

THE THOUGHT OF QOHELETH  
ITS STRUCTURE, ITS SEQUENTIAL UNFOLDING,  
AND ITS POSITION IN ISRAEL'S THEOLOGY

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Summary

This study analyses the theological thought of Qoheleth. In the Introduction, a survey of Qoheleth studies in the last hundred years has shown that the literary structure of the book of Qoheleth is still crucial to the understanding of the theological thought of Qoheleth. Thus, Chapter One of this thesis is devoted to discussing various approaches, i.e. traditional critical, form critical, and modern literary approaches, which have been employed in the study of the structure of the book.

Chapter Two analyses the structure of Qoheleth's theological thought, arguing that  $\text{הַבְּהוּמָה}$  (the absurd) and  $\text{הַשְּׂמֵחָה}$  (joy) are the two concepts which make sense of Qoheleth's thought and also form the fundamental structure of his thought. Together with various secondary themes such as portion, profit, wisdom, wealth, death, remembrance and God, they form the total structure of Qoheleth's thought. This is followed by a reading of Qoheleth in Chapter Three, analysing the argument of the book as it develops.

Chapter Four examines the position of Qoheleth's theological thought within Israel's theology. The relationships between Wisdom and Yahwism, and Wisdom and Creation are analysed, arguing that the idea that Wisdom theology is essentially Creation theology is not compatible with Qoheleth's thought. The theology of Qoheleth is to be determined by the book itself, and proves to reflect neither conservative Yahwism nor radical anti-Yahwism. The uniqueness of Qoheleth's thought leads to the identification of Qoheleth as a 'liminal intellectual' who may be going through a period of transition, in the process of adopting a new set of beliefs, social norms or status. Thus, Qoheleth's theological thought may be seen as a 'liminal' theology, with 'liminality' as its social setting.

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עֲשׂוֹת סִפְרִים הַרְבֵּה אֵין קֵץ  
וְלֹהֵג הַרְבֵּה יִגְעַת בְּשָׂר׃

Of Making Many Books There is No End  
and Much Study is a Weariness of the Flesh  
(Qoh. 12:12)

## ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
ASTI	<i>Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute</i>
ATD	Das Alte Testament Deutsch
AUSS	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BDB	Brown, Driver, and Briggs, <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic</i> . Oxford: OUP, 1907.
BETL	<i>Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium</i>
BHT	Beiträge zur Historischen Theologie
Bib	<i>Biblica</i>
BKAT	Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BTF	<i>Bangalore Theological Forum</i>
BZ	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
BZAW	<i>Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
CBOTS	Coniectanea Biblica Old Testament Series
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBQMS	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series</i>
CJT	<i>Canadian Journal of Theology</i>
COT	<i>Creation in the Old Testament</i> , ed. B.W. Anderson, London/Philadelphia: SPCK/Fortress Press, 1984.
CTM	<i>Concordia Theological Monthly</i>
CUP	Cambridge University Press
DSBS	The Daily Study Bible Series
EBC	Everyman's Bible Commentary
EJ	<i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i>
EphCarm	<i>Ephemerides Carmeliticae</i>
ET	English Translation
ETL	<i>Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses</i>
EvT	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
EvQ	<i>The Evangelical Quarterly</i>
ExpT	<i>The Expository Times</i>
FOTL	The Forms of the Old Testament Literature
GTJ	<i>Grace Theological Journal</i>
HAR	<i>Hebrew Annual Review</i>

HAT	Handbuch zum Alten Testament
HBT	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
IB	<i>Interpreter's Bible</i> , ed. by G.A. Buttrick, 12 vols., Nashville: Abingdon, 1952-57.
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IDB	<i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> , ed. by G.A. Buttrick, 4 vols., Nashville: Abingdon, 1962.
IDBSup	<i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Supplementary Volume</i> , ed. by K. Crim, Nashville: Abingdon, 1976
IndJT	<i>Indian Journal of Theology</i>
Interp	<i>Interpretation</i>
ITQ	<i>Irish Theological Quarterly</i>
IW	<i>Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien</i> , ed. J.G. Gammie, et al. New York: Union Theological Seminary; Montana: Scholars Press, 1978.
JAOS	<i>Journal of American Oriental Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JBR	<i>Journal of the Bible and Religion</i>
JJS	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series</i>
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KAT	Kommentar zum Alten Testament
OBS	Oxford Bible Series
OrLovPer	<i>Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica</i>
OrLovPer[An]	<i>Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica [Analecta]</i>
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTS	<i>Oudtestamentische Studiën</i>
PAAJR	<i>Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research</i>
PEQ	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i>
PSB	<i>Princeton Seminary Bulletin</i>
RevExp	<i>Review and Expositor</i>
RSR	<i>Religious Studies Review</i>
RSV	Revised Standard Version



SAIW	<i>Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom</i> , ed. by J.L. Crenshaw. New York: KTAV, 1976.
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBT	<i>Studia Biblica et Theologica</i>
SJT	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SMiss	<i>Studia Missionalia</i>
SPOA	<i>Les sagesses du Porche-Orient ancien</i> (Colloque de Strasbourg, 1962), Paris, 1963.
SpT	<i>Spirituality Today</i>
StiZt	<i>Stimmen der Zeit</i>
STU	<i>Schweizerische Theologische Umschau</i>
TB	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
TDOT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> , ed. by G.J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974-
Trad	<i>Traditions</i>
TSFB	<i>Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin</i>
TTZ	<i>Trierer theologische Zeitschrift</i>
TUMSR	Trinity University Monograph Series in Religion
TZ	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
UF	<i>Ugaritische Forschungen</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to <i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZTK	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

## INTRODUCTION

### A. A CENTURY OF QOHELETH STUDIES

Since the Reformation, the book of Qoheleth, more commonly known as the book of Ecclesiastes, has been one of the most disputed books of the Old Testament, perhaps due to its apparently unorthodox and often self-contradictory contents. Although it has been stigmatized as the 'black sheep' of the Old Testament wisdom family, interest in Qoheleth has grown, especially in the last century and more so during the last twenty years. The brief survey of works on Qoheleth from the 1850s to the 1970s which follows will help to set the backdrop for the current study and also provide a proper perspective on the shifts of interest in Qoheleth studies over the last hundred years.

#### 1. From the 1850s to 1910

In 1857, an anonymous article in *The Princeton Review* entitled "The Scope and Plan of the Book of Ecclesiastes", argued that

... The deficiency of arrangement [in Ecclesiastes] which has been alleged, does not exist; and the alterations which have been proposed are not improvements. There is a clear and consistent plan in the book of Ecclesiastes, which needs no changes nor mutilations in order to its discovery; one in fact of the most strictly logical and methodical kind.<sup>1</sup>

Together with Genung and Cornill<sup>2</sup>, this represents the conservative

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<sup>1</sup>*The Princeton Review* 29 (1857):419-40 (427).

<sup>2</sup>J.F. Genung, *Words of Koheleth* (1904) and C.H. Cornill, *Introduction to the Canonical Books of the Old Testament* (1907); cf. Robert Gordis, *Koheleth - The Man and His World* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), p. 379, n. 14.

position on the compositional structure of Qoheleth which has lasted up to the present time.<sup>3</sup>

In Germany, however, it seems that both 'conservatives' and 'liberals' would agree that no compositional unity existed in Qoheleth. A popular quotation from the conservative scholar Franz Delitzsch will serve as a classic example: "All attempts to show, on the whole, not only a oneness of spirit, but also a genetic progress, an all-embracing plan, and an organic connection, have hitherto failed, and must fail."<sup>4</sup> This sceptical attitude can be attributed to the many apparently self-contradictory and irreconcilable paradoxical sayings of Qoheleth which sometimes have been thought to be contrary to or hostile to Judeo-Christian orthodoxy. The inconsistency of the loosely connected sayings and the unsystematic organization of the entire book lead one of the most prominent critical scholars of those days, C. Siegfried, to argue for multiple authorship of the book.<sup>5</sup> Another radical scholar, G. Bickell, had suggested that Qoheleth was written in codex form with about 525 letters on each leaf and had become disorganized during

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<sup>3</sup>Conservatives like Walter C. Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes: Total Life* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979); G.L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964).

<sup>4</sup>Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, trans. by M.G. Easton (Edinburgh, 1891), p. 181. Also E.W. Hengstenberg the great conservative scholar argued in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, trans. by D.W. Simon (Philadelphia: Smith, English and Co., 1860), p. 15, that "A connected and orderly argument, an elaborate arrangement of the parts, is as little to be looked for here as in the special portion of the book of Proverbs which begins with Chapter X., or as in the alphabetic Psalms."

<sup>5</sup>Carl Siegfried, *Prediger Salomonis und Hoheslied* (Göttingen, 1898). He argued that the book was first written by a Jew with a Greek philosophy and then commented on by a Sadducean Epicurean (who added the idea that one should enjoy life while it lasts), a Hokma-teacher ('wise man' who was responsible for the wisdom passages which argue for the advantage of wisdom) and a Hasid (perhaps a 'pietist' who brought the consciousness of divine judgment into the scene). Later, a glossator, redactors and epilogists added more comments to the original message.

transmission.<sup>6</sup> A similar treatment of the book was given by V. Zapletal and P. Haupt who argued that the book had been written in metrical form and regarded only about one half of the book as genuine. Thus, Haupt was compelled to rewrite Qoheleth in order to support his metrical theory.<sup>7</sup>

In Great Britain, A.H. McNeile and G.A. Barton though not as radical as Siegfried, both adopted a modified version of his analysis, assuming the influence of the *Hokma* and *Hasid* editors on the original material.<sup>8</sup> Along the same line of thought the French scholar E. Podechard suggested that there were two epilogists, one a disciple of Qoheleth who was responsible for the epilogue (12:9-14) and the third person material, the other a *Hasid*, plus a *Hokma* glossator and two other interpolators, to whom a total of 85 verses were assigned.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the general critical opinion up to the first decade of the twentieth century was that the original Qoheleth was heterodox and disunified in its composition, and that later orthodox glosses had been imposed upon it to give it its present form. It is surprising to see, as pointed out by Robert Gordis, that "none of these scholars seeks to explain why the book was deemed worthy of this

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<sup>6</sup>G. Bickell, *Der Prediger über den Wert des Daseins* (1884), pp. 4-5; cf. G.A. Barton, *A Critical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (ICC; Edinburgh, 3rd edn, 1908), pp. 25f.

<sup>7</sup>V. Zapletal, *Die Metrik des Buches Kohelet* (1904); P. Haupt, *Koheleth* (1905) and *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (1905).

<sup>8</sup>G.A. Barton, *loc. cit.*; A. H. McNeile, *An Introduction to Ecclesiastes* (Cambridge, 1904), pp. 44ff., argued that the book had undergone three major stages of redaction: the first redactor diluted the pessimistic message, then a second redactor improved its religious orthodoxy and the final stage was the touching up by the 'epilogist' and 'prologist'.

<sup>9</sup>E. Podechard, *L' Ecclésiaste* (Paris, 1912), pp. 142ff.

effort to legitimize it, when it could so easily have been suppressed."<sup>10</sup>

Another related, but less disputed problem among the critical scholars of this period, is the question of Solomonic authorship. Though Jewish scholars, at least up to the eighteenth century, accepted the Solomonic authorship of the book, the first Christian to doubt this was the great reformer Martin Luther who ascribed the date of the book to the Maccabean period.<sup>11</sup> This seems to have had its effect on the late nineteenth century conservatives like F. Delitzsch and E.W. Hengstenberg, both of whom rejected the Solomonic authorship of the book. Today, only a handful of conservatives, such as G.L. Archer and W. Kaiser, still hold to the Solomonic authorship of the book of Qoheleth.

## 2. From the 1920s to the 1950s

Scholars of this period seem to have picked up an old, but neglected, issue concerning foreign influence on Qoheleth and started a series of heated scholarly debates. The debates occurred in two stages; first over the issue of Hellenistic influence, second over the question of ancient Near Eastern influence.

First, the debate over Greek influence centred on two areas: language and philosophical thought.<sup>12</sup> Although Barton seems to have

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<sup>10</sup>Robert Gordis, *Koheleth - The Man and His World*, p. 71.

<sup>11</sup>C.D. Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth* (New York: KTAV, 1970), p. 113, presented Martin Luther's view as "Solomon himself did not write the book of Ecclesiastes, but it was produced by Sirach at the time of the Maccabees.... It is a sort of a Talmud, compiled from many books, probably from the library of King Ptolemy Euergetes of Egypt" (quoted and translated by Ginsburg from Martin Luther's *Table Talk*, pp. 400-401 of the Förstermann and Birdsell's edition).

<sup>12</sup>Cf. H. Ranston, *Ecclesiastes and the Early Greek Wisdom Literature* (London: The Epworth Press, 1925).

argued convincingly against Greek influence in both areas in his 1908 commentary, there are others who have seen Qoheleth as a sceptic, a pessimist, an agnostic, an epicurean or a fatalist.<sup>13</sup> Murphy rightly observes that, although this debate has gone on to the present day, "no firm conclusion can be drawn."<sup>14</sup> Defending the Hebrew originality of Qoheleth, Robert Gordis argues that although Qoheleth is aware of the Greek culture of his day, "What is most striking, however, is not his familiarity with some popular ideas drawn from Greek philosophy, but his *completely original and independent use of these ideas to express his own unique world view.*"<sup>15</sup>

Second, perhaps due to the discovery of certain ancient Near Eastern texts, scholars have shifted their attention to argue for a foreign origin of Qoheleth. As remarked by James Muilenburg in 1954, "Commentators have had little difficulty in citing parallels from the literary works of the people of the ancient Near East."<sup>16</sup> Such remarks are indeed evident in a series of articles by the late Father Mitchell Dahood who argued strongly for a "Canaanite-Phoenician" influence on Qoheleth.<sup>17</sup> Others who argue for an Aramaic

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<sup>13</sup>G.A. Barton, *op. cit.*, pp. 34ff., "everything in Qoheleth can be accounted for as a development of Semitic thought, and [that] the expressions which have been seized upon to prove that its writer came under the influence of Greek schools of philosophy only prove at most that Qoheleth was a Jew who had in him the making of a Greek philosopher."; cf. R. Pfeiffer, "The Peculiar Skepticism of Ecclesiastes," *JBL* 53 (1934):100-09; Charles Forman, "The Pessimism of Ecclesiastes," *JSS* 3 (1958):136-43; more recently, Charles F. Whitley, *Koheleth: His Language and Thought* (BZAW 148; 1979), pp. 151ff.; R.B.Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* (AB; 2nd edn; New York: Doublday, 1982), p. 192, sees Qoheleth as "a rationalist, an agnostic, a skeptic, a pessimist and a fatalist."

<sup>14</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Introduction to Wisdom Literature," in *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther*, (FOTL, 13; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 12.

<sup>15</sup>Robert Gordis, *op. cit.*, p. 56 (*italics his*).

<sup>16</sup>James Muilenburg, "A Qoheleth Scroll from Qumran," *BASOR* 135 (1954):20-28.

<sup>17</sup>Mitchell Dahood, *Bib* 33 (1952):30-52, 191-221; *idem*, "Qoheleth

origin are F.C. Burkitt,<sup>18</sup> H.L. Ginsberg,<sup>19</sup> and Frank Zimmerman.<sup>20</sup> This triggered a debate with Robert Gordis who defended the Hebrew origin of Qoheleth.<sup>21</sup> G.L. Archer, on the other hand, argues that Phoenician influence in Qoheleth is a valid proof of the Solomonic authorship because Solomon had taken Phoenician wives.<sup>22</sup> As the debate on the linguistic element of Qoheleth slowly faded into the background with views mostly conjectural in nature, scholars in the 1960s entered another phase of Qoheleth studies, as tools for interpretation were being introduced and recognized.

### 3. From the 1960s to the 1970s

A sudden awakening from the past neglect of biblical wisdom literature has brought a new wave of scholarly interest in it in the 1970s. Consequently, interest in Qoheleth has brought much advancement in understanding particularly the structure of the

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and Recent Discoveries," *Bib* 39 (1958):302-18; *idem*, "Qoheleth and Northwest Semitic Philology," *Bib* 43 (1962):349-65; *idem*, "The Phoenician Background of Qoheleth," *Bib* 47 (1966):264-82; *idem*, "Three Parallel Pairs in Ecclesiastes 10:8: 'A Reply to Professor Gordis'," *JQR* 62 (1971-2):84-87. He argued that Qoheleth was composed by a Hebrew author who employed Phoenician orthography and that its composition shows heavy Canaanite-Phoenician literary influence.

<sup>18</sup>F.C. Burkitt, "Is Ecclesiastes a Translation?," *JTS* 23 (1932): 22-28; he asserted that, "What we have is not an original but a translation.... The Aramaic influence in Ecclesiastes is of course evident" (22-23).

<sup>19</sup>H.L. Ginsberg, *Studies in Koheleth* (Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950), p. 16.

<sup>20</sup>Frank Zimmerman, "The Aramaic Provenance of Qohelet," *JQR* 36 (1945-46):17-45; *idem*, "The Question of Hebrew," *JQR* 40 (1949): 79-102.

<sup>21</sup>Robert Gordis, "The Original Language of Qohelet," *JQR* 37 (1946):67-84; *idem*, "The Translation-Theory of Qohelet Re-examined," *JQR* 40 (1949):103-16; *idem*, "Koheleth - Hebrew or Aramaic?," *JBL* 71 (1952):93-109; *idem*, "Was Qoheleth a Phoenician?," *JBL* 74 (1955): 103-14; *idem*, *Koheleth: The Man and His World*, pp. 51-58, 413, 416.

<sup>22</sup>G.L. Archer, "The Linguistic Evidence for the Date of 'Ecclesiastes'," *JETS* 12 (1969):167-81.

book. Scholars of this period no longer show much interest in the problem of authorship and foreign philosophies or linguistic influence, but rather in what way the book may be said to be a unity. This may be attributed to the rise of New Criticism as a style of literary study, with which is associated James Muilenburg's 'rhetorical criticism'. Scholars apparently think that it is unsatisfactory to explain the disorganization and self-inconsistency of Qoheleth with a theory of multiple authors or a hypothesis of a foreign origin.<sup>23</sup> Thus the study of the structure of Qoheleth again became the primary concern among scholars of this period. But unlike the 1920s, modern scholars have generally regarded the book as essentially a unity and have argued or assumed that only on that premise can the thought of Qoheleth be understood.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, there is no consensus as to the extent of unity within the book.

