seeing' something tangible (cf. 11:3b). He is firmly within the terrain of private opinion. Given the pleonastic use of אני, this would suggest that Qoheleth was assigning special importance to his negative assessment of human motivation.[617] That may or not be so, but there are differing opinions as to what Qoheleth means by this observation.

How is the term קנאת to be interpreted? The root קנאה means "jealousy," "envy," "ardour," "rivalry," depending on the context.[618] Whybray suggests that the meaning is probably "rivalry" or "competition," and quotes the famous line in the Talmud (Baba Bathra) – "Rivalry among scribes increases wisdom."[619] Ogden follows in a similar

[617] For Qoheleth's use of אני see Isaksson, *Studies in the Language*, 163-71. The use of this personal pronoun is by no means the only way to add emphasis, cf., W. T. Claassen, "Speaker-oriented functions of *ki* in Biblical Hebrew," *JNSL* 11 (1983): 29-46. As Isaksson remarks (at 167), "In some places where אני would be expected, it is omitted. In other places where it is found, the importance or emphasis of the clause is not obvious."

[618] BDB, 888.

[619] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 83.

manner, though is a little less certain: "There is nothing in the context nor in the two terms [קנאה and עמל] themselves to suggest that the challenge to excel is unhealthy, though that is always a possibility."[620] Murphy is more forthright. Some people succeed; some do not. "Behind it all he [Qoheleth] sees envy at work. This is the dark side of human activity (cf. Prov 14:30)."[621] It is, of course, true that rivalry/envy has both positive and negative consequences, but I think that the opinion expressed in 4:4 in its immediate context, has very negative and cynical overtones.

It is interesting to note a touch of irony in 4:4-6. Qoheleth as "king" in Chapters 1-2, made the claim that he had surpassed all his predecessors with his wisdom and great deeds (1:16; 2:7, 9). Naturally, as a wise man he wanted to secure an advantage over the fool (2:13-16), and in 2:18-23, according to Crüsemann, ". . . clearly it is envy of his successor that turns life bitter for him."[622] But as "king," Qoheleth derided his toil and the social goods that accrued from it as הבל, and a striving after the wind; yet in 4:4 קנאה is criticized in exactly the same terms - הבל ורעות רוח.[623] Qoheleth's use of the verb ראיתי in 4:1 is not an empirical sighting of a phenomenon, natural or otherwise, but a piercing and very negative opinion about his contemporaries in a society characterized by a boisterous and competitive spirit (cf. 10:19).

4: 7-8

7 ושבתי אני ואראה הבל תחת השמש׃

8 יש אחד ואין שני גם בן ואח אין־לו
ואין קץ לכל־עמלו גם־עיניו לא־תשבע עשר
ולמי אני עמל ומחסר את־נפשי מטובה
גם־זה הבל וענין רע הוא׃

7 Again I saw vanity under the sun:
8 the case of solitary individuals, without sons or brothers; yet there is no end to all their toil, and their eyes are never satisfied with riches. "For whom am I toiling," they ask, "and depriving myself of pleasure?" This also is vanity and an unhappy business.

The words at the beginning of verse 7, ושבתי אני ואראה = "And I turned and saw," (Cf. 4:1) herald a new topic. The very personal nature of this observation is conveyed by the sage's use of the pleonastic אני. Another interesting feature of these verses is that they contain several of the key terms and phrases of Qoheleth's lexicon: הבל (x2), תחת השמש,

[620] Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 72. Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, is of the opinion (at p. 133) that, ". . . it is Qoheleth's observation that the advantages from toil are envied by others to a point of possible tragic oppression and confiscation of the fruit of one's labours (cf, Exod 20:17)." Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes,* comments (at 190), "A competitive spirit drives us to excel; Koheleth rightly names it "envy."

[621] Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 38; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, also takes (at 137) a similar view.

[622] Crüsemann, "Unchangeable World," 68.

[623] So Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 96, and Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 161.

טב, עמל (x2), and ענין רע. These verses are concerned with the existential loner, the personification of Qoheleth himself.[624] The reality described in verse 8a,b is introduced and enclosed by the הבל theme (verse 7 and verse 8c), with a further negative description (וענין רע הוא) at the very end of verse 8. In this unit Qoheleth's observation is centred on toiling in loneliness. The solitary figure is introduced. His isolation is emphasized by the words יש אחד ואין שני = "one without a second."[625] This contrasts sharply with the importance of community in verses 9-12.

While having no ties of kinship, the loner's toil is unrelenting in pursuit of amassing great wealth. Some people never can get enough of riches but in a vivid moment of reflection Qoheleth employs the striking question in the first person, אני עמל ולמי = "So for whom am I toiling?" This shift from the third to the first person may be indicative of Qoheleth's inner struggle of the lonely person and the relentless toil that brings no lasting benefit.[626] Working unceasingly to pile up great resources of riches, especially as one has no heirs, points directly to a הבל conclusion. Farmer touches on the universality of this scenario: "This ancient description of an individual who has no living heir but who works hard and lives frugally in order to amass wealth resonates with reality in the contemporary world."[627]

In these verses Qoheleth is without doubt touching on features of life under the sun that are not confined to the third century BCE. Overall, I think the reason for the question is clear: there is no real purpose in amassing great wealth and depriving oneself of life's pleasures if there is no relative or friend to share that wealth with, in the present or in the future. For Qoheleth, there is only one response to the situation: השמש ושבתי אני ואראה הבל תחת.

In this unit we are firmly in the realm of personal opinion. Qoheleth claims to have seen another example of הבל, but this is yet again another demonstration of the

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[624] I agree with Fox, *A Rereading*, where he says (at 222) that ". . . the interjection in the middle of v. 8 shows that Qohelet is speaking out of his own experience." Contra Gordis, *Koheleth*, who remarks (at 242) that the second half of verse 8 is a striking illustration of a quotation without an introductory formula. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, denies (at 86) that this interposed question is biographical. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, thinks (at 188) that Qoheleth imagines the miser is the person asking the question.

[625] The term אין occurs three times in this verse thus driving home to the reader the theme of isolation. The phrase denotes a man with no friend, wife, or business partner. Much speculation surrounds the meaning of this phrase. See Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth*, (at 326-7) for a discussion.

[626] According to Barton, *Ecclesiastes* (at 115), "Qoheleth suddenly drops the indirect discourse and transfers us to the soul of the miser, perhaps to his own soul, for this may be a bit of personal experience."

[627] Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good?,* 165.

negative value he puts on human activity on earth. And how does Qoheleth know that some people are never satisfied with riches? To make such a claim is improvable. This scenario depicts the mind of a very lonely man. Notably the observation is framed at vv 7a and 8b by the הבל motif. It is most fitting that a very special set of circumstances, involving an atypical family, can so easily elicit from Qoheleth a הבל conclusion. This is a further example of how an overpowering הבל mindset can skew a sage's argumentation. The scene he describes is neither a necessary nor a sufficient empirical basis to warrant such a negative conclusion.

4:15

ראיתי את־כל־החיים המהלכים תחת השמש
עם הילד השני אשר יעמד תחתיו׃

I saw all the living who, moving about under the sun, follow that youth who replaced the king;

Chapter 4:13-16 is another very difficult passage in the book to unravel. As Addison Wright puts it, "The interpretation of this passage is a very tangled thing. The use of pronouns and the use of verbs with unidentified subjects as well as a very terse style combine to create a number of ambiguities internal to the story."[628] No sustained attempt will be made to unravel this very obscure pericope, but my immediate concern is to examine what Qoheleth claims to have "seen" in verse 15.[629] In order to address this issue we will attempt to give the gist of the context.

The unit opens in verse 13 with another comparative sapiential proverb, which determines the advantage of the first element over the second, i.e., better A than B, i.e., a wise but poor youth is contrasted with an old but foolish king. In typical wisdom terminology, being wise goes with age, but youth and poverty do not, which means that wisdom and old age are not synonymous. This is an inversion of conventional wisdom teaching.

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[628] A. G. Wright, "The Poor But Wise Youth and the Old But Foolish King (Qoh 4:13-16)," *CBQ* 29 (1997): 142-54, at 142. See also M. V. Fox, "What Happens in Qohelet 4:13-16," 1-10; D. Rudman, "A Contextual Reading of Ecclesiastes," *JBL* 116 (1997): 57-73. Rudman holds (at 62) that "the youth who emerges from the prison is not a usurper but a general counselor in the general tradition of Joseph or Daniel." The text of verse 15 is far too ambiguous to reach such a conclusion. W. A. Irwin, "Eccles 4:13-16," *JNES* 3 (1944): 255-57, writes (at 255), "Its confusion of pronominal antecedents is characteristic of Hebrew usage at its worst . . ." Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, writes (at 190), "In 4:13-16 we find a tantalizing text."

[629] For a close reading of this unit see Z. Weisman "Elements of Political Satire in Koheleth 4:13-16; 9:13-16*," ZAW* 111 (1999): 547-60. His conclusion (at 554) is that Qoheleth's "interest is to use examples from history to persuade his audience that there is no history: the causality operating in it is paradoxical, and memory, the thread connecting various threads to history, is nothing more than illusion. The quasi-historical anecdote provides an apt literary dress for Koheleth's political satire on upheavals in government."

Regarding verse 14, many commentators try to identify the possible historical background and the persons that may be alluded to. Names like Joseph in Genesis and Rehoboam, Solomon's son in 1 Kings 12, have been suggested.[630] Despite the many attempts to explain these obscure references, the fact is that there is not enough detail in the text – aside from the lexical ambiguity in the unit – to warrant secure conclusions.[631]

Qoheleth's use of ראיתי in verse 15 is without the pleonastic אני (contast 4:4). Ginsburg comments that Qoheleth ". . . transports himself into the midst of the scene he depicts, in order to render the illustration more vivid and striking."[632] Qoheleth is therefore not personally experiencing the incident he describes, but merely observing it. Thus, when the sage writes ראיתי את־כל־החיים המהלכים תחת השמש, this statement cannot be taken to mean that he saw all humans living under the sun. Here the verb ראיתי has the sense of "to observe, examine," and the conclusion of this examination is found in verse 16, which, once again, gives rise to a typical הבל verdict.

The major issue in verse 15 is the identity of הילד השני = "the second young person," which appears to be loosely connected with 4:7-12. Various solutions have been proposed. Schoors give the following rendering: "The object of the examination are all those who are on the side of the new king and the result is: they are innumerable, but those who come later do not take pleasure in him."[633] I favour the assessment of Lohfink.

> Generally vv. 13-16 deal with three leaders: the old king who was dislodged, the young man who was released from prison in order to dislodge him, and "the next young man" who "arose" in the place of the second. The rapidity of this description of a sequence of three leaders, and his gently ironic presentation of the approval "of all the living who walked about under the sun," underline stylistically what this is about: the fickleness of popular favor and the insecurity at the top of the political ladder.[634]

Whatever the *sitz im leben* of this passage and its meaning might be, Qoheleth's reflections are certainly based on an experiential methodology. But as noted earlier there is no causal nexus that flows from his hyperbolic statement, ראיתי את־כל־החיים, to

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[630] See Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, (at 190) for a plethora of possible names relating to the young upstart and the old king.

[631] A fitting comment is made by Murphy and Huwiler, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (NIBC; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), at 193, "In fact, the ambiguity is so embedded in the narration (e.g., the use of pronouns that could refer to either the king or the youth) that it may be preferable to leave the story unclear."

[632] Ginsburg, *Coheleth*, 332.

[633] Schoors, *The Preacher Sought*, Part 2, 68.

[634] Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 73.

his הבל conclusion in verse 16c. It is true that Qoheleth is observing a political reality in life but this phenomenon does not give grounds to warrant this depressing conclusion. From time immemorial to the present, human fickleness has been a constant factor in changing political and economic fortunes, and to assume that such observed fickleness spawned a reflection that inescapably leads to a הבל conclusion is not of necessity grounded on empirical fact. In short, it is another example of Qoheleth's opinion influenced by his esoteric view of the world.