There are basically three views concerning the unity of Qoheleth: 1) the 'minimum' view; 2) the 'maximum' view; and 3) the 'medium' view.

1) *The 'minimum' view.* Advocates of this view argue that there is no logical development or interrelation between the pericopes of the book, and each pericope may consist of loose sayings collected into independent aphoristic units, perhaps by a single author.

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<sup>23</sup>As remarked by B.S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Fortress, 1979), p. 582, "Increasingly, modern scholars have returned to the position of seeing the book as basically a unified composition of one author. The early theories of multiple authorship or extensive interpolation have not been sustained. However, some editorial work is generally recognized in the prologue and the epilogue."

<sup>24</sup>A.G. Wright has suggested that the literary structure of Qoheleth is the key to unlock the message of the book: "The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 30 (1968):313-34 (313).



Scholars representing this view are F. Ellermeier,<sup>25</sup> Kurt Galling,<sup>26</sup> Aarre Lauha,<sup>27</sup> G. Fohrer and O. Eissfeldt.<sup>28</sup> The pericopes are demarcated by employing a form-critical method and drawing parallels from biblical (Proverbs, Job) and extra-biblical (Ben Sira) materials.

2) *The 'maximum' view.* In opposition to Ellermeier and Galling, H.W. Hertzberg,<sup>29</sup> sees Qoh. 1:2-12:8 as a literary unit in terms of language, structure and style, and argues that there is a compositional relationship between pericopes, while A.G. Wright<sup>30</sup> exhibiting the concerns of the New Criticism argues that there is a logical progression within the internal structure and that a sequence of thought can be detected. There are also others who argue along this line of thought though with different variations.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>F. Ellermeier, *Qohelet - Untersuchungen zum Buche Qohelet I* (1967), p. 122.

<sup>26</sup>K. Galling, "Der Prediger," in *Die Fünf Megillot* (HAT, 1969), who sees a unity existing in the sense that one author has put the strings of independent poems together from 1:12-12:7 (1:1-11 and 12:8-14 are later addition). In his article, "Kohelet-Studien," *ZAW* 50 (1932):281, he writes that "Ihre Einheit - nicht Einheitlichkeit - muss in der Einheit des Menschen Kohelet, ihre Widersprüche, Spannungen und Gebrochenheiten müssen in eben diesem Widerspruch, der Spannung und Gebrochenheit der Menschen Kohelet geschaut werden. Es gilt, die Kräfte des dynamischen Schaffensprozesses abzutasten, um ohne Nivellierung, Addition und Subtraktion die ganze Fülle der Lebensschau und Lebenshaltung in diesem Menschen und in seinem Werk zu erkennen."

<sup>27</sup>Aarre Lauha seems to agree with him in, "Die Krise des religiösen Glaubens bei Kohelet," *VTSup* 3 (1955):183-191 (183, 189).

<sup>28</sup>Following K. Galling's view are G. Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (10th edn; Abingdon, 1968), p. 337; and O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament. An Introduction* (ET; Oxford and New York, 1965), pp. 499f.

<sup>29</sup>H.W. Hertzberg, *Der Prediger* (KAT, 1963), p. 14; also early 1900s scholars such as A. Bea and M. Thilo.

<sup>30</sup>Wright, *op. cit.*; *idem*, "The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited: Numerical Patterns in the Book of Ecclesiastes," *CBQ* 42 (1980):38-51; *idem*, "Additional Numerical Patterns in Qoheleth," *CBQ* 45 (1983):32-43; The NAB seems to follow Wright's outline.

<sup>31</sup>H.L. Ginsberg, "Structure and Contents of Kohelet," *VTSup* 3 (1955):138-49; G.R. Castellino, "Qohelet and his Wisdom," *CBQ* 30

3) The 'medium' view. This view represents those who see certain degree of unity existed in the book as exhibited through the recurring phrases and themes, but who are not willing to admit that the work is a carefully designed literary piece with a logical progression in thought. For instance, B. Gemser sees the unity only in the contents of the book, i.e. one single unifying thought that connects all the utterances, and no unity exists in the compositional connection between pericopes.<sup>32</sup> Similarly Oswald Loretz<sup>33</sup> argues that neither the 'minimum' unity view nor the 'maximum' unity view are relevant, for what matters is how to relate the pericopes to the main idea of the book which is the thought of 'vanity'. Along the same line of thought is R.E. Murphy who in one of his earlier articles on Qoheleth remarks that

... No one will ever succeed in giving a satisfactory outline of the contents of the book. Any schematic outline superimposes upon the meditations of Qoheleth a framework that he certainly never had in mind. Once we recognize the fact that these are jottings, unified only by the very tenuous thread of 'vanity', an outline ceases to reflect the real thought and mood of the book.<sup>34</sup>

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(1968):15-28; H. Carl Shank, "Qoheleth's World and Life View as Seen in his Recurring Phrases," *WTJ* 37 (1974-5):57-73; Michael V. Fox, "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet," *HUCA* 48 (1977):83-106; R.K. Johnston, "'Confessions of a Workaholic': A Reappraisal of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 38 (1976):17-19.

<sup>32</sup>B. Gemser, *Sprüche Salomons* (HAT, 1963).

<sup>33</sup>Oswald Loretz, *Qohelet und der Alte Orient* (Freiburg: Herder, 1964), who argues that the main idea of the book is 'vanity' and that unity existed in the content of the book.

<sup>34</sup>R.E. Murphy, "The Pensées of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 17 (1958):304-14, p. 306-7; however, in his later work, "Ecclesiastes (Qohelet)," in *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther* (FOTL, 13), he writes that "In the light of the uncertainty underscored by Zimmerli, and to escape subjectivity as much as possible, the analysis here will adopt the outline proposed by A.G. Wright, with only slight differences" (128); cf. *idem*, "Form Criticism and Wisdom Literature," *CBQ* 31 (1969):477; *idem*, "A Form Critical Consideration of Ecclesiastes VII," *SBL 1974 Seminar Papers I* (ed. G.W. MacRae; Cambridge, Mass.: SBL, 1974):77-85.

B.S. Childs remarks that "In my judgment, the truth lies between these two extremes."<sup>35</sup> W. Zimmerli brings this view into the open with his carefully argued article entitled "Das Buch Kohelet - Traktat oder Sentenzensammlung? He concludes that

... Das Buch Kohelet ist kein Traktat mit klar erkennbarem Aufriss und einem einzigen, bestimmbar Thema. Es ist aber zugleich mehr als eine lose Sentenzensammlung, obwohl der Sammlungscharakter an einzelnen Stellen nicht zu übersehen ist.<sup>36</sup>

Formally speaking, of course, it cannot be doubted that the book consists both of collections of loose sayings as well as of coherent materials. Zimmerli thus suggests that the first task of the exegete is to determine the various form-critical units. Secondly, the exegete must try to relate one or more of these units together. Thirdly, one will then ask how the content determines the sequence of the individual complex form-critical units.<sup>37</sup> Following this suggestion, though with his own methodology, is J.A. Loader, another recent advocate of this 'medium' view, who in his seminal work on *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet*,<sup>38</sup> remarks that

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<sup>35</sup>B.S. Childs, *op. cit.*, p. 582.

<sup>36</sup>W. Zimmerli, "Das Buch Kohelet - Traktat oder Sentenzensammlung?," *VT* 24 (1974):221-30 (30), "The book of Qoheleth is not a *Traktat* with clearly recognizable structure and with one definable theme. But it is at the same time more than a loose *Sentenzensammlung*, even though *Sammlungscharakter* (characteristic of collection) in some places is not to be overlooked."

<sup>37</sup>Zimmerli, *loc. cit.*, p. 30, "Er hat zunächst die formgeschichtlich primären Einheiten herauszuarbeiten. Er hat dann, wie es auch der Exeget von Prov. xxiv 30-34, aber auch schon von xxii 17ff. tun muß, nach der möglichen Kombinationsform von zwei oder mehr formgeschichtlich primären Bauelementen zu fragen. Darüber hinaus aber hat er, und das unterscheidet die Kohelet-Exegese von der Proverbienexegese und nähert sie bis zu einem gewissen Grade stellenweise der Hiobexegese an, nach der inhaltlich beabsichtigten Abfolge der einzelnen formgeschichtlich komplexen Einheiten zu fragen ..."

<sup>38</sup>J.A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (BZAW 152; Berlin, 1979), p. 9.

... we have no logical development of thought reflected in the composition of the book, but there are various separate pericopes. These are structured carefully ... it can also be said that separate pericopes are compositionally related to each other. The basic idea running through all of them is the conviction of emptiness which purposely begins and ends the book.

What Loader meant by 'structured carefully' is that the work is based on the polar structures that he discerned, such as 'life and death,' 'talk and silence,' 'joy and toil,' which he carefully distinguishes from the formal structure of the book as a whole.

These three views will be discussed in more detail later in Chapter One, but it is sufficient at this juncture to make two observations regarding Qoheleth studies of this period. First, the influence of the form-critical method prevented form critics from seeing what New Critics later saw in Qoheleth. Secondly, though most modern scholars agreed that the book is basically a unity, there is no consensus as to where the unity lies or what the essence of the unity of the book is. Does the unity exist in the compositional structure or just in its thought or is it in both? Regardless, Qoheleth studies of this period have made some progress beyond the works of the 1950s.

#### 4. *Since the 1970s*

As rhetorical criticism begins to take shape on the American scene while new methods in literary criticism are being introduced into biblical research in Britain and traditio-historical and form-critical methods still seem to dominate Germany, Qoheleth studies after the 1970s have made no particular advances, as can be seen in the lack of new commentaries.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps the lack of advance-

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<sup>39</sup>J.A. Loader has made available his BZAW monograph in a popular version in the Dutch series of *Een praktische bijbelverklaring* part

ment in Qoheleth studies since the 1970s is due also to the rise of new literary critical approaches, such as Structuralism, Feminism and Deconstructionism for which wisdom literature is not so attractive as the narrative and historical portions of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>40</sup> However, there are still a few works worth mentioning here. Michael Fox's article, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qoheleth" (1986), makes a significant advancement in Qoheleth's use of *הֶבֶל*.<sup>41</sup> A.G. Wright's two companion articles, "The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited: Numerical Patterns in the Book of Ecclesiastes" (1980), and "Additional Numerical Patterns in Qoheleth" (1983), provided significant support for his earlier work on the structure of Qoheleth. Also notable are the two 1979 BZAW monographs by Charles F. Whitley, *Koheleth: His Language and Thought*, and J.A. Loader's *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet*.

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of the *Tekst en Toelichting* series in 1984, with the English translation of the series published by W.B. Eerdmans in 1986; Robert Davidson's commentary in the Daily Study Bible series also appeared in 1986; Graham Ogden's commentary in JSOT Press's new series Readings has just appeared; James L. Crenshaw for the Old Testament Library series, the latest, has just been released in February, 1988 (U.S. released in December, 1987); Michael Fox's commentary on Qoheleth is pending release by Almond Press later in 1988; A number are in preparation by some leading Qoheleth scholars, such as R.N. Whybray for the New Century Bible Commentary series, R.E. Murphy for the Hermeneia series, and David Hubbard is also preparing for the Word Commentary series.

<sup>40</sup>Regarding the application of Reader-oriented theory to biblical studies, David Gunn recently in "New Directions in the Study of Hebrew Narrative," *JSOT* 39 (1987):65-75, warns that "Reader-oriented theory legitimizes the relativity of different readings and thus threatens to unnerve conventional understandings of biblical authority. This has already happened at the level of critical practice through the challenge of feminist criticism.... my prediction is that troubling times lie ahead as the reader theory of the secular critics begins to corrode the edges of normative exegesis and doctrines of biblical authority which insist on viewing the Bible as divine prescription."

<sup>41</sup>Michael Fox, *JBL* 105 (1986):409-27.

In sum, the survey has shown that over the last hundred years, scholars have been trying to understand the book of Qoheleth through an analysis of the structure of the book. There has taken place, however, a shift in the understanding of the structure of the book in the 1970s as compared to the 1900s. This may be attributed to source criticism giving way to New Criticism and/or rhetorical criticism. Although the literary structure of the book still fascinates researchers and there is no lack of works done on the linguistic and thematic analysis of the book in recent years, "Scholars remain divided in their estimate of the theological contribution of the book as a whole," as B.S. Childs remarks in his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*.

#### B. THE THESIS

This study attempts to understand the theological thought of Qoheleth. As the survey of the last hundred years of Qoheleth studies has shown, the literary structure of the book of Qoheleth is still crucial to understanding the theological thought of Qoheleth. Thus, Chapter One of this thesis will be devoted to discussing the various approaches which have been employed in the studying of the structure of the book of Qoheleth. Then, Chapter Two will attempt to analyse the structure of Qoheleth's theological thought, which will be followed by a reading of Qoheleth in Chapter Three, analysing the argument of the book as it develops. Chapter Four will examine the position of Qoheleth's theological thought in Israel, via the understanding of *Wisdom* and *Yahwism* and the idea that Wisdom theology is essentially Creation theology.

## CHAPTER I

### THE LITERARY STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF QOHELETH

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## CHAPTER ONE

### THE LITERARY STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF QOHELETH

The structure of the book of Qoheleth has been an enigma for over a century, as reflected in the title of A.G. Wright's article, "The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth." In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, many scholars understood the book to be a piece of disparate, disorganized and disunified wisdom literature. However, as the survey in the Introduction has shown, scholars in the late twentieth century view the book as essentially a unified composition, though there are some variations in how they understand the concept of 'unity'. But even with such a change in the view of the composition of the book, Qoheleth nevertheless remains enigmatic even to modern scholars. It is enigmatic not because the book has no literary structure, but because scholars have agreed that there is a structure and a unity, and yet the structure is not obvious enough to be easily recognizable in full, even though a few obvious elements such as the  $\text{הָבֵל}$  (*hebel*) theme are easily recognizable by all.

In the hands of the form critics, individual pericopes are identified (again with divided opinions), according to their various 'genres'; proverb, narrative, prose,  $\text{מְשָׁל}$ , etc. As various literary forms are identified in the book, scholars find it even more difficult to connect all these disparate pericopes to form a coherent body of literature, though at some level a unifying thought such as that of  $\text{הָבֵל}$  may be discerned. Scholars are divided into three different schools of thought on the unity of the book



as mentioned in the Introduction. This chapter will discern an outline of the literary structure of Qoheleth after offering a critique of the various approaches to the study of the literary structure of Qoheleth.

#### A. THE VARIOUS APPROACHES IN QOHELETH STUDIES

##### 1. *The Traditional Literary-Critical Approach*

In the late nineteenth century when literary critics applied their method to Old Testament studies, they were often interested in three questions: (1) Who was the author of the book? (2) When was the book written? (3) Is the book a compositional unity? The general consensus of the critics was that the book of Qoheleth was not written by Solomon, but by a sage in the Maccabean period, with later glossators editing the text to give the final form of the book which shows no unified compositional structure. This conclusion was based mostly on grounds of comparative philology, philosophy and religion. Due to the lack of internal coherence within the composition of the book, it was viewed largely as a collection of sayings, an anthology. Thus the main strength, which was also the weakness, of the traditional literary-critical approach to Qoheleth studies was its ability to recognize the incoherent and disunified nature of the book, and its inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to solve the structural puzzle of the book, i.e. the structural unity behind the apparent incoherent composition. This inability may be traced back to the inadequacy of their method of study: they paid more attention to the hypothetical traditio-historical background of the book than to the book itself as a completed literary piece within the canon.

## 2. The Form-Critical Approach

With the rise of the form-critical and traditio-historical works of Hermann Gunkel, scholars begin to analyse the *Gattungen* and *Sitz im Leben* of the various Old Testament traditions. Since then, for more than a century, the form-critical method has proven to be an essential tool for biblical scholars, particularly in Old Testament studies. Needless to say, its contributions to wisdom research have been invaluable. It helps to answer questions that other methods could not raise and answer. James Crenshaw has commented correctly concerning form-critical studies of wisdom literature, that

... Form critical investigation of wisdom literature advances only to the degree that it gives adequate answers to the following questions: (1) what is the scope of the literature? (2) what are the literary forms making up this body of literature? (3) what precise setting in life did these forms occupy? (4) what function did they perform in the life of ancient Israel?<sup>1</sup>

He goes on to mention four kinds of wisdom literature: (1) juridical, (2) nature, (3) practical, and (4) theological; and three types of settings which characterize wisdom literature: (a) family/clan wisdom, (b) court wisdom, and (c) scribal wisdom. He also discusses eight forms of writing normally employed in the wisdom genre: (1) proverb, (2) riddle, (3) fable and allegory, (4) hymn and prayer, (5) *Streitgespräch* or dialogue, (6) confession, (7) lists, (8) didactic poetry and narrative. He discusses Qoheleth mainly under the category of (6) confession and (8) autobiographical narrative, though he also realizes that the variety of forms employed in a book may "reflect the author's desire to express

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<sup>1</sup>James Crenshaw, "Wisdom," in *Old Testament Form Criticism* (ed. J.H. Hayes; TUMSR, 2; San Antonio, 1974):225-64 (226); cf. *idem*, "Prolegomenon," in *SAIW*, pp. 1-60 (13-20).

himself by means of the total linguistic stock available to him."<sup>2</sup>

This method, when applied to Qoheleth studies, helps in recognizing the various literary forms that make up the book, for example, *mashal* (Ellermeier) and *reflexion* (R. Braun). Early works on Qoheleth utilizing this method are by K. Galling, and his student F. Ellermeier.