8: 9

את־כל־זה ראיתי ונתון את־לבי
לכל־מעשה אשר נעשה תחת השמש
עת אשר שלט האדם באדם לרע לו׃

> All this I observed, applying my mind to all that is done under the sun, while one person exercises authority over another to the other's hurt.

Qoheleth continues with another observation on contemporary issues, this time, the art of survival in the face of superior political authority. In typical fashion he writes ראיתי את־כל־זה. The immediate question is: what does את־כל־זה refer to? Some critics take it to apply to what follows, thus viewing the phrase as the beginning of a new section.[635]

However, most commentators understand verse 9 as the conclusion of 8:2-9. Krüger comments, "Verse 9 summarizes the result of the preceding reflections and places it on the broader horizon of "everything that is done under the sun." "[636] Also, the use of שלט = "power," in verses 4, 8 and 9, points to a coherence of thought.[637] Certainly at face value, verse 9 can be understood as a conclusion to Qoheleth's remarks about survival in a fragile political environment (vv 2-5), the inability of humans to know the future (v 7), the lack of control over one's death (v 8a), and the lack of freedom from war and wickedness (v 8c). Whybray gives a good summary of the context of verse 9.

> Qoheleth points out that the context for his general observations is the age in which he and his readers live, which he regards as notorious for its cruel tyranny (cf. 4:1-3). Thus in this final comment Qoheleth makes clear his attitude towards political authority as it manifested itself in his time: on the one hand he counsels obedience and submission to it on the grounds of prudence, while on the other he does not hide the fact that he regards it as

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[635] So Galling, *Der Prediger*, 111. "Verschiedentlich wird 9 noch zur vorangehenden Sentenz gerechnet, aber die konkreteBeobachtung in 10 bedarf einer Einleitung, die zunächst auf die Grundfrage nach dem Gebrauch der Macht hinleitet (cf. 10 5);" Zimmerli, *Das Buch des Predigers Salomo*, at 219-20.

[636] Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 157.

[637] See Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 98-99. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, notes (at 84) that "the phrase "all that is done under the sun" (cf. 1:13, 14; 2:17; etc) usually has to do with divine sovereignty in human events, and vv 10ff., which also deal with abuse of power, will illustrate this."

brutal and tyrannical as a particular, concrete example of human servitude in general.[638]

In this instance of Qoheleth's use of ראיתי, Michel is correct to state that the meaning here is "examined."[639] But since the passage advocates appropriate conduct in the presence of a superior political ruler (8:2-6), with the accompanying reflections on human life (8:7-8), it cannot be doubted that Qoheleth adroitly learned the lessons of political survival from his personal observations.

Verse 6 echoes the thoughts of 3:1 –"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven," and 1:13b – ". . . it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with." Since Qoheleth is claiming to observe all that is done under the sun (v 9a), this reference of עת, and God as giver, seems to inject God's sovereignty into the discussion. Even so, at the same time, there is some movement left for human choice, otherwise Qoheleth's advice would be rendered redundant. In the end, verse 9 concludes with the advice and reflections of Qoheleth, and notice is given of the painful realities attending the exercise of political authority.[640] However, all this observation and evaluation is but his very own personal assessment of the vagaries of political fortunes. The references to the unknowability of the future, power over the day of death, and עת, are all familiar themes of Qoheleth and do not betray an empirical methodology.

9:11-12

11 שבתי וראה תחת־השמש
כי לא לקלים המרוץ ולא לגבורים המלחמה
וגם לא לחכמים לחם וגם לא לנבנים עשר
וגם לא לידעים חן
כי־עת ופגע יקרה את־כלם׃

12 כי גם לא־ידע האדם את־עתו
כדגים שנאחזים במצודה רעה
וכצפרים האחזות בפח
כהם יוקשים בני האדם לעת רעה
כשתפול עליהם פתאם׃

11 Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and

[638] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 134-5.

[639] Michel, *Untersuchungen*, 98. "ראיתי bedeutet hier "betrachten" und nicht "sehen."

[640] A question arises as to who is being hurt in v 9b. Is it the one who exercises authority, or some others? I take v 9 as a conclusion to 8:2-6, hence, detriment is to those in power. So Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 284.

chance happen to them all.
12 For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them.

Many scholars regard these verses as an independent section, though, with Qoheleth, it is difficult at times to discern where one unit begins and the other ends. Certainly the open words שבתי וראה = "I turned and I saw" suggest the start of a new literary unit.[641] Qoheleth acknowledges randomness in human existence by evoking the concepts of עת = "time," and פגע = "chance" (verse 11b), which are earlier themes in 3:1-12.[642]

The emphasis in these verses is on the unpredictability and randomness of events. Qoheleth concedes that the swift on foot, the strong in battle, the wise, the intelligent, and the men of skill will normally meet with success in their exploits. Yet, success cannot always be guaranteed.[643] For example, the swift-footed Asahel lost his life to Abner (2 Sam 2: 18-23), and Gideon and his men overcame the superior Midianites (Judg 7). No matter how talented and skilled one is, no human has a sure grip on successful outcomes.

The overall context of this passage must be borne in mind in order to appreciate and rhetorical force of verses 11-12. The first six verses indicate that a common fate awaits everyone. After a negative statement, Qoheleth reiterates his "joy" theme in 9:7-10. For Qoheleth, the only appropriate response to the certainty of death is to enjoy life when the opportunities present themselves. But then, in true antithetical style, he immediately reverts to stress that misfortune may come upon man indiscriminately at any time (verses 11-12).

The terminology that Qoheleth employs brings home the message to the reader. Whereas he uses the same verb האחזות = "to grasp, to take hold," to describe the capture of fish, he chooses another verb to signify the snaring of human beings, יופשים = "to

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[641] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, identifies (at 320) these verses as part of a larger literary unit, 9:11-10:15, which is divided into three different sections, 9:11-12; 9:13-10:4; 10:5-15, each commencing with, "I have observed." Interestingly, וראה, being the infinitive absolute, is used in place of a finite verb. Cf. 8:9, which has the perfect form, and 4:1, 7, where the imperfect is used. There does not appear to be any difference in meaning. See GKC § 113z.