A more recent form-critical approach to Qoheleth is that of R.E. Murphy in *The Forms of the Old Testament Literature* series, in which he consistently discusses all the pericopes of the book under four headings: Structure, Genre, Setting, and Intention. In his opening words, he recognizes the fact that "There is simply no agreement concerning the structure of Ecclesiastes."<sup>3</sup> Though adopting the basic structure of A.G. Wright's new stylistics reading, he deviates slightly on 10:16-11:2 and thinks the unit should be 10:16-11:6 instead. He remarks that "There is no claim that this is a logical structure; it is based on form, not content."<sup>4</sup> He goes on to make further clarification concerning the introductory poem (1:3-11) and the instruction on old age (11:7-12:7), that "The instruction on old age (11:7-12:7) stands outside of this form [i.e. the catch phrases, refrains, etc. as recognized by Wright], as does the reflection about man's toil (1:3-11) in the introduction."<sup>5</sup> This form-critical approach to Qoheleth by Murphy reflects a necessity to synchronize the results of different approaches if one is to gain a broader and richer understanding of the structure of the book.

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<sup>2</sup>J.L. Crenshaw, "Wisdom," p. 263; cf. the suggestive remarks of Hermisson in *Studien zur israelitischen Spruchweisheit*, pp. 137-86.

<sup>3</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Ecclesiastes (Qohelet)," (FOTL, 13), p. 127.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

Without a discussion on genre, this analysis of form-critical study on Qoheleth is incomplete. Scholars are divided, as usual, on the genre of the book of Qoheleth. F. Ellermeyer<sup>6</sup> thinks Qoheleth is basically written in the 'mashal' (משל) form, with *Sentenz* 'saying' and *Reflexion* 'reflection' as the two subgenres. R. Braun<sup>7</sup> discerned three basic genres in Qoheleth: meditative reflection (*betrachtende Reflexion*), meditation (*Betrachtung*), and instruction (*Belehrung*). R.E. Murphy finds six types of genres in Qoheleth: (1) Wisdom sayings (7:1ff.; 9:17ff.), (2) Instructions (sayings with a command or prohibition), (3) Reflections (such as "I said," "I saw," "I know," "I gave," "who knows?" "who can find out?") which also includes proverbial sayings (2:14; 4:5,6), (4) Example Stories (4:13-16; 9:13-16), (5) Woe Oracles (2:16; 4:10; 10:16), and (6) Blessing (10:17).<sup>8</sup>

Differing from Murphy, Loader<sup>9</sup> discovered thirteen *Gattungen* in Qoheleth: (1) Royal fiction, (2) *Wahrspruch* and maxim, (3) *ṭōb*-saying, (4) comparison, (5) metaphor, (6) parable, (7) allegory, (8) observation, (9) self-discourse, (10) woe-saying and benediction, (11) antilogion, (12) rhetorical question, and (13) admonition.

Among other form-critical studies of Qoheleth is that of Graham Ogden who in a series of articles studied the form of 'better'-

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<sup>6</sup>Ellermeyer, *Qohelet*, I, 1, p. 49.

<sup>7</sup>R. Braun, *Kohelet und die frühhellenistische Popularphilosophie* (BZAW 130; Berlin, 1973).

<sup>8</sup>Murphy, *op. cit.*, pp. 129-30; cf. *idem*, "Form Criticism and Wisdom Literature," *CBQ* 31 (1969):475-83; *idem*, "A Form-Critical Consideration of Ecclesiastes VII," in *SBL Seminar Papers I* (1974): 77-85; *idem*, "The Interpretation of the Old Testament Wisdom Literature," *Interp* 23 (1969):289-301.

<sup>9</sup>J.A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (BZAW 152; Berlin, 1979), pp. 18-28; cf. *idem*, "Qohelet 3:2-8 - A 'Sonnet' in the Old Testament," *ZAW* 81 (1969):240-42.

proverbs and identified several rhetorical devices, such as twin-themes employed in Qoh. 9-12.<sup>10</sup> R. Gordis and more recently R.N. Whybray, have also studied the use of quotations in Qoheleth.<sup>11</sup> Whybray identified eight sayings as quotations from older wisdom sayings whose themes are characteristic of the teaching of Proverbs 10-29, and argues that they were used either with unqualified or relative approval.<sup>12</sup>

Although form-critical studies on Qoheleth cannot be ignored and have much to contribute to current Qoheleth research, they have their own limitation as Crenshaw reminded us. One should not look beyond what the method has not designed to accomplish. They are valuable only in so far as they assist a recognition of the formal structure of the book. They do not help in understanding, for example, the thought structure of Qoheleth.

### 3. Modern Literary Approach

Since James Muilenburg urged scholarship to move beyond form-criticism in his 1968 SBL presidential address<sup>13</sup>, new phases of

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<sup>10</sup>Graham Ogden, "The 'Better'-Proverb (*Tob-Spruch*), Rhetorical Criticism, and Qoheleth," *JBL* 96 (1977):489-505; *idem*, "Qoheleth's Use of the 'Nothing is Better'-Form," *JBL* 98 (1979):339-50; *idem*, "Qoheleth ix 17-x 20: Variations on the Theme of Wisdom's Strength and Vulnerability," *VT* 30 (1980):27-37; *idem*, "Historical Allusion in Qoh. iv 13-16?," *VT* 30 (1980):309-15; *idem*, "Qoheleth ix 1-16," *VT* 32 (1982):158-69; *idem*, "Qoheleth xi 1-6," *VT* 33 (1983):222-30; *idem*, "Qoheleth xi-xii 8," *VT* 34 (1984):27-38; *idem*, "The Mathematics of Wisdom: Qoheleth iv 1-12," *VT* 34 (1984):446-53.

<sup>11</sup>R. Gordis, *The Man and His World*, pp. 95-108; *idem*, "Quotations As a Literary Usage in Biblical, Oriental and Rabbinic Literature," *HUCA* 22 (1949):157-219; *idem*, "Quotation in Wisdom Literature," *JQR* 30 (1939-40):123-47; R.N. Whybray, "The Identification and Use of Quotations in Ecclesiastes," *VTSup* 32 (1981):435-51; cf. M.V. Fox, "The Identification of Quotations in Biblical Literature," *ZAW* 92 (1980):416-31.

<sup>12</sup>R.N. Whybray, *loc. cit.*; the eight sayings are Qoh. 2:14a; 4:5; 4:6; 7:5; 7:6a; 9:17; 10:2; 10:12.

<sup>13</sup>James Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *JBL* 88 (1969):1-18.

modern literary approach have gained considerable recognition. They include New criticism and Rhetorical criticism which largely flourished in the United States, while structural criticism, normally associated with France's Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss,<sup>14</sup> also attracts its followers. However, there is a confusion over the definition of these new methodologies, and their compatibility with one another. For instance, James Crenshaw views New criticism and structural analysis as being identical, though different from Rhetorical criticism.<sup>15</sup> David Gunn, on the other hand, sees New criticism and Rhetorical criticism as two terms sharing the same approach but different from Structural criticism.<sup>16</sup> Since they all share some common denominators, e.g. searching for meaning from the structure of the text, for the sake of convenience this section will treat them as one approach, though I am well aware of the dangers of such oversimplification.

As a school of criticism in literature generally, New criticism especially as exemplified in what has come to be known as "close-reading," looks for repeated phrases, catch words, refrains, symmetry and any literary or rhetorical device which may serve as structural markers or dividers. It focuses both on the macro-structure as well as the micro-structure of the book. A.G. Wright's new stylist's analysis of the structure of the book of Qoheleth in his 1968 article has, in a way, laid down the foundational structure of the book as many have followed the structure outlined by him. He argues that

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<sup>14</sup>Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (Garden City; New York: Basic Books, 1963); cf. Daniel Patte, *What is Structural Exegesis?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976); Robert M. Polzin, *Biblical Structuralism: Method and Subjectivity in the Study of Ancient Texts* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

<sup>15</sup>James Crenshaw, "Wisdom," p. 264.

<sup>16</sup>David Gunn, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

... There is the eight-fold repetition in 1:12-6:9 of "vanity and a chase after wind," marking off eight meaningful units which contain eight major observations from Qoheleth's investigation of life, plus digressionary material ... When this pattern ceases in 6:9 there follows immediately the introduction of two new ideas: man does not know what is good to do nor what comes after him; and another verbal pattern begins. The first idea is developed in four sections in 7:1-8:17. The end of each unit is marked by the verb "find out" and the final section ends with a triple "cannot find out" (8:17) in an a b a arrangement ... The second idea is developed in six sections in 9:1-11:6. The end of each unit is marked with "do not know" or "no knowledge" and the final section again ends with a triple "you do not know" (11:5, 6) and again in an a b a arrangement ... When this pattern ends we are right at the beginning of the generally recognized unit on youth and old age at the end of the book.<sup>17</sup>

More than ten years later, he provided additional evidence not only to support his earlier reading but also to advance significantly his understanding of the structure of the book. The evidence provided is based on 'numerical' analysis of the alphabetical value of the root חַכָּל ( ח = 5, כ = 2, ל = 30); the number 37 as the total occurrences of the root in the book (excluding either 5:6 or 9:9 due to textual corruption); the total number of verses, 222, in the book, etc.<sup>18</sup> Although Wright's 'numerical' analysis of Qoheleth has some implications for the structure of the book, it is not so crucial as Murphy states in his remarks, "These and other numerical patterns indicated by Wright can hardly be dismissed as coincidental, and thus they form a strong argument for a structure that goes beyond content and thought divisions."<sup>19</sup>

G.R. Castellino<sup>20</sup> is another new stylist who has attempted a close reading of Qoheleth, though he suggests a different structu-

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<sup>17</sup>A.G. Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 323.

<sup>18</sup>A.G. Wright, "The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited: Numerical Patterns in the Book of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 42 (1980):38-51; *idem*, "Additional Numerical Patterns in Qoheleth," *CBQ* 45 (1983):32-43.

<sup>19</sup>R.E. Murphy, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

<sup>20</sup>G.R. Castellino, "Qoheleth and His Wisdom," *CBQ* 30 (1968):15-28 (16).

ral outline than that of A.G. Wright. He divides the book, based on its grammatical style, into two parts breaking at 4:16; part I (1:1-4:16) consists largely of narrative with preterite or imperfect with  $\bar{\text{ל}}$ -consecutive and part II (4:17-12:14) begins with an imperative (K  $\bar{\text{שׁמֹר}} \bar{\text{נְגִידֶיךָ}}$ ;  $\bar{\text{נְגִידֶיךָ}}$  "Guard your steps") in 4:17 and is immediately followed by a negative imperative ( $\bar{\text{אַל-תִּבְהַר}} \bar{\text{עַל-פִּיךָ}}$  "Do not be quick with your mouth"), in 5:1a. With the sudden and unexpected change in style after 4:16, Castellino believes that "Qohelet is no longer speaking about himself, but has turned to the reader, or listener, and is imparting to him admonitions and instructions."<sup>21</sup>

Without any doubt, any analysis of the literary structure of Qoheleth must treat Castellino's and Wright's results seriously. In my opinion, the literary structure of Qoheleth, as will be analysed later, stands between Wright and Castellino.

Finding the structure of the book difficult to determine, Graham Ogden, in his recent commentary, comes to a "mediating position" which sees "the various blocks of material which comprise the book as individually relating to a theme" and hopes this would "avoid the problem of defining the structure in terms of a logical connection between one unit and the next."<sup>22</sup> Thus, he argues that the book is divided into two parts: chs. 1-8 and chs. 9-12. The first part is governed by three features: a programatic question about humanity's *yitrôn*, a negative answer and a positive response. The second part consists of discourse material that appraises the value of wisdom.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>G.R. Castellino, *loc. cit.*

<sup>22</sup>G. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, p. 12.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 13.



In sum, the traditional literary approach understands the book as a fragmented and disparate 'anthology'; the form-critical approach finds structure within individual pericopes; and a close reading of Qoheleth, seeing the book as a whole, understands the book as one with either a structure with a logical development (Wright) or a structure with little discernable logical development (Ogden). However, even with the recognition of a highly designed structure such as that of A.G. Wright's analysis, the message and theological thought of Qoheleth still stands in need of further analysis. A.G. Wright in his 1968 article proposed that if one discovered the underlying structure of the book, one could then "move ahead with confidence to attack the remaining and major problems (message, genre, unity) and to solve the essential riddles." This has yet to be done!<sup>24</sup>

Taking Wright's and Castellino's analyses into consideration, the following is an analysis of the literary structure of Qoheleth. After which the theological thought of Qoheleth will be analysed in the next chapter.

## B. THE STRUCTURE

The book of Qoheleth consists of a title (1:1), the main body (1:2-12:8) and the Epilogue (12:9-14). The main body is a unified body of text framed by the phrase  $\text{אֵלֶּיךָ יְהוָה אֲנִי וְעַבְדֶּיךָ}$ , though logical development is not discernable. In form, the first person narrative occurs mainly in 1:1-4:16 (though Qoheleth falls back again occasionally into narrative later in the book) and proverbial sayings and instructions (advice, command, prohibition) characterizes chs.

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<sup>24</sup>A.G. Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 313; but more than ten years later in his 1980 and 1983 articles, he does not seem to have unveiled further the message and theology of Qoheleth, despite providing more evidence to strengthen his earlier argument.

5, 7, 8, 10, 11, which makes a clear demarcation of pericopes in the second half of the book very difficult. In content, the first six chapters are concerned mostly with the themes of absurdity (הַבְּרָלָה occurs 26 out of 38 times) and profit (רִיבֻץ occurs 7 out of 10 times), while chs. 7-12 are concerned mostly with the theme of wisdom (הַחִכְמָה) (where the phrases 'who can find out/cannot find' (אֲצָמָה) or 'who can know/cannot know' [לֹא יֵדָע] occurred), and the advice to enjoy (הַמְּשִׁיב) life which is expressed in the form of a command. Generally, the main body (1:2-12:8) may be divided into two halves: 1:2-6:9 and 6:10-12:8. No logical development in composition is detectable, though individual pericopes are related to a theme and the twin themes - הַבְּרָלָה and הַמְּשִׁיב - which consistently run across the two halves of the book will be analysed in the next chapter.

The first half consists of a poem (1:3-11) and six units (1:12-2:26; 3:1-22; 4:1-16; 4:17-5:8; 5:9-19; 6:1-9), while the second half consists of three blocks of materials (6:10-7:29; 8:1-17; 9:1-11:6) and a final advice which followed by a vivid description on death (11:7-12:7). Two superlative statements (1:2; 12:8) framed the main body (1:3-12:7). The book ends with an epilogue (12:9-14).

### C. THE OUTLINE

#### *The Title 1:1*

The book begins with a title introducing the noun קְהֵלָה (cf. 1:2, 12; 7:27; 12:8, 9, 10).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Michael Fox, "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet," *HUCA* 48 (1977):83-106, argues that the book is built on three successive levels of narrative "each with a perspective that encompasses the next; level 1, the author or 'frame-narrator' who tells about, level 2a, Qohelet-the-reporter, the narrating 'I,' who speaks from the vantage point of old age and looks back on, level 2b, Qohelet-the-seeker, the experiencing 'I,' the younger Qohelet who made the fruitless investigation introduced in 1:12f. Level 1

### *A Thematic Statement 1:2*

The main body begins with an opening thematic statement or refrain in the superlative form which finds its counterpart in 12:8. It is slightly different from 12:8 with its extra phrase *וְהָיָה הַיָּמִים*. Framed within the two superlative statements (1:2; 12:8) is the main term of the book, *וְהָיָה*, which occurs thirty-eight times throughout the book.

### *The Prologue 1:3-11*

The prologue consists of a rhetorical question (1:3) and a poem on the natural world as observed by the poet (1:4-11). The poem may be divided into two parts: natural phenomena (1:5-7) and the human world (1:8-10), framed by 1:4 and 1:11 reflecting on the 'coming' (*וְהָיָה*) and 'going' (*וְאָבָד*) of the 'generation' (*דּוֹר*) so that there is no 'remembrance' (*וְלֹא יִזְכָּר*).<sup>26</sup> The rhetorical question (1:3) has caused some dispute among scholars who are not certain whether it belongs to 1:2 or 1:4-11 as part of the poem. Since 1:2 is taken as an independent thematic statement corresponding to its counterpart in 12:8, there is no reason to attach 1:3 to it. Rather, 1:3 introduces the theme of the search for 'profit' (*וְהָיָה לְפָתַח*) which characterizes the following unit 1:12-2:26, and the poem (1:4-11) introduces the scope and realm of the search. The poem defines the last phrase of the rhetorical question, "under the sun". Subsequently, the rhe-

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and level 2 are different persons; level 2a and 2b are different perspectives of one person." Fox finds similar techniques used in ancient literature of various genres including wisdom literature, particularly in Egypt and Israel (pp. 91f.). On the name of *Qohelet*, see Edward Ullendorff, "The Meaning of *קהלת*," *VT* 12 (1962):215, suggests "the arguer," drawing implication from the Aramaic-Syriac connotation of *qhl*.

<sup>26</sup>François Rousseau, "Structure de Qohélet i 4-11 et plan du livre," *VT* 31 (1981):200-17, argues an interesting parallel structure between 1:4-11 (A B C B' A') and 1:12-11:10 (A B C B' C').

torical question of 1:3 becomes the focus of Qoheleth's inquiry, especially in the first half of the book as the term *וְהִנֵּה* occurs in 1:3; 2:11,13; 3:9; 5:8,15; 7:12; 10:10,11.

#### *The Experience 1:12-2:26*

Scholars have generally agreed that 1:12-2:26 forms a literary unit by itself and consists of several subunits.<sup>27</sup>

*1:12-18 Introductions.* This subunit consists of two slightly different introductions (1:13-15; 16-18, cf. A.G. Wright), with 1:12 a self-identification, and 1:15 and 1:18 two proverbial sayings quoted in support of the statements 1:13-14 and 16-17 respectively, concerning the *לְבַקֵּשׁ* of pursuing wisdom.