[642] The phrase עת ופגע is usually taken as a hendiadys. Literally it means "time and an incident." The term פגע is elsewhere only found in 1 Kgs 5:18 (ET 5:4] where it has a negative nuance. There it is used with רע and is similar in meaning to ענין רע = "a grievous ill" in Eccl 5:13. Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, makes the interesting distinction (at 111), that Qoheleth's notion of time "refers not just to the ceaseless progression of hours and days but to the things that come unexpectedly and apart from human control."

[643] As Ellermerier, *Qohelet 1/1* puts it (245), ". . . daß weder die Schnellsten für den Wettlauf eine Garantie haben noch die Tapfersten für den Krieg und daß weder den Weisesten ein Unterhalt noch den Einsichtigsten Wohlstand noch den schärfsten Denkern der Beifall garantiert ist."

capture." Fish that are caught in a net, and birds that are caught in a snare, are analogies that starkly emphasize the fact that humans, despite their superior abilities and achievements over animals, are just as helpless as members of the natural world. "What is particularly fascinating about the state of affairs which Qoheleth describes is that he argues from a *theological* premise, namely that it is God who determines the outcome of the 'times' (cf. ch.3)."[644]

In these much-cited verses, Qoheleth claims to have "seen" a variety of situations in life concerned with the unpredictability of events. His use of highly figurative language, while attention grabbing and memorable, does not, however, detract in any way from the fact that, for most observing people, calamity can suddenly fall upon any mortal, be it a financial personal tragedy, illness, or death (ופגע יקרה את־כלם כי־עת). What Qoheleth is observing in these verses constitutes public knowledge about the vicissitudes of human existence. In the words of Salyer, " . . . much of what Qoheleth observes here is simple realism."[645]

10:4 Summary and Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter we drew attention to the huge prominence of the verb ראה in Qoheleth's exposition of his ideas. This suggested that Qoheleth was enraptured in his outlook on the world by experience and observation. It was also noted that ראה takes pre-eminence over the verb שבע = "to hear, hearken," the latter having no significant role in the book. Indeed, Qoheleth appears to give precedence to his own observations more than to listening to other people's insights or advice.

Specific attention was drawn to the many ways that this verb may be rendered, thus pointing out that every occurrence of it does not necessarily indicate experiential significance. Indeed, on many occasions when Qoheleth employed ראה the context revealed the scenario so described did not involve any empirical observation. Since this verb attracts a wide semantic range, it was not surprising to learn that it has many common uses in Qoheleth's language, with only 21 instances in which he appears as subject.

In examining cases in chapter 9 where Qoheleth claims to have "seen everything," along with "all the deeds done under the sun," and "all the work of God," we concluded that the knowledge claims that he made were not borne of an empirical

[644] Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 169.

[645] Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 357.

methodology. This same conclusion was drawn regarding the three "joy passages" that were considered. A distinction has to be drawn between opinion and belief, and on these occasions Qoheleth was expressing an opinion as to how his fellow humans should live in the light of life's frustrations.

In the present chapter we considered all the remaining instances of ראה covering evils observed, reflections on wisdom, and comments on social political matters. In one instance Qoheleth turns to consider wisdom, madness, and folly in 2:12. At first he endorses a traditional wisdom view in v 13a-14a, but this leads to a reflection on the same fate of the wise and the foolish. He thus hates life for his ever-recurring opinion is that all is הבל (v 15c). In 9:13 the example story of the poor wise man that saved the city causes anguish for Qoheleth: "Yet no one remembered that poor man" (v 15c). The failure of human memory is a feature of his outlook, but paradoxically Qoheleth appears to be the only one to remember this poor wise man. On both these occasions Qoheleth is, once again, setting out his personal judgment on wisdom. Claiming to "see" wisdom in 9:13 is essentially a value judgment, and the same applies to his "seeing" advantage in wisdom in 2:13-14a. We found that Qoheleth did not reach such conclusions by empirical means.

On four occasions we drew attention to evils that Qoheleth claims to have seen, two of which concern the possession of material wealth. The context in each case (5:12-13, and 6:1-2) points to Qoheleth's negative conclusions being influenced by (i) his views about human toil and (ii) his understanding of death. Death is also implied in 8:10 - he saw the wicked buried – and in 10:5-7 the sage claims to have witnessed the normative realities reversed – folly in high places, rich sit in a low place, slaves on horseback and princes acting like slaves. To determine what constitutes an example of evil requires a person to make a value judgment, and this is the case in all four scenarios. Additionally 6:1-2 and 8:10 conclude with the הבל theme, and to draw that conclusion in response to the described realities certainly involves making a value judgment.

The remaining seven passages concerned social and political observations about which Qoheleth felt deeply. The replacement of justice and righteous conduct with wickedness in 3:16 is situated in a theological context (3:17): God will judge the righteous and the wicked. His moving tribute to the oppressed in 4:1 is the springboard for his belief that one is better off dead than alive because of all the evil in the world (4:2-3), which is a depressing valid judgment on human existence. In the next verse (4:4) Qoheleth offers a cynical view of human motivation with respect to human toil.

Again, this leads to another personal judgment that this state of affairs is הבל. A further indictment on human toil comes in 4:7-8 about the loner who sees no end to his labour, is never satisfied with his wealth, is deprived of pleasure, and never queries his relentless insistence on his toil. Once more, the הבל theme is invoked (4:8c).

In chapter 4:15, which occurs in the obscure pericope, vv 13-16, the scenario described appears to refer to a change in political leadership, and the fickleness on the part of the people. Yet again, a given scenario inexorably leads Qoheleth to another instance of הבל. Observation is mixed with dogmatism, i.e., Qoheleth's ideas act as a platform for his egocentric view of the world. The context of 8:9 is another observation statement about political power as described in vv 2-9. While these happenings in the higher reaches of society were clearly observed by Qoheleth as an insider, they confirm information that would have been garnered by others in courtly circles. The allusion to God's time in 3:1 (עת) and man's unhappy business from God's hand (1:13b) in 8:6, are elements of Qoheleth's thought that do not emanate from an empirical grounding.

Finally, in the memorable and poetic words of 9:11-12 the use of עת and פגע (cf. 3:1-12) suggest the uncertainty and unpredictability of future events – a familiar topic in Qoheleth's arsenal of beliefs about the world. Yet despite the reflective poignancy of the contents of these verses, Qoheleth is touching on common themes in the public domain. A personal commitment to empiricism is not a necessary condition to reach the conclusions he draws in these two verses.

It is now time to close in on the conclusion of this dissertation. Before doing so, I wish to strengthen my argument in the next chapter that Qoheleth was not an empiricist by briefly presenting some general observations concerning the nature of his argumentation.

CHAPTER 11. QOHELETH'S ARGUMENTATION

Regarding the nature of Qoheleth's argumentation, there are two fundamental features of note. First, there is his starting point. After the superscription, and without taking breath, the author cites the first words of Qoheleth by the incessant repetition of the הבל theme in 1:2, which is linked to the יתרון problem in 1:3. Immediately following in 1:4, Qoheleth juxtaposes human mortality with the permanence of the physical world: "A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains for ever."[646] In the space of just three verses, Qoheleth flags up this trilogy of issues, which are dominating topics in the book.

Secondly, the "I" narrative has a huge presence in the book, and that fact alone assures the reader that what is to follow will be a very personal statement, something akin to a memoir. Indeed, it is so personal that Qoheleth's monologue could at times be justifiably viewed as a dialogue in so far as he is in dialogue with himself and his heart.[647] We earlier noted that Qoheleth appeared not to be a person who listened much to what others had to say, possibly due to the role that his large ego plays in the book.[648] Never once does he proclaim, "This is what I have heard." If, as some scholars like Whybray and Ogden believe, Qoheleth was addressing his students, there is little solid evidence in the book that reflects the cut and thrust of debate that one would expect between lively students and a radically minded teacher. In other words, Qoheleth appears not to have been a practitioner of collegiate engagement.[649] Given the dogmatic nature of much of his assertions, I would suggest that Qoheleth's mind was hermetically sealed to such an extent that he would have found it very difficult to adopt a change of

[646] *Contra* Fox, *A Rereading*, who writes (at 166) '. . . the permanence of the physical earth has no relevance to the individual life.' Fox takes האדצין to refer to humanity as a whole, not to the physical world. Fox cites other OT references in support. I disagree. I believe that the passing of the generations is a reference to human mortality. Death is a huge concern for Qoheleth, and consequently האדצין should be interpreted in that light.

[647] Loader, *Polar Structures*, suggests (at 25) that there are seven examples of what he calls "self discourse' in the book: 1:16; 2:1; 2:15; 3:17; 3:18; and 7:23.

[648] Podechard, *L` Ecclésiastes*, observes (at 195), "Le moi y devient la mesure des choses et c'est d'après ses besoins et ses désirs qu'on juge la vie: elle serait bonne, si le moi en sortait satisfait." (The ego becomes the measure of things And it is according to his needs and desires that life is judged; Good, if the self came out satisfied).

[649] Crenshaw, "The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth," is correct when he observes (at 206) that Qoheleth's journey was a lonely one.

position on any issue.

A text that is dominated by an autobiographical "I" narrative style, which in Qoheleth's case reflects a "radical subjectivity,"[650] runs the risk of drawing conclusions not based on secure premises. On occasions Qoheleth's conclusions do not necessarily follow from his observations. Attention has already been drawn to the importance of the material in the early chapters of the book for understanding Qoheleth's outlook on the world. Thus, in 1:4-7 he immediately draws attention to the natural processes of the world, which seems a good starting point for a keen observer of reality. He sets out to show the serious limitations of human perception and, in particular, the loss of human memory (1:11; 2:16; 9:5). What Qoheleth does is to off-set the ephemerality of human life against the permanence of the natural world because "each human life is too short to observe the true character of the world (physical and human), while each human memory is too short for humanity as a whole to accumulate such an understanding.[651]

How does the sage reach such an understanding? What drives Qoheleth to this conclusion? Just as the poem in chapter 12 is bracketed by the הבל theme (at 11:10b and 12:8), so also in chapter one, this poem on the natural order is bracketed in similar fashion (at 1:2 by the fivefold הבל theme and at 1:14b). But the הבל conclusion does not necessarily flow from the observations and reflections found in 1:4-11. In this example, Qoheleth's experiential statements are united with dogmatic assertions to reach his preferred conclusion.

Let us consider what Qoheleth says about death. This is an issue that concerns him greatly as can be seen from the many references (implicit and explicit) he makes to human mortality. These are 1:4; 2:14-16; 3:2; 3:19-21; 4:2-3; 5:14-16; 6:3-6; 7:1, 2, 4, 17, 26, 8:8; 9:2-12; 11:8, and 12:7. It is truly a striking feature of the book that the subject of death, one way or another, gets a mention in every chapter except chapter ten.[652] We have already examined 6:3-5 and 9:3-5 in chapter 6, both of which concerned the fact of death and the status of the dead. While referring to the fact of death in both passages, what Qoheleth claims to have known about the dead's destination and their state of knowing/not knowing could not have been based on empirical findings.

It is one thing to refer to the phenomenon of human death; it is quite another to

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[650] The phrase is from Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 240.

[651] Weeks, Unpublished script on *Ecclesiastes*.

[652] According to Schoors, *The Preacher Sought*, Part 2, (at 205) the verb מות occurs nine times and the noun מָוֶת six times. He states (at 205) that the fact of dying or the state of death point to the fact that death plays a major role in Qoheleth. The context of the above references certainly concurs with this assessment.

claim knowledge of the afterlife. On several occasions Qoheleth merely refers to the fact of death, e.g., at 1:4; 2:14; 3:2, and 8:8. More often than not, however, the mention of the dead elicits further comments from the sage that are straightforward expressions of opinion. In 4:2-3 he believes that the dead are more fortunate than the living, an opinion that flows from his reflections on the oppressions and evil that exist in the world. A similar opinion is reflected in 7:1 where he states that the day of death is better than the day of birth, while in 7:1, 4, the house of mourning (death being implied) is to be preferred to the house of mirth.