*2:1-11 The Test.* The phrase *אָמַרְתִּי בְלִבִּי* (I said in my heart) marks the beginning of a new subunit which continues the first person narrative or 'royal fiction/testament' that runs through to 4:16 (cf. Castellino). This subunit focuses specifically on the test of *הֵנַחֵשׁ* "joy" and denies that any *וְהִנֵּה* can be found in any of the activities of the test; the joy of gathering 'wealth' and 'possession' produces no *וְהִנֵּה*.

*2:12-17 On Wisdom.* The phrase *וַיִּפְּנֵי תִּי לְרֹאשׁוֹ* (And I turned to see) signals a new subunit which reflects on the profitlessness of wisdom. A proverbial saying (2:14a) is used to illustrate the traditional concept of the value of wisdom, but is elaborated in 2:14b with the phrase *וְגַם יָדַעְתִּי* (But I also know) to introduce the idea that both wise and fool face the same destiny - death.

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<sup>27</sup>A.G. Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 325, has 1:12-15; 1:16-18; 2:1-11; 2:12-17; 2:18-26; A. Schoors, "La structure littéraire de Qoheleth," *OrLovPer* 13 (1982):91-116 (115), has 1:12-15 (introduction); 1:16-18; 2:1-11; 2:12-17; 2:18-23; 2:24-26 (conclusion); cf. R. Gordis, *op. cit.*, pp. 148-9; A. Lauha, *Kohelet* (BKAT 19; Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1978), pp. 42-43.

This subunit concludes with the phrase "... under the sun, all is הֶבֶל and a striving after wind" (2:17b).

2:18-23 *On Activity*. The term עָמַל (activity, toil) is the key concept in this subunit where Qoheleth reflects and argues on the הֶבֶל and lack of רוּחַ in any human activity (עָמַל). Out of the thirty-five occurrences in the book, the term עָמַל occurs ten times in this subunit. It assumes two inter-related meanings according to F. Foresti: "hard, assiduous work, toil" and "income, fruit of work, profit".<sup>28</sup> Again it concludes with the phrase 'Even this, it is absurd' (גַּם-זֶה הֶבֶל הוּא).

2:24-26 *Advice to Enjoy Life*. The change of subject, form and style marks this subunit as the conclusion of the entire unit (1:12-2:26). The experience has led him to this conclusion - enjoy life. Life is to be enjoyed as God gives (יָתַן) it (cf. 2:26a) to those who pleases God. This is the first of the seven occasions in which advice is given to 'enjoy life' (cf. 3:12,13; 3:22; 5:17-18; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:7-9).<sup>29</sup> It is in the form of אֵין-טוֹב or a 'better'-proverb, which is found also in 3:12, 22 and 8:15, whereas 5:17 and 9:7-9 are expressed in variant forms.

The unit (1:12-2:26) ends with the phrase 'Also this is absurd, and a striving after wind' (גַּם-זֶה הֶבֶל וְרוּעַח רִיחַ).

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<sup>28</sup>Fabrizio Foresti, "'amal in Koheleth: 'Toil' or 'Profit'," *Eph. Carm.* 31 (1980):415-30 (430), argues that "the first meaning has given origin to the second, according to a process largely attested in Semitic linguistics." The first meaning includes the occurrences in 1:3; 2:10-11; 3:9; 4:4, 8, 9; 5:15; 8:15,17 (as an auxiliary verb); 9:9; 10:15; and the second meaning 2:18-24a; 3:13; 4:6; 5:14,17,18; 6:7; cf. Robert Gordis, "On the Meaning of עָמַל in Koheleth," in *Koheleth the Man and His World*, pp. 418-20; H.G. Mitchell, "'Work' in Ecclesiastes," *JBL* 32 (1913):123-38.

<sup>29</sup>For a discussion of the seven passages, see Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," *JSOT* 23 (1982):87-98.

### *The Reality of Time 3:1-22*

While most scholars agree that 3:1 marks the beginning of a new unit there is disagreement over its conclusion. Wright thinks it ends in 4:6 with the phrase "striving after wind", but it is more likely that it ends in 3:22 where the advice to enjoy life, as with the unit 1:12-2:26, forms the conclusion of the unit. Furthermore, the controlling concept - *Time* - that runs throughout the unit - does not extend to 4:1-6 where social justice is the dominant idea.<sup>30</sup> Two subunits are clearly demarcated: (1) 3:1-15; and (2) 3:16-22.

*3:1-15 Time and Chance.* This subunit begins with a poem on time (3:2-8). According to J.A. Loader<sup>31</sup> the form of 3:2-8 is a sonnet which includes fourteen pairs of opposites. However, I would follow A.G. Wright on this score who divides the poem into two pairs of stanzas with three couplets each (3:2-4, 5-7), with 3:4 and 3:7 as the concluding couplets for each pair, and having the mourning/rejoicing motif as a refrain. Accordingly, 3:8 "may be an umbrella for the whole poem: love and hate generally motivate most of the constructive and destructive actions and the separations and unions of life ... [both] on the individual scale ... and on the larger scale (war and peace, 3:8b)."<sup>32</sup> The poem is followed immediately by a rhetorical question (3:9) which expects the negative answer that

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<sup>30</sup>On this score, I tend to agree with A. Schoors, *op. cit.*, p. 115, who considers 3:1-22 as a unit, but I would differ from him to see 3:1-15 as a subunit rather than two (3:1-8; 3:9-15) subunits.

<sup>31</sup>J.A. Loader, "Qoh. 3:2-8 - A 'Sonnet' in the Old Testament," *ZAW* 81 (1969):240-42, argues that 3:2-8 is composed of a series of what Loader labels as 'Desirable' and 'Undesirable' sentences which are arranged in a chiasmic structure. The Poem is divided into three pairs of two couplets (3:2-3, 4-5, 6-7).

<sup>32</sup>A.G. Wright, "<For Everything There Is A Season>: The Structure and Meaning of the Fourteen Opposites (Ecclesiastes 3,2-8)," *De la Tôrah au Messie, Mélanges Henri Cazelles*, ed J. Doré et al. (Paris: Desclée, 1981):321-28 (327).

there is no *ḥayil* found within the various occasions of life. The subunit ends with a proverbial saying (3:15a; cf. 1:9). The theme seems to be the unfathomable God who has made everything *ḥayil* 'beautiful' in its own time, yet human beings know not this timing and find no *ḥayil*. In response to the reality, an advice to enjoy life is given (3:12,13).<sup>33</sup>

3:16-22 *Time, Justice and Death*. The phrase *ḥayil* (Moreover, I saw) signals a slight change of subject but stays with the main theme - *Time*. Qoheleth focuses specifically on the time for justice and argues that even though the time for judgment is in the hand of God, he does know that there is a time to die for all - righteous, wicked or beast. In such a reality, again the subunit ends with Qoheleth's advice to enjoy life: there is a *ḥayil* 'portion' in one's work, the enjoyment in one's activity (3:22b).

The key term of the unit (3:1-22) is *ḥayil* (time) which occurs in all three subunits: 3:8,11,17. In relation to the term are two pairs of ideas: death and joy, profit and portion. There is a 'time' allocated to death and joy though no one knows his/her own time. The unpredictability and unknowability of when what will happen and the fact that act and consequence has little relation leads to a negative answer to the *ḥayil* question - no 'profit' in any human activity. But there is a 'portion' (*ḥayil*) in all human activity, that is to enjoy life.

#### *Life in Society 4:1-16*

Qoh. 4:1-16 forms a self-contained unit by itself; 4:17 of the Hebrew Bible forms a link to the next unit. Several subunits are

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<sup>33</sup>For the history of interpretation and various translations of 3:15b, cf. R.B. Salters, "A Note on the Exegesis of Ecclesiastes 3:15b," *ZAW* 88 (1976):419-22.

clearly demarcated. 4:1-6 forms two subunits (4:1-3; 4:4-6).<sup>34</sup> 4:7-8 turns to another observation and follows with a series of numerical 'better'-proverbs to form another subunit, 4:9-12. The last subunit, 4:13-16 is an example story. The common concern of all these sub-units is that of personal, communal and national life, where absurdity abounds (4:4, 7-8, 16).

*4:1-3 On Oppression.* The phrase *וַיִּשָׁבֵר וַיֵּרְאֶה* (And I turned and saw) marks the beginning of a subunit on the subject of oppression (4:1). The observation on oppression is followed by a pair of contrasting proverbial sayings (4:2-3) with 4:3 having the form of a 'better'-proverb.

*4:4-6 On Activity.* This subunit begins with the familiar phrase *וַיֵּרְאֶה וַיִּשָׁבֵר* (And I saw) and is also followed by a pair of contrasting proverbial sayings (4:5-6) with another 'better'-proverb in 4:6. Activities of the fools and the wise are the theme in this subunit.

*4:7-12 On One, Two or Three.* The phrase *וַיִּשָׁבֵר אֲנִי וַאֲרָאָה הַבָּל תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ* (Then I turned and saw absurdity under the sun) signals the beginning of another subunit. The subunit concerns the *הַבָּל* of accumulating wealth for oneself yet having none to share the wealth with or pass it onto and the deprivation of oneself from enjoying one's life (4:7-8). Thus, a series of numerical sayings (4:9-12) follows to encourage companionship, dwelling on the number 'two' or even 'three' (4:12b).

*4:13-16 An Example Story.* The story begins with a 'better'-proverb (4:13) and follows with a commentary illustrating the non-enduring value of wisdom.

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<sup>34</sup>Crenshaw following Gordis, links 4:1-3 with the previous unit (3:16-4:3); Wright and Murphy think 4:1-6 belongs to the unit 3:1-4:6; A. Schoors demarcates 4:1-16 as a unit with four subunits: 4:1-3; 4:4-6; 4:7-12; 4:13-16.



## *Advice Concerning Religious Matters*

### *Advice 4:17-5:8*

A series of imperatives and the change of subject from the previous unit mark 4:17-5:8 as a new unit.<sup>35</sup> 4:17-5:6 consists of advice for the religious sphere and 5:7-8 is concerned with injustice in the high places. In form, it consists of quotations (5:2, 6a), several prohibitions (5:1,3,5a,7)<sup>36</sup> and commands (4:17a, 5:6b). The series of commands and prohibitions is based on the principles that God is unfathomable and that act and consequence have little relationship. It also aims to warn those who go to the temple to fear God. 5:7-8 are two textually difficult and probably related verses which consist of a prohibition (5:7) and a saying about the king (5:8).

### *Profit and Wealth 5:9-19*

This unit breaks away from the religious subject of the previous unit and returns to the question of profit in wealth. It consists of three wisdom sayings (5:9-11), an 'example-story' (5:12-16) and concludes with advice to enjoy life as a gift from God (5:17-19). This is the fourth of the seven pieces of advice to enjoy one's life and the fruits of activity (לִשְׂמֹחַ). As in the previous units 1:12-2:26 and 3:1-22, the advice to enjoy life in 5:17-19 (Evv. 5:18-20) forms the conclusion to the unit 5:9-19.

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<sup>35</sup>Most scholars (Wright, Murphy, Crenshaw, Schoors) consider 4:17-5:8 to be a unit, though a few (Ogden, Gordis) think 5:7-8 belongs to another unit.

<sup>36</sup>5:3a is a close quotation from Deuteronomy 23:22. For a history of interpretation of this unit, see R.B. Salters, "Notes on the History of the Interpretation of Koh.5:5," *ZAW* 90 (1978):95-101.

### *The Opportunity to Enjoy Life 6:1-9*

In form, this unit breaks away from the advice in 5:17-19. It begins with an example story (6:1-6)<sup>37</sup> about the לַחֲיוֹן of possessions (6:1-2) and the לַחֲיוֹן of a joyless long life (6:3-6), and follows with a series of wisdom sayings (6:7), rhetorical questions (6:8) and a 'better'-proverb (6:9a) leading to the לַחֲיוֹן conclusion in 6:9b. The key idea as expressed in the rhetorical questions and the advice to the undesirable situation as expressed through the example stories (6:1-6) is found in the 'better'-proverb (6:9a). The refrain חַיֵּי אִתְּךָ וְחַיֵּי אִתְּךָ לַחֲיוֹן אִתְּךָ (Also this is absurd and a striving after wind) in 6:9b marks the end of the unit, though in general terms, it also marks the end of the first six chapters of the book.

### *The Unattainability of Wisdom 6:10-7:29*

This is the first of the three blocks of materials (8:1-17; 9:1-11:6) that characterizes the second half of the book.<sup>38</sup> Scholarly opinion concerning the length of this unit varies widely, though most would agree that 6:10-12 is an introduction. Most scholars would demarcate 7:1-29 into various smaller subunits without having to relate them together to form a large unit as I do here. In fact, the various smaller subunits: 6:10-12; 7:1-14; 7:15-18; 7:19-24; 7:25-29, are all concerned with the theme of wisdom.<sup>39</sup> It begins with an introduction (6:10-12) which consists of a statement on

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<sup>37</sup>On the history of Jewish interpretations of 6:2, see R.B. Salters, "Notes on the Interpretation of Qoh.6:2," *ZAW* 91 (1979): 282-89.

<sup>38</sup>I differ from Schoors who demarcates the three blocks as 7:1-9:10; 9:11-10:20; 11:1-6, with 6:10-12 as an introduction.

<sup>39</sup>Wright, Murphy, Schoors, Crenshaw, Lauha and Gordis take 7:1-14 as a unit, while Ogden thinks 7:13-14 relates better to 7:15-18. There is no agreement on where the unit begins with 7:15 should end. There are proposals that it ends with 7:22 (Crenshaw), 7:24 (Wright, Murphy, Schoors), or 7:25 (Gordis). I take 7:15-18 (Brindle), 7:19-24 (Ogden), 7:25-29 (Wright, Murphy, Schoors, Ogden) as three subunits.

human impotence and follows with rhetorical questions (6:11-12) that introduce wisdom as the theme of the following subunits. The root  $\text{וָיָד}$  occurs frequently in the unit which also consists of a series of 'better'-proverbs, wisdom sayings on what is 'good', instructions, quotations and reflection on the theme of wisdom and justice.

*7:1-14 The Unattainable Wisdom of God.* This subunit consists of a series of cleverly edited wisdom sayings on what is 'good' (7:1-12) and 7:13-14 brings the thought together as a conclusion, urging one to accept one's fate knowing that the work ( $\text{מְעַלְמֵי}$ ) of God is unattainable by human wisdom (7:13-14). Without 7:13-14, the series of sayings stand as an anthology with little focus.

*7:15-18 Staying Alive.* The main dispute of the structure of this subunit is where it should end, 7:18, 7:22, or 7:24?<sup>40</sup> A reality is observed in 7:15 on the criss-crossing of deeds and consequences of righteousness and wickedness. Three pieces of advice are given in 7:16-18 as principles of conduct in face of the reality. The ultimate advice is to fear God whose activity is hidden from human wisdom (7:18). The advice concludes this subunit.

*7:19-24 The Value and the Unattainability of Wisdom.* The saying in 7:19, though still on the theme of wisdom, breaks away from the discussion of 7:15-18 on the principles of conduct. The value of wisdom is greatly appreciated when compared with military power (7:19); yet wisdom is beyond the reach of human knowledge (7:24).

*7:25-29 Three Findings.* This subunit begins with the phrase  $\text{וָיָדַעְתִּי$   $\text{וְלִבִּי}$  (I turned around even my heart) which signals a break from the previous subunit. The key term is '(not) finding'  $\text{לֹא מָצָא}$  which

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<sup>40</sup>R.N. Whybray, "Qoheleth the Immoralist? (Qoh. 7:16-17)," in *IW*, pp. 191-204, thinks that 7:15 belongs to the previous unit; Wayne A. Brindle, "Righteousness and Wickedness in Ecclesiastes 7:15-18," *AUSS* 23 (1985):243-57, takes 7:15-18 as a unit.

occurs seven times. The three findings concerning humankind are found in 7:26, 7:27-28 and 7:29.

### *Wisdom and Justice 8:1-17*

This unit forms the second block of materials of the second half of the book. Although scholars are divided over the structure of ch. 8,<sup>41</sup> generally, three subunits may be demarcated: 8:1-9; 8:10-15; 8:16-17, as marked by indicators such as וַיֵּרְאֵהוּ (And then I saw this, 8:10) and כִּי־נָתַתִּי לִבִּי לְדַעַם (When I gave my heart to know, 8:16).

*8:1-9 Wisdom and the King.* This subunit focuses on the wisdom of the sages and their conduct before the king (8:1-4) through a series of sayings with command (8:2) and prohibition (8:3-4). Then, 8:5-9, although it continues with the theme of wisdom focuses on 'time' (זֶמַן), a concept which occurred earlier in ch. 3. Although the wise would know when to do what (8:5), presumably before the king (8:2-4), even they do not know the future events, especially those consequences of their actions (8:7-8). The subunit concludes with a reflection on the power of the king (cf. 8:2-4) in 8:9 and mourns that 'absolute power corrupts absolutely.'

*8:10-15 On Injustice.* The phrase 'And then I saw this' (8:10) indicates a new observation on the problem of justice. No particularly clear logical structure is discernable. First it declares the criss-crossing of the deeds and consequences of the righteous and the wicked to be הִתְקַדְּמָה, which it repeats again in 8:14, with 8:11 providing the reason for the uprising of wicked deeds in society. Framed in between these verses is the advice to fear God as the

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<sup>41</sup>Zimmerli takes 8:1-15 as a unit; Barucq thinks 8:1-8 forms a unit; Murphy demarcates ch. 8 as 8:1-4; 8:5-8; 8:9-15; 8:16-17; Crenshaw sees two units, 8:1-9 and 8:10-17; Hertzberg thinks 8:1 belongs to 7:29 and sees two units in 8:2-9 and 8:10-9:10.

golden principle of conduct (8:12-13), which does not answer the problem of the suffering of the righteous which seems to be the theme of the passage. Neither does the next verse (8:15) show any logical connection with 8:14, except indirectly it serves as a concluding piece of advice in face of the absurd reality of 8:14. Thus, as in the previous admonition to enjoy life (cf. 2:24-26; 3:12-13; 3:22; 5:17-19), 8:15 forms the fifth of the seven statements of advice to enjoy life and the conclusion of the subunit 8:10-15.