Qoheleth offers advice to his readers in 7:17 not to be too wicked, and avoid foolish behaviour, to which he adds, "Why should you die before your time?" This question seems rather odd considering the extended poem on עת in 3:1-8, which strongly rings of divine determinism. The question is premised on the assumption that Qoheleth appears to know that to be too wicked, or being foolish, determines the duration of one's life. An epistemic claim of this magnitude could not be derived from empirical evidence. Rather, it comes from Qoheleth's personal (ambiguous) belief about the nature of human action and its possibilities and not from his observational powers.

In 5:14-16 (ET 5:15-17) Qoheleth points to the nakedness of humans at birth and at death; for him at least, that fact represents a grievous ill. The dead have nothing in their hand despite all their toil; nothing has really been gained. This gloomy mood is further intensified by the use of the language in v 17: humans spend their days in 'darkness, in much vexation and sickness and resentment.' This assessment of humanity has despair written all over it; it is a belief that is well beyond the framework of an empirical methodology to establish.

Even when Qoheleth strikes a positive note, as he does at 11:8a, he is at pains to tell his fellow humans ". . . that the days of darkness (death) will be many" (11:8b). Whereupon, he invokes his הבל theme (11:8c). Again we see that his strongly negative attitude to life colours his thinking with this value-laden opinion. Since Qoheleth adamantly claims that no one can know the future (cf. 3:22; 6:12; 7:14; 8:7; 9:12; 10:14; 11:12; 11:6) - contrary to his claim that he does know the future fortunes of the wicked and the God-fearer (cf. 8:12-13) – yet he proclaims certain knowledge about what happens after death. When the dust returns to earth, he claims that the breath (רוח) returns to God who gave it (12:7). This statement comes at the end of the poem on ageing and death, thereby bringing the monologue to a conclusion with a three-fold

rendering of the הבל theme (12:8). Again, this is a personal theological opinion and conclusion, categorically stated without any supporting evidence.

The significant feature associated with these references to death (i.e., the fact of death and the condition of the dead) is that the majority of them are linked to the הבל theme in the immediate literary context (the exceptions being 7:17; 7:26, and 8:8). As indicated at the beginning of this study, the very negative mindset that Qoheleth brandished at the beginning of the prologue, - exemplified by the הבל theme in 1:2, the יתרון question in 1:3, and the reality of human mortality in 1:4 – are the constituent elements that drive many of his ideas to their remorseless, pessimistic conclusions.

Qoheleth regards his life as הבל (7:15). In fact, he goes much further down the road of self-abasement when he states that he hates life because of what happens under the sun (3:17a). He also hates life because all his toil (i.e., the results of his toil) would pass on to someone else, perhaps a fool, at his demise (2:18). The expression of such intimate personal feelings cannot possibly be attributed to an empiricist methodology. Such views, though deeply held, are more a reflection of his mental state, which most of the time, is characterized by a negative and pessimistic outlook on life.

Much the same can be said about other of Qoheleth's ideas and claims. For example, since he is so certain about the failure of human memory (1:11; 2:16; 9:5), how does he know what has already happened, and how could he possibly know that what is to be, already exists (3:15a)? These are puzzling questions surrounding his ideas, particularly since in 1:16 he claims to have a secure knowledge of all his predecessors who lived in Jerusalem. And how does he know that no righteous man exists (7:20), or that something that is crooked cannot be straightened (7:13)?

Qoheleth is not averse to advancing his opinion on matters for which he offers no observation or warrant. When he remarks in 5:11 (ET 5:12) that "Sweet is the sleep of labourers, whether little or much; but the surfeit of the rich will not let them sleep." what he is offering his readers is a very personal opinion for which no evidential basis is given. What he says might be true, but it may not be. The same can be said of his belief that all toil and all skill in work come from one person's envy of someone else (4:4a). This jaundiced view of human motivation is backed up by another invocation of the הבל theme in 4:4b. Again, there is not the slightest justification set forth to substantiate such a provocative claim.

It also might be added that his ideas on toil and profit would not be considered

normative. We have already noted the close connection between the הבל, עמל, and יתרון themes. His negative ideas in these matters become for him the benchmark *simpliciter* for his views on human toil and profit. Few sages, and people generally, would I venture to suggest, concur with Qoheleth on his ideas on human endeavour and motivation. The same applies to his opinions expressed in 6:7 that all human toil is for one's mouth, but the appetite is never satisfied. Whether one agrees with him or not, the fact remains that these ideas on human effort are laced with value judgments, even when he explicitly states that the conclusions he draws are borne of observation. But what Qoheleth "sees" is not necessarily to be equated with what he "observes."

Stuart Weeks sums up the matter perceptively when he writes, "Qohelet does not typically extrapolate ideas from experience, but places his experience in the context of his ideas."[653] That is, Qoheleth's ideas take the preeminence in shaping his outlook on the world. The inevitable result is that Qoheleth's argumentation reflects more of his own dogmatic proclivities than it does external empirical evidence. James Crenshaw offers the observation that ". . . few interpreters would deny the overwhelming experiential basis of Qoheleth's teaching."[654] At first blush that appears to be a plausible assessment, especially when one keeps in view the nature of Qoheleth's stated quests, and the prominence of key experiential verbs, e.g., "knowing," "finding," and "seeing." But as Crenshaw also points out, Qoheleth's many unsubstantiated assertions are a departure from an empirical base. He writes,

> The simple truth is that Qoheleth accepted an astonishing variety of transmitted teachings without submitting them to the test of experience. Occasionally, he uses emphatic language, e.g., "I Know," when asserting something that none can confirm (3:14-15 and 8:12-13). One suspects that rhetoric aims at obscuring faulty logic in such moments. In light of overwhelming evidence of *a priori* knowledge in Qoheleth's teaching, it may be necessary to qualify the claim that a new era of empirical knowledge dawned when he appeared on the scene.[655]

Leong Seow offers this assessment, ". . . Qoheleth's "epistemology" is not entirely "empirical." He does draw on traditional sources as well, specifically wisdom teachings, materials found in the Torah and, of course, traditions about Solomon."[656] Seow, however, does allows that some aspects of Qoheleth's teaching are partly empirical. To what extent this is so, I will address in the conclusion to which we now turn.