*8:16-17 God's Work Unattainable by Human Wisdom.* These two verses formally conclude 8:1-17 with a reflection on the impotence of human knowledge. This contrasts with the faith which the wise place in wisdom in 8:1 and supports the claims of 8:7-8 on the unpredictability and unknowability of the activity of God.

#### *Wisdom and Joy 9:1-11:6*

This is the last of the three blocks of materials of the second half of the book.<sup>42</sup> I discerned six subunits: 9:1-6; 9:7-10; 9:11-12; 9:13-10:1; 10:2-20; 11:1-6.<sup>43</sup>

*9:1-6 Life is Better than Death.* The phrase *כִּי אָחַז-כָּל-יָהוָה נִחַמְתִּי אֶל-לִבִּי* (For all this I took unto my heart, even to explain all this) indicates the beginning of a unit. This is followed by a statement of affirmation in 9:1b that both the righteous and the

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<sup>42</sup>A.G. Wright considers 9:1-11:6 to be a large unit which consists of six subunits (9:1-6; 9:7-10; 9:11-12; 9:13-10:15; 10:16-11:2; 11:3-6) each ending with the phrase 'do not know/no knowledge'. In his recent commentary and previous studies of 9:1-16 (1982), 9:17-10:20 (1980) and 11:1-6 (1983), G. Ogden strongly argues that "As we move into ch. 9, we detect a transition from the former investigative approach to one of discourse" (commentary on *Qoheleth*, p. 142).

<sup>43</sup>Murphy sees five units: 9:1-6; 9:7-10; 9:11-12; 9:13-10:15; 10:16-11:6; Crenshaw demarcates a different set of five units: 9:1-10; 9:11-12; 9:13-18; 10:1-20; 11:1-6; Gordis, 9:4-12; 9:13-10:1; 10:2-11:6; Hertzberg thinks 9:1-10 forms a subunit of the larger unit 8:10-9:10, while 9:11-10:11, 10:12-20; 11:1-8 are three units.

wicked are in the hands of God and that no one knows what is in life for them. 'Death' and 'life' are the two key words (9:3, 4, 5) of this subunit, a theme raised earlier in chs. 2-3. The expression of 'love' and 'hate' in 9:1, 6 forms the inclusion of the subunit (9:1-6) which ends with the phrase 'under the sun'.

*9:7-10 Be happy!* This is the sixth of the seven pieces of advice to enjoy life. Its imperative mood, commanding the hearer to do as he/she is told, to enjoy life, makes it a subunit by itself. Two conditions that were not in the previous advice have been added here to accompany the command to enjoy life: good conduct or a clean life (9:8) and a sense of striving for excellency in all activities (9:10).

*9:11-12 The Many Unexpected Occasions in Life.* With no obvious logical sequence to follow from the last unit, these two verses begin with the phrase *שָׁבַתִּי וַיֵּרְאֵהּ תַּחַת-הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ* (I returned and saw under the sun, cf. 4:1), and focus on the idea of 'time' (*עֵת*), especially the time of death (cf. ch. 3). Five unexpected results are observed in 9:11a. The reason is given in 9:11b and elaborated in 9:12, where the situation of humankind being caught by evil time is compared to fish caught by evil nets and birds caught in a snare.

*9:13-10:1 The Strength and Weakness of Wisdom.* This subunit consists of an example story with wisdom sayings (9:13-10:1) and a collection of proverbial sayings that contrast and compare the wise and the fool, the rich and poor, king and servant (10:2-20).<sup>44</sup> The 'vulnerability of wisdom' despite its superiority as seen in 9:13-18a is presented in 9:18b-10:1.

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<sup>44</sup>Graham Ogden, "ix 17-x 20: Variations on the Theme of Wisdom's Strength and Vulnerability," *VT* 30 (1980):27-37, demarcates six subunits: 9:17-18; 10:1-4; 5-7; 8-11; 12-15; 16-20; Murphy, "Ecclesiastes (Qohelet )," (FOTL, 13), pp. 146f., sees no clear structure in 10:5-15 and recognizes 9:17-10:4 and 10:16-20 as two subunits.

10:2-20 *Wisdom Sayings*. This subunit contains a loosely structured collection of sayings that touches on a variety of themes: such as comparing the wise and foolish (10:2-3, 10-15); prohibition before the king (10:4); social order (10:5-7); the many unexpected occasions where acts and consequences mismatched (10:8-9); wisdom in politics (10:16-20).

11:1-6 *The Irregular and the Unexpected*. This unit consists of a series of sayings about the irregular/unexpected (11:1) and regular/expected (11:3) in daily human activities. The theme seems to be the unpredictability and unknowability of the activity (הַעֲלֵמָה) of God in 11:5, which leads to the conclusion in 11:6 advising humankind to do the best they could and hope for the best.

*Enjoy Life Now! 11:7-12:7*

Most scholars would agree with the length of this unit, except some might want to include 12:8. It consist of two parts: 11:7-10 and 12:1-7. Two themes, 'joy' (הִנְחֵלֵנוּ) and 'remember' (זָכֹר), revolve around the unit. The first part (11:7-10) contains the last of the seven pieces of advice to enjoy life which is in the form of a command. The second part (12:1-7) containing a vivid description of not only the certainty of death, but also its imminence, reinforces the first part of the command to enjoy life while there is still opportunity. The second part begins with an imperative clause (11:12a) and is followed by three זָכֹר זָכֹר זָכֹר phrases that divide the part into three portions (12:1b, 2-5, 6-7). The focus of these two parts is not on youth and old age as most scholars believe<sup>45</sup> but rather, on life and death: enjoy life because there is no activity

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<sup>45</sup>Scholars such as Crenshaw, Murphy, Loader, Gordis, Wright, Lohfink, Lauha, and Zimmerli. In fact, Sawyer has long pointed out that old age is never the interest of Qoheleth throughout the whole book in his article, "The Ruined House in Ecclesiastes 12: A Reconsideration of the Original Parable," *JBL* 94 (1976):519-31.

after death and death will arrive at the most unexpected moment. The two part structure aims to contrast life and death, bringing the theme on the enjoyment of life to a climax.

#### *The Concluding Statement 12:8*

This concluding statement or refrain, echoing the opening remark of 1:2, though with slight variation, sums up the main theme of Qoheleth's thought on the *הַבְּלָה* of human existence. As in 1:2, it is expressed in the superlative form, *הַבְּלָה הַבְּלָה אֲמַר הַקּוֹהֵלֶת הַכֹּל הַבְּלָה*.

#### *The Epilogue 12:9-14*

Most scholars understand 12:9-14 as an epilogue.<sup>46</sup> It may be divided into two sections: (1) 12:9-11; (2) 12:12-14, as indicated by the phrases *וְיִתֵּן לְךָ אֲשֶׁר הָיָה* (And in addition to that, 12:9) and *וְיִתֵּן לְךָ* (And in addition to these, 12:12). There is no conclusive evidence to suggest more than one 'epilogist' involves in editing the epilogue. The role and function of Qoheleth as a sage is stated in 12:9-11 in the third person. The instructions to the reader are given in the form of imperative in 12:12-14. It is difficult to discern whether the title 1:1 also comes from the hand of the editor of the epilogue. The combination of 'fearing God' and 'keeping the commandment of God' in an advice in 12:13 is rare in the Old Testament, though not in contradiction with Qoheleth's thought in the book. The epilogist's exhortation is sounded clearly in 12:13 and the reason is given in 12:14.

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<sup>46</sup>Even conservatives like Derek Kidner agree that "Beyond reasonable doubt the remaining verse, 12:9-14, with their portrait of the writer, their warning against unauthorized teachings and their summary of the discourse, are an editorial epilogue or epilogues," in *Wisdom To Live By* (Leicester: IVP, 1985), p. 90.



#### D. CONCLUSION

The above literary structure of the book is based on both form and content. There is no clear logical development in the structure of the book. The various pericopes are related to themes that run across the book and sometimes the pericopes within a larger unit form some kind of a development, for example 1:12-2:26. The demarcation of the book into various pericopes that express various themes of Qoheleth's thought helps one to understand the book as a whole. What still needs to be understood is the underlying theological thought of Qoheleth. In order to do so, one needs first to delineate the structure of Qoheleth's theological thought. The above analysis of the literary structure of the book will assist in the analysis of Qoheleth's thought structure in the next chapter. Unlike others, I shall argue that the two controlling themes of Qoheleth's thought are  $\text{הֵנָּה וְהֵנָּה}$  and the advice to enjoy life.

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- III. The Prologue 1:3-11
- IV. The Experience 1:12-2:26
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  - B. 2:1-11 The Test
  - C. 2:12-17 On Wisdom
  - D. 2:18-23 On Activity
  - E. 2:24-26 An Advice to Enjoy Life
- V. The Reality of Time 3:1-22
  - A. 3:1-15 Time and Chance
  - B. 3:16-22 Time, Justice and Death
- VI. Life in Society 4:1-16
  - A. 4:1-3 On Oppression
  - B. 4:4-6 On Activity
  - C. 4:7-12 On One, Two or Three
  - D. 4:13-16 An Example Story
- VII. Advice Concerning Religious Matters 4:17-5:8
- VIII. Profit and Wealth 5:9-19
- IX. The Opportunity to Enjoy Life 6:1-9
- X. The Unattainability of Wisdom 6:10-7:29
  - A. 7:1-14 The Unattainable Wisdom of God
  - B. 7:15-18 Staying Alive
  - C. 7:19-24 The Value and the Unattainability of Wisdom
  - D. 7:25-29 Three Findings
- XI. Wisdom and Justice 8:1-17
  - A. 8:1-9 Wisdom and the King
  - B. 8:10-15 On Injustice
  - C. 8:16-17 God's Work Unattainable by Human Wisdom
- XII. Wisdom and Joy 9:1-11:6
  - A. 9:1-6 Life is Better than Death
  - B. 9:7-10 Be happy!
  - C. 9:11-12 The Many Unexpected Occasions in life
  - D. 9:13-10:1 The Strength and Weakness of Wisdom
  - E. 10:2-20 Wisdom Sayings
  - F. 11:1-6 The Irregular and the Unexpected
- XIII. Enjoy Life Now! 11:7-12:7
- XIV. The Concluding Statement 12:8
- XV. The Epilogue 12:9-14

## CHAPTER II

### THE STRUCTURE OF QOHELETH'S THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT

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## CHAPTER TWO

### THE STRUCTURE OF QOHELETH'S THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT

The thought of Qoheleth has attracted a considerable amount of scholarly attention since the turn of the century. As seen earlier, there is no lack of theories which see Qoheleth as an importer of foreign concepts or ideologies. The purpose of this chapter, however, is not to concern itself with these alleged borrowings, but to analyse the structure of Qoheleth's theological thought in the book of Qoheleth.

The most common approach in analysing Qoheleth's theological thought is to study the various themes of Qoheleth. The following will examine the various proposals on the structure of Qoheleth's thought before making my own proposal.

#### A. PROPOSED STRUCTURES

There have been numerous proposals as to the thought structure of Qoheleth.

1. Edwin Good proposes three basic axioms in Qoheleth's thought:

a) Every man must find the significance of his life within that life, not beyond it. b) Distinctions are to be drawn in this life between what is good and what is bad, between righteousness and wickedness, wisdom and folly. c) The circumstances of life come from God.<sup>1</sup> He argues that all these three axioms come together in

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<sup>1</sup>Edwin Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1981):168-95 (189).

7:29, as he writes,

... For if humankind refuse the third axiom, if they "seek out many dodges" [7:29b], they are doomed with regard to the first two [axioms]. In affecting to ignore and escape God's "up-right" treatment of them, they bypass the possibility of life's meaning and the perception of the necessary distinctions.<sup>2</sup>

2. Nobert Lohfink<sup>3</sup> argues that the structure of Qoheleth's thought consists of two parts. First, Qoheleth recognizes that "Death as the limit imposed upon human existence, cutting it off from the infinitely greater potentiality of the progress of time, forms the framework at the beginning and the end of the book of Qoheleth." Thus, "death has become the frontier situation which forces humans to reflect upon it and leads humans through this reflection toward a new attitude, that of hatred of life and disillusion." The knowledge of death leads to the second part, where Qoheleth concentrates his thought upon the present moment, recognizing that "the happiness of the present moment should be embraced with joy and all should accept the gift of happiness in the present moment from the hand of God."

3. R.K. Johnston, based on Lohfink's thematic insights, argues that Qoheleth's thought develops in three stages: "Having noted a) a range of limits imposed on man's experience, and b) the resultant folly of man's attempt to master his life, Qoheleth c) reasserts the sage's advice that man's lot (קִלְקִיל) is to enjoy (הֵאָרַךְ or הִמְתַּחֵשׁ) the life that God gives (יָרַךְ) him."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>E. Good, *loc. cit.*, pp. 189f.

<sup>3</sup>Norbert Lohfink, *The Christian Meaning of the Old Testament* (trans. R.A. Wilson; London: Burns & Oates, 1969):147-56; R.K. Johnston, "Confessions of a Workaholic," *CBQ* 38 (1976):14-28 (21), however, understood N. Lohfink in a three-pronged way: 1) death as the limit imposed upon human existence; 2) the hatred of life and the disillusionment that results from this realization; and 3) the reality of the present moment as a gift from God to be enjoyed.

<sup>4</sup>R.K. Johnston, *op. cit.*, p. 21. It is doubtful, in his third

4. James L. Crenshaw proposes five major theses in Qoheleth's thought: a) Death cancels everything; b) wisdom cannot achieve its goal; c) God is unknowable; d) the world is crooked; and e) pleasure commends itself. Crenshaw believes that "all these five theses flow from a loss of trust in the goodness of God, the presupposition of earlier wisdom."<sup>5</sup>

5. Gerhard von Rad<sup>6</sup> sums up Qoheleth's thought in three basic insights: a) A thorough, rational examination of life is unable to find any satisfactory meaning; everything is 'vanity'. b) God determines every event. c) Human beings are unable to discern these decrees, or "works of God", in the world.

6. H.-P. Müller argues that "the thought of Qoheleth is shaped by the structure of a 'creator' religion."<sup>7</sup> This religious outlook prevents any person from passing any judgment upon the creator and the created world, even though "the world order established by the heavenly creator falls victim to a value vacuum." Müller thinks that for Qoheleth, this 'creator' religion "opens the way to a theologically motivated joy in living."<sup>8</sup>

7. According to Bruce Vawter, Antonio Bonora<sup>9</sup> argues that Qoheleth's thought revolves around two affirmations: all is vanity (לְכָל־בָּרָאָה־וָאֵין־בָּהֶן־חָכְמָה, 1:2; 12:8) and God makes everything beautiful (יְהִי־בְרָאָה־וָאֵין־בָּהֶן־חָכְמָה, 3:11).

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point, whether רָאָה (to see) can be equated with נִחַן (to enjoy).

<sup>5</sup>James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981):126-48 (128); cf. *idem*, "The Eternal Gospel (Eccl. 3:11)," in *Essays in Old Testament Ethics* (ed. James Crenshaw and John Willis; New York: KTAV, 1974):25-55.

<sup>6</sup>Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (trans. J.D. Martin; New York: Abingdon, 1972), pp. 227-8.

<sup>7</sup>H.-P. Müller, "Neige der althebräischen >Weisheit< Zum Denken Qohäläts," *ZAW* 90 (1978):238-64 (263).

<sup>8</sup>Quotation is taken from Müller's own English summary in p. 263.

<sup>9</sup>As the article by Antonio Bonora, "Esperienza e timor di Dio in Qohelet," *Teologia* 6 (1981):171-82, is unavailable to me, this is based on Vawter's summary in *O.T. Abstract* 5 (1982), p. 165.

The first concerns human experience and the second refers to religious faith.

8. J.A. Loader,<sup>10</sup> recently argues that Qoheleth's thought is structured in a polar pattern<sup>11</sup> - thought or pole and counterthought or counterpole - which creates a tension that often leads to a *hebel* statement. Loader states that "polar structures occur in almost every literary unit of the book" and he arranges Qoheleth's thought according to ten areas of different aspects of polarity: (1) Conservation, life--abandonment, death (3:1-9; 7:1-4); (2) Worth and Worthlessness of wisdom (1:12-2:26; 4:13-16; 7:5-7; 7:11-8:1; 8:16-17; 9:11-10:11); (3) Risk and assurance (11:1-6); (4) Political power and powerlessness (8:2-9); (5) Talk and silence (4:17-5:8; 6:10-12; 7:8-10; 10:12-15a; 10:16-20); (6) Wealth has no value (5:6-6:9); (7) Labour with and without product (3:10-15; 4:4-6; 4:7-12); (8) The inhuman human (3:16-22; 4:1-3); (9) No retribution where expected (8:10-15; 9:1-10); (10) Toil and joy (3:12-13; 3:22; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:7-12:8). Among these, the aspect of 'worth and worthlessness of wisdom' takes up the largest proportion of the overall thought and text, and 'risk and assurance' has the smallest share. He also asserts that "the basic idea running through all of them is the conviction of emptiness which purposely begins and ends the book."<sup>12</sup> In sum, Loader sees the thought of Qoheleth as being

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<sup>10</sup>J.A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet*, argues the polarity of Qoheleth's thought in terms of the religio-historical development of Judaism in his last chapter, pp. 124-131.

<sup>11</sup>Loader refers the term 'polar structure' "to a thought pattern, i.e. a structure of contents" and it does not "mean the process of thinking in Qoheleth's brain, but the actual manifestation of a pattern in the contents of his literary product." This is not the same as "the formal structure of the literary units in the book (p. 1).

<sup>12</sup>Loader, *loc. cit.*, p. 9, also recognizes that "it is not sufficient to take the dominant idea as the only relation between the separate units." They are also related to each other simply by sharing one of the ten major aspects of polarities.

dispersed throughout the ten topics and the only common element between them, besides the idea of *hebel*, is that they all share the same pattern of thought - the polar pattern.

9. H.W. Hertzberg<sup>13</sup> sums up the theology of the book in three main ideas: (1) *der Ausschliesslichkeit Gottes*, the exclusivity of everything being determined by God; (2) *der Eitelkeit alles Irdischen*, the vanity of all earthly things; (3) *die Gegenwart so, wie sie ist, d.h. also aus Gotts Hand, entgegenzunehmen*, To accept the present, just as it is, that is, as coming from God's hand.

10. Graham Ogden<sup>14</sup> has argued recently that the thought of Qoheleth is structured around a thesis - enjoy life - which is argued by (1) a programmatic question about humanity's *yitrôn* or 'advantage' (1:3); (2) its *hebel* answer (negative); and (3) the response to enjoy life which flows from that.

The above proposals for the structure of Qoheleth's thought are by no means the only ones but are a good representation of the vast scholarly interest in the subject. Though there may be some differences in their understanding of the structure of Qoheleth's thought, it is not surprising to find some common factors among them.

## B. EVALUATION

There are, obviously, common motifs that most scholars agree are central to Qoheleth's thought, though there are also many individual and idiosyncratic proposals. For instance, the concept of *הַבְּרָכָה*

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<sup>13</sup>H.W. Hertzberg, *Der Prediger* (KAT; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1963).

<sup>14</sup>Graham Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Readings: A New Commentary; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), pp. 12-15.



has been generally recognized as a main concept in the thought structure of Qoheleth without much dispute. The idea of God has also received considerable attention, for example, in Hertzberg's theology of Qoheleth and also in von Rad's, Crenshaw's, Good's, Lohfink's and Johnston's proposals. Lohfink's recognition of death as the main idea of Qoheleth's thought is also adopted by R.K. Johnston and even gained a prominent role in Crenshaw's understanding. However, Good sees life as the main thought of Qoheleth, as exemplified in his three axioms. Good's analysis of the concept of "vanity" is constructive and will be examined more closely later in this chapter.

Among the most generally agreed central concepts in Qoheleth are *hebel* and 'joy', although 'death' has also attracted considerable attention. Secondary themes such as 'profit' (a primary theme in Ogden's thesis), 'portion', 'wealth' and 'wisdom' have also been the subjects of thematic analysis. However, there is a defect in most thematic analyses, namely, an inability to relate the themes to each other and to the total structure of Qoheleth's thought.

The lack of exegetical analysis of Qoheleth has also caused considerable difficulty for evaluating the proposed thought structures as mentioned above in (A). J.A. Loader's analysis of Qoheleth's polar thought pattern is outstanding in this respect and deserves a closer evaluation. Graham Ogden's proposal is also worth commenting on as it represents one of the most recent fresh looks at Qoheleth.

#### 1. J.A. Loader

J.A. Loader's analysis of the structure of Qoheleth's thought in the form of polar structures is so complex that it becomes elusive. I find the numerous structural diagrams at the end of each unit or aspect of polarity most enigmatic. Although he groups the thirty

literary units (1:12-12:8) under ten aspects of polar thought, polarity is not obvious in some of them, such as 'No retribution where expected' or 'Wealth has no value'. The tenth aspect - Toil and Joy - does not necessarily constitute a polarity but two separate entities. In fact, the grouping of the literary units under the ten aspects is most obscure. For instance, it is misleading to group the unit 4:17-5:8 in which Qoheleth gives advice concerning religious matters under the aspect of 'Talk and Silence'. Similarly, the unit 5:17-19 consisting of Qoheleth's advice to enjoy life is not included in the section where joy is discussed, but under the title 'Wealth has no value.' Furthermore, to separate 'Toil' from the seventh aspect 'Labour without Product' is unjustifiable. It seems more appropriate to discuss the two units (3:16-22; 4:1-3) concerning social justice under the aspect of 'no retribution is expected' than under 'the inhuman human' as Loader does.

Equally elusive is Loader's analysis of Qoheleth's thought in various literary units, structuring them into pole and counter-pole. For example, in his analysis of 3:1-9 under the title 'life and death', he sums up the unit as pole = life, conservation; contra-pole = death, abandonment; and tension = no security, surrender of helpless man to the eventualities of life. But surely, the point of Qoheleth's thought in the unit is to question the וְחַיִּים of life which consists of the various occasions (3:2-8). By focusing on the alleged polar pattern, Loader misses the interpretive key (3:9) to Qoheleth's thought in this unit. It is also not clear how Loader derives the tension from the two opposing poles.

Another example that demonstrates Loader's misinterpretation of Qoheleth's thought is the unit 2:1-11 which Loader thinks it belongs to the larger unit 1:12-2:26 which is concerned with the

subject of the 'worthlessness of wisdom'. He purports that the unit 1:12-2:26 consists of two polar thoughts: (1) Thought = generally accepted wisdom; Counterthought = folly; and Tension = Relative priority of wisdom. (2) Thought = Generally accepted wisdom; Counterthought = Life's happenstances; and Tension = Worthlessness of wisdom. But the unit 2:1-11 clearly concerns Qoheleth's test on mirth (הִתְחַלְּצוּ occurs four times) for profit, and the larger unit concerns more with the question of הִתְחַלְּצוּ and לְחַלְּצוֹ than with just wisdom's value as Loader claims. He certainly needs more justification for perceiving the two poles and tensions in the unit.

It seems evident, based on the above consideration of Loader's interpretation of Qoheleth's thought, that he is proof-texting his thesis - the polar thought pattern. His alleged polar thought pattern in every unit is most unconvincing. Dispersing Qoheleth's thought into ten areas of different, and often unrelated, aspects of polarity is unjustifiable and only reveals his unwillingness, if not inability, to relate the various thoughts together to see a total structure of Qoheleth's thought. It is not incorrect to say that Loader is only interested in the pattern of Qoheleth's thought and not the thought of Qoheleth itself.

Although Loader asserts that "the persistent tension in the poems between polar opposites of all kinds leads to the basic theme of vanity," only ten out of the fifty-eight polar opposites that he adduces result in a tension which can be related to the theme of vanity.<sup>15</sup> Despite Loader's attempt to demonstrate the relationship of the various units of polar thought through a diagrammatic summary (cf. pp. 112, 132), R.E. Murphy rightly says that such an

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<sup>15</sup>The ten polar opposites that resulted a *hebel* tension are found in the units 3:10-15; 4:1-3; 4:4-6; 4:7-12 (2x); 6:7-8; 7:1-4; 7:8-10; 8:10-15; 11:7-12:8.

interlocking and schematic diagram summary "is more mysterious than the text of Qohelet."<sup>16</sup> It appears that Loader has over emphasized the significance of the polar tension and the 'emptiness' theme in the overall structure of Qoheleth's thought which has misled him to bypass the presence of other significant themes such as the enjoyment of life.

## 2. Graham Ogden

Differing from Loader's structural analysis, Ogden has correctly identified the various significant themes in Qoheleth's thought, such as profit, *hebel* and joy. He has attempted to relate them to each other in terms of a programatic question, a negative answer and a positive response. Ogden thinks that the positive response, i.e. the call to enjoy life, is central to Qoheleth's thought and thus, forms the single thesis of his thought. The theme of *hebel* as expressed through the *hebel*-phrase is not to be taken as the thesis of Qoheleth's thought, but only as mere pointer, or a negative answer to the programatic question about profit, which leads to the thesis - enjoy life - as a response to the negative answer. By subordinating all the other themes under the theme of joy, Ogden takes a new stand against most of the previous understandings of Qoheleth's thought, especially that of Loader's who strongly argues that the theme of joy must be subordinated under *hebel* as the main theme in Qoheleth's thought.

Although Ogden has elevated the theme of joy to become the single thesis in Qoheleth's thought, he achieves it by diminishing the importance of the theme of *hebel* unnecessarily, if not unjustifiably. According to his argument, the theme of profit, as expressed in the form of a programatic question, is even more significant

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<sup>16</sup>R.E. Murphy, *CBQ* 42 (1980), p. 245, rightly points out that polarity is not a dominant element in Qoheleth's thought.

than the *hebel* theme because the programatic question about profit forms the framework of Qoheleth's argument for the thesis. Surely the *hebel* theme (which occurs 38 times) has a more significant, if not primary, place in Qoheleth's thought than the concept of profit (ןִיָּבֵן which occurs 10 times) as most would agree.

Ogden's unwillingness to grant the concept of *hebel* a primary place and thus to reduce the complexity of Qoheleth's thought to a mere single thesis is a fatal mistake in his analysis of the structure of Qoheleth's thought.

In sum, the major weakness of the existing proposals concerning the structure of Qoheleth's thought lies in their unwillingness and probably inability to search for and/or establish any legitimate relationships between the various thematic elements they have identified. It is inadequate just to study the various themes or concepts of Qoheleth without relating them to the whole structure of Qoheleth's thought. Though Ogden has correctly elevated the call to enjoy life to a key position in Qoheleth's thought, he achieves it at the expense of another main thought - *hebel*. Similarly with Loader's structural analysis, although he has identified a key theme, the 'emptiness' of everything, upon which the structure of Qoheleth's thought develops, he might have missed its twin, the concept of joy.

Having analysed the inadequacy of the various proposals for the structure of Qoheleth's thought, it is the purpose of this chapter to argue for a greater degree of coherence between the primary and secondary themes within the structure of Qoheleth's thought. The following section will propose, and subsequently argue for a pair of concepts as the primary thought structure which will accommodate the various secondary themes within Qoheleth's thought.

### C. THE TWO PRIMARY CONCEPTS OF QOHELETH'S THOUGHT:

#### *Hebel and Joy*

It is noticeable that over the past century of Qoheleth studies, there has been a transformation in understanding the nature of Qoheleth's thought, from a view of it as essentially pessimistic to a relatively optimistic view. The phrase  $\text{הֵבֶל הַיָּגֶל}$  (1:2; 12:8) and the numerous occurrences of the term  $\text{הֵבֶל}$  are seen more as an unifying theme in Qoheleth's thought, rather than as an indicator of pessimism. Certainly, the term  $\text{הֵבֶל}$  and its usages are crucial to the understanding of Qoheleth's thought. One other reason for rejecting the characterization of Qoheleth's thought as pessimistic is that the concept of joy has been increasingly recognized by scholars to be a major motif in Qoheleth's thought, though they are uncertain of the relationship between joy and *hebel*. With this positive recognition, the motif of 'death' receives lesser attention and is reduced to secondary importance<sup>17</sup> along with other motifs such as 'wisdom', 'wealth' and 'toil'. The concept of 'profit' ( $\text{יְתָרֹן}$ ) and 'portion' ( $\text{חֵלֶק}$ ), remain significant in Qoheleth's thought due to the speculation about the thought's rich commercial background.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Contrast Norbert Lohfink, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-56, who understands that "Death as the firm Limit imposed upon human existence, cutting it off from the infinitely greater potentiality of the progress of time, forms the framework at the beginning and the end of the Book of Qoheleth" (147).

<sup>18</sup>James Williams, "What does it profit a man? The Wisdom of Koheleth," *Judaism* 20 (1971):179-93; Graham Ogden in his new commentary, *op. cit.*, based on two key terms, 'enigma' ( $\text{הֵבֶל}$ ) and 'advantage' ( $\text{יְתָרֹן}$ ), argues that the purpose of Qoheleth is to search for an answer to the question of 'profit' ( $\text{יְתָרֹן}$ ).

The following is a proposal that הֶבֶל, 'the absurd' and שְׂמֵחָה, 'joy', as two concepts, are fundamental in the structure of Qoheleth's thought. The concepts of הֶבֶל and joy of Qoheleth will first be studied which followed by an analysis of their relationship to each other within Qoheleth's thought. Thirdly, the relationship between these two concepts, הֶבֶל and joy, and various secondary themes will be studied. The secondary themes include 'profit' (תְּרוּחָה), 'portion' (חֵלֶק), 'wealth' (עֲשֵׂר, חֵסֶד), 'wisdom' (חָכְמָה), 'death' (מָוֶת), 'remembrance' (זִכְרוֹן) and 'God' (אֱלֹהִים). It must be noted, however, that the point of this proposal is not the question of how significant the themes of הֶבֶל and joy are in the book, but the point is that these two concepts make sense of Qoheleth's thought. The former approach only points out the importance of the theme as one among many within the book; while the latter understands the two concepts as the determinative element in the structure of Qoheleth's thought.

## 1. הֶבֶל

### a. *Various Understandings of הֶבֶל*

Although this term is frequently studied, very few studies have concentrated on its use in the book itself as uniquely employed by Qoheleth. Most studies have tried to understand the meaning of the term etymologically or from its use in other parts of the Old Testament. These studies do not do full justice to its use in Qoheleth and therefore are liable to misunderstand Qoheleth's thought. Similarly, translating the term into various alleged synonymous or related terms also do no justice to the meaning of the term in Qoheleth. The following will examine the various studies of the term's usage in Qoheleth after discussing its various translations.

1) *Usual Translations.* There are at least twenty English transla-

tions, nouns or adjectives, for the term according to its various contexts: vanity, meaninglessness, emptiness, transitoriness, nothing, breath, wind, vapour, transience, enigmatic, perplexity, elusive, fleeting, ineffectual, futile, fruitlessness, ephemerality, inequity, unbeneficial and profitlessness. The more words used to translate, the more certain it becomes that the term is ambiguous in the minds of the translators. The idea that the meaning of the term can only be determined by its use in different contexts will be examined later in C.1.b, but first we shall turn to examine the various studies on the usage of the term in Qoheleth.

2) Edwin Good.<sup>19</sup> When discussing usage of the term  $\text{הֶבֶל}$ , Edwin Good rightly points out the obvious fact that "The fact that Third Isaiah can use *hebel* to mean a 'vapor' (Isa. 57:13) does not mean that Qoheleth must do so." It is correct that Qoheleth never used the word in the sense of "vapour". The precise meaning of the word  $\text{הֶבֶל}$  must be determined by its various uses in Qoheleth. After examining the occurrences of the word in Qoheleth, Edwin Good concludes that "the word *hebel* is used to point out *incongruities*." He then gives seven examples of incongruities in Qoheleth,<sup>20</sup> and writes, "Qoheleth uses the term *hebel* to mean something very close to 'irony' and 'ironic'."<sup>21</sup> Good is right in his analysis of the

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<sup>19</sup>Edwin Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*, p. 77.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p.182, "It is incongruous that a man's work may go for the advantage of someone he does not know who has not done the work. It is incongruous that the wise and fool, good and bad, pious and impious, come to the same destiny. It is incongruous that the righteous and the wicked are treated as if they were the opposite, that the wicked should be praised for doing badly. It is incongruous that a man toils merely to keep up with the Joneses. It is incongruous that, although rejoicing is the best thing for man to do, it accomplishes nothing. It is incongruous that man should foolishly multiply his dreams and his babblings before God. The whole of life, the motto says is a tissue of incongruity."

<sup>21</sup>W.E. Staples, "The 'Vanity' of Ecclesiastes," *JNES* 2 (1943):95-104; *idem*, "Vanity of Vanities," *CJT* 1 (1955):141-56, suggests the meaning of "mystery." Graham Ogden suggests the meaning "enigma-



usage of *הֵבֵל* in Qoheleth as marking incongruities. But he stops short of identifying the precise usage and meaning of the term because he is interested in a literary feature (irony) in Qoheleth, rather than the philosophical or theological aspect (incongruity or absurdity) of Qoheleth's thought. This is followed up later by Michael Fox who develops the idea of incongruities further in a recent article.

3) Michael Fox<sup>22</sup>. In his article entitled "The Meaning of *HEBEL* for Qoheleth," M. Fox suggests "absurd" or "absurdity" as the dominant meaning of the term *הֵבֵל* in Qoheleth. He defines it thus: "The essence of the absurd is a disparity between two terms that are supposed to be joined by a link of harmony or causality but are, in fact, disjunct. The absurd is an affront to reason."<sup>23</sup> Taking issue with Edwin Good, Fox attempts a distinction between 'irony', the 'incongruous' and the 'absurd'. He argues as follows:

... incongruities and ironies may be merely puzzling or amusing; the absurd is never that. Some ironies may also satisfy a sense of justice, as when a man is caught in trap he has set; the absurd never does. Incongruities and ironies may lie within the grasp of human intellect and evoke a variety of reactions. *Hebel* for Qoheleth, like "absurd" for Camus, is not merely incongruous or ironic; it is oppressive, even tragic. The divorce between act and result is the reality upon which human reason founders; it robs human actions of significance and undermines morality. For Qoheleth *hebel* is an injustice.<sup>24</sup>

Fox perceives that *הֵבֵל* is more than an intellectual abstraction for Qoheleth; it is an emotional outcry, a response based on the observation and experience of *הֵבֵל* in daily life. Oppression and injustice form the main part of the reality of human experience.

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tic", though he shows approval of the meaning "incongruity."

<sup>22</sup>Michael Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qoheleth," *JBL* 105:3 (1986):409-27.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 409.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 410.

Fox concludes his study by stating that

... the book of Qoheleth, taken as a whole, is not primarily lamenting the brevity of life or exposing the vanity of worldly wealth and pleasures.... His main complaint [is] the irrationality of life as a whole, which is to say, of divine behavior.... Underlying Qoheleth's *hebel*-judgments is an assumption that the system should be rational, which, for Qoheleth, means that actions should invariably produce appropriate consequences. In fact Qoheleth stubbornly expects them to do so (3:17; 5:5; 7:17; 8:12b-13).<sup>25</sup>

#### 4. Others

Fox's understanding of  $\text{הֵבֶל}$  to mean "absurd" is recently adopted by Crenshaw in his new commentary. But even before Fox's analysis, Frank Crüsemann has already suggested the idea when he asserts that "A basic presupposition of Koheleth's thinking is that there is no connection between what human beings do and how they fare."<sup>26</sup> However, Crüsemann makes no connection with the term  $\text{הֵבֶל}$  when he analyses Qoheleth's thought under the title 'The Collapse of the Act-Consequence Connection'.