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[653] Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 124.

[654] Crenshaw, *Qoheleth's Understanding*, 212.

[655] Crenshaw, *Qoheleth's Understanding*, 213.

[656] Seow, "Theology When It Is Out Of Control," *Int* 55 (2001), 239.

CHAPTER 12: CONCLUSION

We began our study by exploring the mindset and world outlook of Qoheleth by examining the contents of the first two chapters of the book. In doing so we discovered valuable insights into the mind and outlook of a unique author by the way he employed key terms like הבל, עמל, and יתרון. This material set the tone for the entire book for it was found that the issues and ideas presented in this early material surfaced again and again throughout the rest of the monologue. Thus, chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation lay the groundwork for our study.

After presenting in chapter 3 a descriptive analysis of various scholarly claims that Qoheleth is best described as an empiricist, we undertook to offer a working definition of empiricism, and presented a short discussion on epistemological theory. Thereafter our study moved to examine the diversity of Qoheleth's epistemic claims in four mains areas: (i) God, and the use of the verbs (ii) ראה, (iii) ידע, and (iv) מצא. It was found that the theological claims regarding God's nature and activity were a matter of personal belief and opinion, not derived from an empirical grounding.

All three of the verbs (along with several others) had great *prima facie* experiential potential. Yet on examination, the experiential value of these verbs did not live up to initial expectations. If Qoheleth is to be viewed as having an empiricist outlook on life then I believe that description would not be out of place when assessing his early experimentalist phase in chapter 2. There we observe a man bent on a life of pleasure, and in all his business exploits he experienced the nature of hard work and the wealth that accrued from it. He was setting out to prove something about the nature of life directly related to his personal involvement in a range of projects. I have no doubt that he learned from it accordingly, notwithstanding the fact that he typically drew on his all-embracing הבל conclusion in 2:11. For the most part, however, keeping in mind our findings in Parts 2 to 4, it is difficult to maintain that Qoheleth was an empiricist in any meaningful sense.

In previous chapters two important issues were noted about Qoheleth's knowledge claims. First, there is no evidence found in Ecclesiastes to the effect that Qoheleth appropriated any epistemological theory. Nevertheless, a sage who claims to have extensive knowledge, and simultaneously knows that his fellow humans have severe cognitive limitations, must be operating on the basis of some understanding of

knowledge acquisition and its limitations. Secondly, we observed that there were dangers in attempting to squeeze Qoheleth into the form a modern day epistemologist. No attempt has been made to follow this procedure. While it is true that the provenance of epistemological theory extends beyond the third century BCE, Qoheleth's passion appears to have been to present his ideas and observations about life under the sun without the aid of any philosophical theory.

As we now come to bring this dissertation to a fitting conclusion, I wish to pick up, and briefly elaborate on, the epistemological discussion we had in chapter 3, the purpose being to come to a nuanced understanding of Qoheleth's knowledge claims. We referred to the traditional account of knowledge as *justified true belief*. Applied to Qoheleth's epistemic claims we noted that there was no ambivalence about Qoheleth's assertions about God, mankind, and the world at large. For him, these claims constituted knowledge: he firmly *believed* them, and held them to be *true*. But he showed no awareness of the need to offer some justification (evidence, warrant, good reasons) for his claims.

Foundationalism is a response to the justification problem: it is a normative theory as to how we gain the epistemic right to believe. To recap on our discussion in chapter three, the metaphor of a building is employed to indicate the nature of foundationalism. A building has a foundation and a superstructure. Knowledge is thus structured like a building. There is foundational knowledge and without it there can be no knowledge at all. Basic beliefs are viewed as the foundation upon which all of the rest of our justified beliefs are built. Any belief that is basic is not actually derived from other beliefs.

Thus, beliefs that are part of the superstructure are non-basic and their justification is found in the justified basic beliefs in the foundation. That is to say, a belief is justified if, and only if, it is either a basic belief justified by the subject's experience, or an inferred belief justified in some way by the support of basic beliefs. This approach to the regress problem acknowledges that the subject's experience is significant and relevant to how justified he/she is in his/her beliefs about the world.

According to *moderate foundationalism* the non-inferential warrant possessed by basic beliefs need not amount to absolute certainty. That is, there is no demand that the proper basic belief need be infallible, or incorrigible, as is the case with strong foundationalism. All that is required is that the basic belief must be sufficient of itself to satisfy the justification condition of knowledge. Mention was also made to *internalism*

in chapter 3. According to internalism, justification is dependent solely on critical factors internal to the believer's mind. That is, the only factors relevant to the justification of a belief is the presence of the believer's other mental states, this being important since belief is a mental state, and belief-formation is a mental process. Related to this is another important aspect to the internalist's position: the need to have a good reason (warrant, evidence) for a belief.

We have rejected the empiricist appellation that has been applied to Qoheleth's teaching. However, I believe that, in the light of our discussion of epistemology, Qoheleth best fits the description of a foundationalist who has an internalist understanding of justification. The 'internalist' label seems more appropriate for Qoheleth when we consider the dominance of the "I" narrative in the monologue. The reader is left in no doubt that Qoheleth's understanding of the world is from his own personal post of observation. He claims no experience of divine revelation, no specific tradition to draw on, and no external realities to kick-start his experiments. The indispensable starting point of Qoheleth's understanding of the world is his very own ideas and convictions.

Since we have conferred on Qoheleth the status of a foundationalist, how may we identify a justified basic belief to which he adherred? It can be suggested that a belief could be justified if its warrant is premised on certain *a priori* knowledge, knowledge that is known independently of experience. Accordingly, the most significant basic belief of Qoheleth, that underscores his view of the world, is the existence of a divine creator (3:11; 3:14; 7:14; 7:29; 11:5; 12:1). This, I submit, is the cornerstone of Qoheleth's existential outlook. It is in every sense truly foundational. The divine presence permeates the entire contents of the book with the generic term אלהים occurring in every chapter, with the exception of chapter 10.