Another recent attempt to understand the usage of the term in Qoheleth is that of Ogden. He discusses the usage of the term under three sections: (1) Scenarios which are described as *hebel*; (2) Parallel and Complementary Phrases; and (3) Qoheleth's Call to Enjoyment.<sup>27</sup> He concludes that

It seems abundantly evident from the representative examples of *hebel* ... that Qoheleth does not mean to claim that life is empty, vain, and meaningless. As he addresses the next generation his point is simply that life is replete with situations to which even the sage, the philosopher theologian, has no answer. It is the word *hebel* that Qoheleth applies to describe these situation.

... the term *hebel* in Qoheleth has a distinctive function and meaning: it conveys the notion that life is enigmatic, and

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 426.

<sup>26</sup> Frank Crüsemann, "The Unchangeable World: The 'Crisis of Wisdom' in Koheleth," trans. M.J. O'Connell in *God of the Lowly*, ed. W. Schottroff and W. Stegemann (New York: Orbis Book, 1984), pp. 57-77 (59).

<sup>27</sup> Graham Ogden, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-22.

mysterious;<sup>28</sup> that there are many unanswered and unanswerable questions.

Ogden could have been more specific or explicit in his analysis in defining the meaning of the term *hebel* as used in Qoheleth.

With the above analysis in the background, we shall turn to see what the texts say about the term *hebel* (הֶבֶל).

b. Qoheleth's Use of הֶבֶל<sup>29</sup>

1) The הֶבֶל הַכֹּל הַכֹּל הַכֹּל statement (1:2; 12:8). The term הֶבֶל occurs seventy-three times in the Hebrew Bible and thirty-eight times in Qoheleth alone. The most obvious occurrence is in its superlative form in 1:2 and 12:8 framing the book proper.<sup>30</sup> 1:2 includes the phrase הַכֹּל הַכֹּל הַכֹּל twice and follows with the phrase הַכֹּל הַכֹּל, while 12:8 reads הַכֹּל הַכֹּל הַכֹּל הַכֹּל. It is clear that the phrase הַכֹּל הַכֹּל הַכֹּל is qualitatively stronger than the term הֶבֶל, while the phrase הַכֹּל הַכֹּל that follows draws attention to the scope of the superlative phrase. If the term הֶבֶל is translated as 'absurd', then the superlative phrase can be translated as 'utterly absurd' or 'absurdly absurd'. But what does it mean? It is clear that its meaning can only be determined by usage throughout the book and not from its occurrences in 1:2 and 12:8 alone.

The superlative form in 1:2 functions as an announcement of what Qoheleth is going to argue and declares Qoheleth's perception of the subject of his study. At the end of the investigation, Qoheleth

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<sup>28</sup>Graham Ogden, *op. cit.*, pp. 21f.

<sup>29</sup>Cf. 1:2, 14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:19; 4:4, 7, 8, 16; 5:6 (Ev. 7), 9 (Ev. 10); 6:2, 4, 9, 11, 12; 7:6, 15; 8:10, 14; 9:9; 11:8, 10; 12:8.

<sup>30</sup>Fox believes that the embracing of the thirty-eight occurrences of the term with the two superlative forms in 1:2 and 12:8 must have implied a common meaning inherited in the term as used by Qoheleth throughout the occurrences in the book. This belief motivated Fox to study and analyse the usages of the term and concludes that "absurd" is the root meaning in the use of the term by Qoheleth in all of its occurrences.

once again repeats his utterance in 12:8 as support for his announcement in 1:2 and the main investigation (1:3-12:7). The announcement in 1:2 is more stronger and more forceful than the conclusion in 12:8 as the phrase  $\text{הַכֹּל הַנֶּלֶמַד}$  is used only once at the end, probably because Qoheleth believes that the investigation (the book proper) has convincingly argued for his concept of  $\text{הַכֹּל}$ .

Besides the meaning of  $\text{הַכֹּל}$ , one other interesting element in the introductory and concluding manifesto that also needs investigation is the meaning and scope of the term  $\text{הַכֹּל}$  'everything, all'. It is not immediately clear that whether Qoheleth intend the term to include literally 'everything'. It transpires only as we go on reading the book that the term is used as a general term for the whole system but not all the details and does not mean literally everything because Qoheleth acknowledges the non-absurdity or non- $\text{הַכֹּל}$  of some things such as joy, wisdom and wealth (cf. 2:24,26; 7:11; 9:13,18; 5:18). He does not see eating, drinking and enjoying one's life as absurd, because he affirms that "There is nothing better for humankind than that they should eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their activities" (2:24). He also sees value in wisdom: "Wisdom is good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun. For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money; and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it" (7:11,12); "wisdom is better than might" (9:16).

The phrase 'under the sun' is often used synonymously for  $\text{הַכֹּל}$ , describing the scope of what Qoheleth pronounces as  $\text{הַכֹּל}$ . Fox recognizes the word  $\text{הַכֹּל}$  "everything" does not mean "truly universal," and is contented to see the  $\text{הַכֹּל}$  in 1:2 and 12:8 as synonymous to

"all that happens under the sun" (כָּל-אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשֶׂה תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ) <sup>31</sup>; and states that in these verses, 'everything' refers only to "what happens in the realm of human existence (under the sun)," instead of the "entirety of reality." <sup>32</sup>

Contrary to Fox, as I argued above, the phrase הַכֹּל הַזֶּה does not mean literally everything in the system with all the details. This includes the occurrences of the phrase in 1:14, "I have seen all the works which are done under the sun, and behold, all is absurd (הַכֹּל הַזֶּה) and striving after wind," and 2:17, "Therefore I hated life because the work that is done under the sun is evil (רָע) to me, for everything is הַכֹּל הַזֶּה (הַכֹּל הַזֶּה) and striving after wind," as in 1:2 and 12:8, do not mean literally all the details in the system where humankind exist. It is used as a general statement issued by Qoheleth whenever he encounters a הַכֹּל הַזֶּה situation. A good example is 4:7-8 where Qoheleth describes a particular absurdity existing in a domestic situation or more precisely a particular situation of an individual; he states it as "I saw a הַכֹּל הַזֶּה [an absurdity] under the sun." However, in other situations when the phrase הַכֹּל הַזֶּה occurs, the scope of "everything" refers to its immediate context of reference; 2:11b refers to the context of 2:1-10, like the last phrase of 2:26, "Also this is הַכֹּל הַזֶּה and striving after wind," which refers to the contexts of 2:24-26, or 2:1-26 or possibly 1:12-2:26.

2) *The search for יִתְרוֹן* (2:1,11,22-23; 6:11). The first occurrence of the term הַכֹּל הַזֶּה after the superlative form in 1:2 and 1:14 is in 2:1 when the experiment on שִׁמְחָה is pronounced הַכֹּל הַזֶּה. Qoheleth has been searching for יִתְרוֹן and has found none; therefore he pronounces the non-יִתְרוֹן activity הַכֹּל הַזֶּה. The reason is not immediately

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<sup>31</sup>As in 1:9,13,14; 2:17; 8:17; 9:3,6d

<sup>32</sup>Michael Fox, *op. cit.*, p. 423.

given. However, one could easily be misled into thinking that Qoheleth has pronounced  $\text{שְׂמֵחָה}$  in itself to be  $\text{הֶבֶל}$ . Careful study shows that it is not  $\text{שְׂמֵחָה}$  itself that the pronouncement is aiming at; instead, it is the  $\bar{\text{t}}\text{est}$  that yielded the unexpected experimental result - no  $\text{יְהוֹרֵן}$  - that Qoheleth declared "absurd". The  $\text{הוּא}$ , "it", refers to the testing for  $\text{יְהוֹרֵן}$  rather than  $\text{שְׂמֵחָה}$  itself. The act of enjoying does not lead to the effect of any  $\text{יְהוֹרֵן}$  is pronounced  $\text{הֶבֶל}$ . The fact that an experiment in the chemistry laboratory does not yield the expected result does not prove that the substance used in the experiment is valueless. Qoheleth does not in 2:1 contradict his positive encouragement elsewhere to enjoy life (cf. 2:24ff.).

After his various experiments (2:1-10), Qoheleth categorically pronounces that all his experiments with  $\text{שְׂמֵחָה}$  - which constitute the search for  $\text{יְהוֹרֵן}$  - was  $\text{הֶבֶל הַכֹּל}$  "all was absurd" (2:11). There is a disparity, to the point of absurdity, between the effort invested and the result harvested.

Again, one should not be misled into thinking that Qoheleth is declaring that actions such as wealth gathering (2:8), drinking and dancing (2:9) and wisdom gathering (2:3) are to be prohibited because they all are  $\text{הֶבֶל}$ . In Qoheleth's thought,  $\text{הֶבֶל}$  refers to the mismatch of an action and its expected effect. The declaration of  $\text{הֶבֶל}$  does not imply the prohibition of any action, it reflects a state of realization in Qoheleth's thought. Thus, throughout the book Qoheleth encourages rather than prohibiting one to enjoy life, "to eat and to drink and to be happy" (2:24ff.; 3:12ff.; 3:22; 5:17ff.; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:7-12:1).

The realization of  $\text{הֶבֶל}$ , absurdity, in human activities does not mean Qoheleth is encouraging humankind not to work or involve in activity. Contrary to that, he asserts that there is a portion,

קָלָה, for one in one's activity (2:10,21; 3:22; 5:17,18; 9:6,9), and it is meant to be enjoyed by the one involves in the action, especially within the reality of הֵפֵל הַכֹּל "everything is absurd." Although the experiments as described in 2:1-10 yielded no תְּרוּםָה - that is what is absurd - Qoheleth encourages one to involve in activity and to enjoy one's legitimate portion.<sup>33</sup>

In sum, הֵפֵל in Qoheleth's thought refers to the mismatch of action and its expected effect. Thus, the acts of enjoyment in wealth, in food and drinks, in wisdom (2:1-11) that do not lead to the expected effect of yielding any תְּרוּםָה are declared absurd. This is clearly seen, after a painful search for תְּרוּםָה, in the rhetorical question in 2:22 which follows with a הֵפֵל answer (2:23) that it is grieving and is absurd to find one's labour yielding no תְּרוּםָה. Qoheleth is looking for some enduring value, the תְּרוּםָה, and cannot find any.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, in a situation when one is contending with someone who is stronger than him/her, Qoheleth states that it is absurd to utter more words because there is no תְּרוּםָה to the utterer (6:11; cf.5:6). The realization of absurdity in human activity constitutes the structure of Qoheleth's thought.

3) *Death nullifies the distinction between wise and fool, righteous and wicked, human and beast.* Another mismatch of action and effect

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<sup>33</sup>According to the study of Fabrizio Foresti, "עָמַל in Koheleth: 'Toil' or 'Profit'," *EphCarm* 31 (1980):415-30 (430), the term עָמַל, 'toil', has two semantic meanings: (1) hard, assiduous work, toil, (1:3; 2:10,11; 3:9; 4:4,8,9; 5:15; 8:15,17 (as an auxiliary verb); 9:9; 10:15), and (2) fruit of work, income, profit, (2:18-24a; 3:13; 4:6; 5:14,17,18; 6:7).

<sup>34</sup>This idea is especially clear in Qoheleth's concept of remembrance (1:11; 2:16; 4:16; 9:15; cf. 5:19; 11:8) that when there is no remembrance, i.e. no enduring quality, in the activity, it is declared absurd. As Albert Camus, when asked the question on how did he picture his life after the grave, answered that "A life in which I can remember this life on earth. That's all I want of it." See Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, English translation by Stuart Gilbert, (Hamish Hamilton, 1953; Penguin Books, 1962), pp.117-18.

which Qoheleth would declare a  $\text{לְהַבִּיל}$  is in 2:15, when he discovers that both the wise and the fool will face death with no escape in spite of their differences. The same is said of human and beast in 3:19. The expectation that human and beast, the wise and the fool, who live opposing ways of life should inevitably have different destinies is somehow nullified by the fact of death which occurs to all without discrimination. The effort to live a life of wisdom is met with death, something which also greets the fool. However, that is not all, for often the wise person dies younger, and sometimes with a more dishonourable death than the fool. This is considered absurd. It leads Qoheleth to ask the question, Why be wise? (2:15b), and, What is the advantage of being wise? (6:8). Lest one be quick to accuse Qoheleth of resisting wisdom, let it be clear that he never opts for being a fool as he recognizes that there is much positive value to wisdom (2:13; 7:11ff.; 9:13ff.). This may account for his pronouncement of a  $\text{לְהַבִּיל}$  in 7:6 concerning the behaviour of the fool.

The awareness of how little difference exists between the wise and the fool in face of death leads Qoheleth to think of the differences between the righteous and the wicked (7:15; 8:10-12,14). He promptly pronounces a  $\text{לְהַבִּיל}$  in 8:10 and 8:14, especially when he sees that the righteous receives what the wicked deserve and the wicked receives what the righteous deserve. It is  $\text{לְהַבִּיל}$ , absurd, that righteous action does not receive what is deserved; it is even more absurd that the righteous receives what the wicked deserve.

4) *The gathering of wealth that leads to  $\text{לְהַבִּיל}$ .* This criss-crossing of action and effect leads Qoheleth to think further about the gathering and transferring of wealth (2:19,21; 6:2) and power (4:16) in a community. Why is the gathering and transferring of



wealth and power regarded by Qoheleth as a  $\text{לְהַבִּיל}$ , an absurdity? There are two reasons for this. First, the wealth being gathered by the hard work of one person is not transferred to the one who deserves it; the wise person leaves his possessions to someone who could be a fool (2:19) or who has not laboured for them (2:21). In the situation described in 6:2, there is a double absurdity involved. First, there is the fact of a person's inability to enjoy all the wealth gathered or given by God. That the effort invested to gather wealth does not result in the ability to enjoy the wealth is  $\text{לְהַבִּיל}$ , absurd (6:2). The absurdity is doubled when the wealth that one gathered but is unable to enjoy is given to a stranger or foreigner. In the case of the transferring of political power (4:16), it is for the same reason as given in 2:19 and 2:21 that Qoheleth pronounces a  $\text{לְהַבִּיל}$ , absurd. One has to transfer one's political power to one's successor without knowing whether the successor is good or bad, worthy or not worthy. The worst of all, regardless of how successful one's political career is, one will not be remembered by those who would be the successors. There is also the case of wealth gathered by a lonely man who has no one to give the wealth to; this is also  $\text{לְהַבִּיל}$  (4:7,8). A closer look at the text shows that not only that the act of gathering wealth does not yield the effect of having some one worthy of passing the wealth to, but that the act of gathering wealth does not yield the expected effect of enjoying the wealth - the gatherer deprives himself/herself of the enjoyment - also makes it absurd.

Related to the subject of wealth are three rather obscure verses in which the term  $\text{לְהַבִּיל}$  occurs: "Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a person's envy of his/her neighbour. This is also  $\text{לְהַבִּיל}$  and a striving after wind" (4:4); "He who loves money will not be satisfied with money; nor he who loves wealth, with

gain: this also is לַחֲפֹזִים" (5:9); "Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire; this also is לַחֲפֹזִים and a striving after wind" (6:9). The text of 4:4 is ambiguous and is best connected to 4:5-6. It suggests that rivalry in human activity may lead to no enjoyment in life, and unhealthy competition to gain more wealth may also lead to no enjoyment in activity. This is absurd because one's action of gathering wealth does not lead to the expected result of enjoying one's wealth, but greater discontentment. The absurdity in 4:4 - envy for wealth - may also explain why discontentment, as expressed in the form of a "better-proverb" in 6:9, is also considered absurd by Qoheleth. Without contentment, one will engage oneself in endless activities without reaping any effect from the activity, such as the case described in 4:7-8, which is also absurd. The absurdities found in the envying of wealth and discontentment in 4:4 and 6:9, also form the basis of another absurdity in 5:9 as expressed in the form of a proverbial saying.

5) *Life without enjoyment is לַחֲפֹזִים*. Labouring without רווח' 'profit' has already been classified by Qoheleth as absurd. In 4:7,8 and 6:2, Qoheleth suggests activity without enjoyment or labouring without the ability to enjoy the fruits is also absurd, לַחֲפֹזִים. In 6:3-6, Qoheleth argues hypothetically that living a long life (a thousand years) without experiencing any joy is worse than premature death in a miscarriage because enjoyment in life, especially a long life, are reasonable results to expect that do not in fact occur. Hypothetically, premature death is better than a long life because although both of them, the long lived and the premature dead persons, die without enjoying life, the miscarried child need not suffer through labouring under the sun. Thus Qoheleth speaks, in a relative sense, of his preference for death over a long life when there is no joy in one's life.

In 11:8-10, Qoheleth encourages one to enjoy life and the term  $\text{הֵבֵל}$  occurs twice (11:8b, 10).

<sup>8</sup>For if a person lives many years, let this person rejoice in them all; but let this person remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is *hebel*.<sup>9</sup> Rejoice, O young fellow, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.<sup>10</sup> Remove vexation from your mind, and put away pain from your body; for youth and the dawn of life are *hebel*.

The encouragement to enjoy life in 11:8b and the command to enjoy life in 11:9 are both followed by two *hebel* clauses (11:8b,10). In 11:8, Qoheleth encourages one to find enjoyment in all the days of one's life and that one should also remember that death is enduring and what comes after life is absurd. The absurdity perhaps lies in the fact that the activity of the present life leads to no effect in the after-life (cf. 9:10b). In 11:9-10, Qoheleth commands one to find enjoyment early in one's life and make enjoyment one's life goal. This life goal should not be disrupted by the reality of absurdity which existed even in one's youth.

There is a contrast between the "lives many years" ( $\text{הֵרַבָּה יְחִיָּה}$ ) of 11:8a and the "days of darkness shall be many" ( $\text{הֵרַבָּה יְהִי־יָמֵי}$ ) of 11:8b: a contrast of the finiteness and shortness of the present life against the long enduring after-life. Hypothetically, if the present short life is already filled with much absurd reality, the after-life would be filled with even more absurdities. The purpose of encouraging one to "remember" ( $\text{זָכַר}$ ) the many days of "darkness" or the infinite of death (11:8b) is so that one is always aware, no matter how long one may live, of the finiteness of the present life when contrasted with the infinite of death. Such awareness will drive one to grasp every opportunity to enjoy life before time is running out and especially <sup>points to the fact</sup> that what comes after is absurd.