What, it may be asked, is the source of Qoheleth's belief that God exists? He certainly does not engage in a theoretical defence of theism, as we earlier indicated. The answer, I believe, is to be found in his traditional upbringing. The very distinctive Hebrew belief that there is only one God, often referred to as ethical monotheism, was something that Qoheleth would have imbibed from his childhood. Of course, his belief in God is not characterized by personal intimacy so evident in Yahwism; but then Qoheleth lived at a very different time and place, far distant from early expressions of Yahwism.

In every sense Qoheleth is a rare spirit. He never speaks to God in prayer; God

does not speak directly to him. Nor does Qoheleth upbraid or argue with God as Job did. His basic belief in God as creator of all things includes the implication that God is the giver of life to all humans and all animals. At no time, despite his avowed hatred of life, and his angst and despair, he never once advocates suicide. Notwithstanding the absence of divine engagement on his part, there cannot be the slightest doubt that for Qoheleth the belief in a divine creator, the giver of all things, goes to the very core of his being. For Qoheleth, this basic belief is sufficient of itself to satisfy the justification condition of knowledge.

Stemming from this basic belief other non-basic (inferred) beliefs follow. One such belief is that, given the sovereign reality of God, human beings will be judged for their conduct. This is a solid belief to which Qoheleth adheres unswervingly (cf. 3:17; 5:5 (ET 5:6); 8:12b-13; 11:9; 12:14). While the nature and timing of God's judgment is not clearly explicated by Qoheleth, nevertheless, the reality of God as judge is a belief in keeping with the basic belief that there exists a sovereign, unchangeable, moral, and immortal deity whose will can never be thwarted by any human.

Keeping in mind that the basic belief that God exists is the foundation upon which Qoheleth's inferred beliefs are built, another non-basic belief can be identified that is part of Qoheleth's superstructure of knowledge, namely, that God is to be feared. This belief seems a natural extension from the belief that God is the supreme judge of all humanity. The belief that God is to be feared is most decisively observed in the cultic passage (4:17-5:6 [ET 5:1-5:7]). It is also mentioned twice at 8:12b-13b, and once at 7:18, with a strong emphasis noticeable in the epilogue at 12:13.

The raison d'être for humans to fear God is that God is not merely confined to the human sphere of activity – "under the sun." This is forcefully notified to the reader at 5:2 [ET 5:1] where it reads "God is in heaven, and you upon earth . . ." While God resides in heaven, yet he is very active in the world of humanity, and controls the processes of the natural world. In the context of worship, a minimum of words is advised, and if vows are made they should be kept (5:2b-6) [ET 5:1-5]. Hence the challenging injunction in 5:6b [ET 5:7]: 'but fear God'.

Another of Qoheleth's inferred beliefs is that men and women are not only created by God, but are dependent and limited beings. His views about human kind run through every chapter of the book like a main thread running through a garment. As we noted in chapter four, there are 49 references to אדם in the book, with another 10 occurrences of איש. It is clear from the evidence laid out in previous chapters that

Qoheleth refers to אדם in the generic sense of humankind. While he enjoins his fellow creatures to enjoy life when they can, he generally does not have a lofty and noble opinion of them. As Tomáš Frydrych puts it, "Qoheleth's anthropology is of a low type, in which [a] human being, created by God, is de facto an animal."[657] Humans have sought out many inventions (7:29); men's hearts are set to do evil (8:11b); and injustice, oppression, evil, and unrighteous behaviour exist even in the most unlikely of places (3:16; 4:1; 7:15b; 8:11b, and 10:5).

Qoheleth's anthropology is not far removed from the Genesis tradition of the fall of man in the Garden of Eden, and other accounts of human evil in the Hebrew Bible. Whatever the source of his belief in mankind's tendency to do evil, it is difficult to believe that this sage was unaware of the Genesis story of origins. Be that as it may, it is clear that Qoheleth was more than able to add his own negative and pessimistic interpretation of reality to whatever traditions he may have known about the corporate theological and political experiences of Israel.

Our examination of the diversity of ideas, beliefs, assertions, and opinions to which Qohelet gave expression would suggest that while he may be viewed more as a philosopher of sorts, rather than as a preacher, yet it is still difficult to envisage his literary output being elevated to the status of a consistent and convincing body of work. He is too skeptical, too pessimistic, at times very conservative, at times very radical. He is sometimes esoteric in his views, as well as cynical, unpredictable, contradictory, morbid, and yet, he is compassionate, joyful, and sensitive to being alive.

Of course, it is very unlikely that Qoheleth (whether a fictional or real person) ever set out to be a philosophical theorist; a close reading of the book might suggest that he was an articulate person, with a large persona, only too eager to get a lot of things off his chest. Quite reasonably, he may have had no interest in a theory of knowledge, or any other kind of theory. Essentially, it could be argued that he was simply writing a tract for his time and place.

In spite of his belief in the failure of human memory, yet over two millennia later, many people are grappling to understand the nature and origin of his ideas and teaching. As we observed in chapter three, quite a number of commentators have asserted that in all the claims he made to knowledge, he is best viewed as an empiricist. That is one possible theory. But no matter what theory we adopt to explain Qoheleth's epistemic claims, no theory is perfect. There will be fault lines discernible at some point

[657] Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun*, 160.

in any theory.

I submit that, on the basis on the evidence that has been presented in this dissertation, to give Qoheleth the description of empiricist is not a feasible proposition simply because so much of his claims could never have been established by empirical observation. I would contend that the view that I have presented in this thesis offers a more convincing account of Qoheleth's claims to knowledge. At the most fundamental level he is a theist, or more precisely, a monotheist. And from that basic belief in the sovereign reality of God, all other inferred beliefs are justified.

Of course, I am conscious that moderate foundationalism has its critics, as well as its fault lines. But so too has the notion of empiricism, as any serious engagement with epistemological study will reveal. In the end, as I have acknowledged, there are few perfect theories about any topic relating to any human endeavour, but I believe that presenting Qoheleth as a foundationalist in his theory of knowledge is more plausible than viewing him as an empiricist.

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