There is little doubt that the context of 11:7-10 is concerned with the urge to live a joyful life, particularly in one's youth. This is followed with a description of the certainty, inescapability and the imminence of death in 12:1-7. It is, therefore, reasonable to think also, from this context, that the purpose of 11:8b is to warn that, lest one easily forget that the present life is short and temporary, one should remember that death approaches swiftly, death is imminent and certain to come and the days of the life after (who knows?) are many (11:8b), where all activities will cease (cf. 9:10). Therefore, one should not let the absurdities in life disrupt the sole purpose of life, namely, that it is to be enjoyed. This is supported by 11:10, where one is encouraged to banish all vexation and unpleasant moments since even the "prime of life" - the youthful days - is filled with absurdity, and focus on the youthful life that can be filled with joy (11:9). This interpretation is also in line with the purpose of 12:1-7, where the certainty and imminence of death is described in order to encourage one to find enjoyment in this present life. With this command to enjoy one's life in youth, Qoheleth concludes his thought with the repeated statement of 1:2 in the superlative form in 12:8.

Although the word  $\text{הַבִּיטָה}$  in 11:10 could mean 'ephemeral', 'absurd' also fits well in the context. The verse means that one is to remove vexation and put away all unpleasant things [in order that one may enjoy life (11:9)] because even in one's youth, the prime of life, as in every stage of life, absurdity abounds. The usual choice of  $\text{הַבִּיטָה}$  to precede  $\text{הַבִּיטָה}$ , all or everything is absurd, is discarded in favour of the nouns "youth" and "the prime of life" is absurd, though the meaning is not very different as defined by the context. If taken as "ephemeral", 11:10 could mean that one's

youthful days are short and ephemeral. One should not think that time is on one's side.

For those who are not able to enjoy their wealth there may be a divine cause according to 2:26, where the opportunity to enjoy life is taken away by God from the "sinners" (חַטָּאִים), though this involves a certain degree of absurdity. The absurdity lies in the fact that a sinner is punished by allowing him or her to gather and collect, an act of blessing to the righteous, only to give what has been gathered and collected to someone else to enjoy, thus depriving the sinner the right to enjoy the fruits of labour. This mismatch of acts and consequences is declared absurd (2:26b).

6) *Three ambiguous passages, 'absurd' or 'ephemeral'?* There are three occurrences of the term חַטָּאִים that suggest the meaning of "ephemeral" or "fleeting" (6:12; 7:15; 9:9), though the sense of absurd could also fit in equally well. In 6:12, "his absurd life" (חַטָּאִים) is used in the general sense of the word and may be understood to mean a life that is filled with absurd events. In 7:15, "in the days of my absurdity" (חַטָּאִים) may imply the same as 6:12, a life that is filled with absurdity, as described in 7:15b. Lastly in 9:9, "all the days of the life of your absurdity [i.e. your absurd life]" (חַטָּאִים) is also understood in the same sense as the above.

However, if *hebel* is taken to mean 'fleeting' or 'ephemeral', 6:12 would mean "For who knows what is good for humankind while they live the few days of their fleeting or ephemeral life"; 7:15 would mean "In my fleeting life"; and 9:9 "all the days of your ephemeral life." All three passages could be describing the shortness and ephemerality of life.

When taken to mean absurdity, all three instances refer generally to the absurdity in life. Besides these three verses, there is

one other occurrence of the term in the plural form  $\text{הַבְּלָיִם}$  in an obscure verse (5:6). Since it is in a context referring to excessive speeches or words, it may be understood in a similar sense to 6:10,11 that contending with one who is mightier is absurd because it leads to no  $\text{יִתְרוֹן}$ .

*Summary.* To sum up what the text says about the term,  $\text{הַבְּלָל}$  is used in six ways: (1) The superlative form in 1:2 and 12:8 announces and concludes the subject of the book; it is the absurdity of human existence under the sun as studied by Qoheleth (cf. 1:14; 2:17). (2) All activities that do not yield any  $\text{יִתְרוֹן}$ , profit, are declared  $\text{הַבְּלָל}$ , absurd (2:1,11,22-23; cf. 6:11). (3) When certain actions are taken (e.g. attempting to be wise and righteous) to be assured of a different and distinctive consequence (e.g. to be blessed, prosperous and have a long life), and when such expectations are nullified by the element of death (2:15; 3:19) or the delay in carrying out justice (7:15ff.; 8:10,14), Qoheleth declares them absurd. (4) In the case of transferring wealth or power, Qoheleth pronounces an absurdity when a) the wealth gathered by the labourer is passed on to someone unknown who could be a fool (2:19), or b) the wealth gathered by a wise person is passed onto someone who actually is a fool (2:21), or c) the wealth gathered by a hard-working labourer is passed onto someone who has never laboured for it (6:2), or d) the wealth is gathered by a labourer, who only knows how to work but has no one to pass on the wealth to and has deprived himself or herself of the ability to enjoy the fruits of the effort invested (4:7). (5) The thought that life is to be enjoyed - enjoyment as the primary goal in life - leads Qoheleth to declare absurdity when, a) the labourer gathered wealth but was not able to enjoy it (6:2; 2:26b), or b) the labourer gathered wealth for a stranger who did not work to enjoy it (6:2),

or c) a labourer lives a long life and yet finds no joy or enjoyment (6:3-6; cf. 11:8,10). (6) Though the term  $\text{הַבָּל}$  has the meaning of 'absurd' throughout the book, it could also mean ephemeral or fleeting in 6:12; 7:15 and 9:9.

Qoheleth uses the term  $\text{הַבָּל}$  in the above six ways to mean the same thing: action<sup>that</sup> does not lead to any expected effect is absurd. The recognition of the absurd realities in human activities forms the basic framework of Qoheleth's thought. Everywhere Qoheleth turns to observe or experience, there is absurdity. Both Fox and Ogden are right in seeing  $\text{הַבָּל}$  to mean something other than 'empty', 'vain' or 'meaningless'. But it is imprecise to take  $\text{הַבָּל}$  as "enigmatic" or "mystery" as Ogden did, because they are only descriptions and do not explain why Qoheleth designates his observations and experiences of human activities as  $\text{הַבָּל}$ . Pronouncing the mismatch of action and its expected effect in human activity as  $\text{הַבָּל}$  or absurdity is a more precise meaning and usage for the term. But that is not the entire thought of Qoheleth. His thought does not stop at this state of realization of the absurdity, but moves on to champion the idea of experiencing joy in life as priority. He encourages the enjoyment of life as the wisest course for one who recognizes the absurd reality in human activity.<sup>35</sup>

Of the above usages of the term by Qoheleth, the concept of enjoyment in life stands out uniquely in Qoheleth's thought at least in four special ways. First, joy generated from labour is a well deserved 'portion', a  $\text{חֵלֶק}$ ; it is appropriate and legitimate that one should possess it (2:10,21; 3:22), whether or not the event or situation itself generates any  $\text{הֵנָּה$  and is therefore

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<sup>35</sup>Similar thought may be found in R.B.Y. Scott, *Proverbs; Ecclesiastes* (AB, 18; New York: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 201-04, that despite the thesis of the book is *hebel*, there is the practical aspect of Qoheleth's philosophy, a call to enjoy life.

absurd. Second, joy generated from labour corresponds to God's intention for humans (9:7). Third, joyless life is seen as a punishment by God (2:26), thus emphasizing the significance of joy in Qoheleth's thought. Fourth, a joyless long life is deemed worse than a still born child (6:3-6) and a long life of a thousand years with hundreds of children makes no compensation (6:3; 11:8a). Probably this is to point out the fact that dead or alive, one must possess joy in order to compensate for absurdity (6:3-6; 11:8ff.). In view of Qoheleth's unique ideas on the concept of joy, the following will analyse the concept of joy as a twin theme alongside  $\text{הֵנָּה}$ , the two concepts forming the dual structure of Qoheleth's thought.

## 2. Joy ( $\text{הֵנָּה}$ )

The concept of joy in Qoheleth is best presented in the seven passages devoted to the subject (2:24-26; 3:12,13; 3:22; 5:17-19; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:7-12:1). It is also expressed in the seventeen occurrences of the word  $\text{הֵנָּה}$  "joy, rejoice" in the book<sup>36</sup> and its synonyms such as  $\text{טוֹב}$  "good" (2:1,24; 3:12,13; 6:3,6; 9:7; 11:7-9) and the phrase "to eat ( $\text{לֶאֱכֹל}$ ) and to drink ( $\text{הִשְׂתֵּי}$ )" (2:24-26; 3:12,22; 5:17-19; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:7-12:1). A less common word for "pleasure" in the book is  $\text{דָּבָר}$  (5:3; 8:3,6; 12:1,10) which sometimes means "matter, business" (cf. 3:1, 17; 5:7). A rare word used by Qoheleth for "rejoice" is  $\text{שִׂחַח}$  (2:25).<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup>2:1,2,10 (2x),26; 3:12,22; 4:16; 5:18,19; 7:4; 8:15 (2x); 9:7; 10:19; 11:8,9.

<sup>37</sup>For a discussion of the meaning of  $\text{שִׂחַח}$ , cf. C.F. Whitley, *op. cit.*, p. 28; for a study on  $\text{דָּבָר}$  cf. W.E. Staples, "The Meaning of  $\text{דָּבָר}$  in Ecclesiastes," *JNES* 24 (1965):110-12.



a. *Various Understandings of Joy ?*

As early as 1857, the passages referring to joy in Qoheleth were seen as markers of the literary structure of the book.<sup>38</sup> However, it was not until recently that these passages were studied in detail by R.N. Whybray and Graham Ogden with the emphasis on seeing joy as a leading concept in Qoheleth's thought.

1) R.N. Whybray In his careful study of the seven passages that suggest the theme of joy, R.N. Whybray rightly observes that these passages not only "punctuate the book, forming a kind of Leitmotiv, they also increase steadily in emphasis as the book proceeds."<sup>39</sup> He further remarks on the seven passages that "the last [11:7-12:1a], the most elaborate of them all, directly addressed to the reader, introduces and dominates the concluding section." He then concludes his study as follows;

1) What good things God has given us are intended for our enjoyment, and in the giving of them he has shown his approval of our actions. To enjoy them is actually doing his will. 2) We must accept our ignorance of God's purposes and of the reasons why he has permitted evil to exist in the world; and we must take life as we find it and enjoy what we can, because a) we cannot change the fate which God has chosen for us, b) we cannot know what God has in store for us, c) life is short and death inevitable. 3) The recognition that toil is part of what God has allotted to us in life, and that reliance on our own efforts is vain, enables us to find enjoyment even in our toil.

Whybray's conclusion significantly focuses on the relationship between God and joy, putting all the related subjects such as toil, wealth, portion and profit under the idea of God, the sovereign and distant ruler. Such a focus of interest, however, has perhaps overlooked some details regarding the concept of joy as it is presented

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<sup>38</sup>An unsigned article, "The Scope and Plan of the Book of Ecclesiastes," *The Princeton Review* 29 (1857):419-40; its thesis was later adopted by Walter Kaiser, Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*.

<sup>39</sup>R.N. Whybray, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," *JSOT* 23 (1982): 87-98 (88, 92).

in the book. Whybray's study has also fallen short of establishing the concept of joy as a main theme within the structure of Qoheleth's thought, except in a remark that the above conclusion on the seven passages on joy is "borne out" in the rest of the book.

2) Graham Ogden<sup>40</sup> and others<sup>41</sup> In the last of a series of three studies on the concluding pericopes (9:17-10:20; 11:1-6; 11:7-12:8), Graham Ogden concludes,

[In] the final pericope of the book [i.e. 11:7-12:8], this rhetorical device [the prior indication of the twin themes of the pericope] enables us to grasp the fact that the call to enjoyment and concurrent reflection on the inevitable future of humanity in death, is indeed the central theme of the book.<sup>42</sup>

The conclusion is based on his analysis of the relationship between the twin themes of enjoyment and remembrance in 11:7-12:8 and their occurrences in the rest of the book (5:17-19; 9:7-10,15). But this merely points out one of the major themes in Qoheleth's thought rather than presenting the role the theme plays within the thought structure of Qoheleth. Instead of taking the analysis a step further into the relationship between the twin themes of joy and remembrance and the superlative phrase in 1:2 and 12:8, Ogden limits his studies to the rhetorical device of the twin themes in these articles. In fact he has some difficulty in establishing the relationship between the themes themselves, that is to say, how the theme of "remembrance" relates to the "call to enjoy life." Such a recognition of the twin themes as a major rhetorical device in Qoheleth is nothing more than what is argued in J.A. Loader's thesis regarding the polar pattern of Qoheleth's thought. The

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<sup>40</sup>G.S. Ogden, "Qoheleth xi 7-xii 8: Qoheleth's summons to enjoyment and reflexion," *VT* 34 (1984):27-38; *idem*, *Qoheleth*, pp. 12-15.

<sup>41</sup>Walter Kaiser, Jr., *op. cit.*; cf. N. Lohfink, *op. cit.*; R.K. Johnston, *op. cit.*

<sup>42</sup>G.S. Ogden, "Qoheleth xi 7-xii 8," p. 38.

recognition of a polar pair or binary opposition, such as the wise and the fool, is nothing new in the study of wisdom literature; it is more significant and difficult, however, to recognize the relationship of such a contrasting pair within the structure of Qoheleth's thought.

In his recent commentary, Ogden identifies Qoheleth's thesis as "life under God must be taken and enjoyed in all its mystery" and sees this thought as the positive "advice on how to live in a society plagued by so many enigmas (*hebel*)."<sup>43</sup> He argues that the response to the programatic question about *וְיִרְאֶה* and its negative answer of *לֵבְבֵךְ* is central to Qoheleth's thought, that is, the call to enjoy life.

#### *b. Qoheleth's Concept of Joy*<sup>44</sup>

Now let us turn to consider the passages on enjoyment in Qoheleth. The concept of joy in Qoheleth, as will be argued, does not contradict the concept of *לֵבְבֵךְ*, rather, they support one another, presenting themselves as the two concepts within the structure of Qoheleth's thought. The following analysis will attempt to show that the concept of joy is fundamental within his structure of thought, and that, joy and *לֵבְבֵךְ* exist in parallel, complementing each other.

Qoheleth's concept of joy consists of four interrelated yet different elements: (1) the source of joy; (2) the absence of joy; (3) the encouragement to enjoy; 4) the caution to one who enjoys. In each of the passages on joy, one or more of the four element(s) is present.

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<sup>43</sup>Graham Ogden, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>44</sup>Cf. 2: 1, 2, 10, 26; 3: 12, 22; 4: 16; 5: 18(19), 19(20); 7: 4; 8: 15; 9: 7; 10: 19; 11: 8, 9.

(1) *The source of joy.* Where does joy come from? Clearly, for Qoheleth joy comes primarily from God as a gift to human beings; God is the primary source of human joy (5:18). This concept can be seen in almost all the passages on joy (except 2:10 and 3:22) which either directly end with or imply the idea that enjoyment in life is a gift (יְהוָה) of God or God gives (יְהוָה) joy to humankind (2:24b, 25; 3:13b; 5:17b, 18, 19; 8:15; 9:7, 9).

But what and how does God give? God gives joy by means of granting "wealth, possessions, honour" (6:2) as the fruits of activity together with the ability to enjoy them. However, there are situations where God grants no ability to enjoy the fruits of one's labour even after giving the fruits themselves (6:2). When such a situation occurs, not only is the situation considered as absurd (לֵבָבִי), but the person involved is seen as deprived of joy and is no better than the "still born" (6:3). As the divine giver, God has every right to exercise his sovereign will whereby human beings are regarded as passive receivers. This is especially seen in 7:13, 14 where human beings are to accept the perils of life, "time and chance happen to them all" (9:11).

The concept that God is the giver is further accentuated through Qoheleth's anthropology in which human beings are finite, thus "cannot find out // cannot know what God has done" (3:11; 7:14, 24, 27-29; 8:17; // 8:9; 9:1, 10, 12; 10:14, 15; 11:2, 5, 6). Human beings depend solely on God as the primary source of joy. Since God has the power to give and not to give (6:2) according to his own divine will - and human beings have no say in this - human beings become the passive receivers of joy.

But does joy come solely from God the active giver to human beings the passive receivers? Are there any other means of obtaining or generating joy? To answer these questions in the light

of Qoheleth's concept of joy, one needs to know what it means to say that enjoyment in life is the gift of God or that God is the primary source of joy in life.

To say that enjoyment comes from God as a gift to human beings is to recognize the fact that God is the primary source of joy. But it is not the same as saying one must seek approval from God before one can obtain joy in life. In 9:7 Qoheleth argues that when someone enjoys their portion, the fact that they are enjoying is already (גַּלְגַּל) a proof that God has approved and granted the gift to enjoy life. One's portion (קֶלֶקֶל) is either the immediate result (i.e. the joy in activity) or the consequent result (i.e. wealth, honour) generated from activity. This verse, however, presents some ambiguity in the relation between the giver and the receiver. In enjoying life, individuals experience God's approval for their actions. But what about when one does not experience joy in life? Does it imply God has not granted joy to the individual? It is a possibility (2:26; 6:2), but it could also be caused by the fact that one is not interested in having joy (4:8; cf. 6:3,6a). The presence of joy in one's life means that God has given joy, but it is not always true the other way round. When there is no joy in life, it is not always because God has not given joy for there is the possibility that the absence of joy is self-inflicted. The absence of joy in Qoheleth's thought will be discussed after considering an earlier question: are human beings passive receivers of joy, given that God is the primary source of joy in life? The answer lies in two exceptional verses (2:10; 3:22).

The two verses are exceptional because they mention joy as the legitimate possession of one whose portion is generated by activity, while making no mention of God as the giver. In 2:10, "for my heart found pleasure in all my activity, and this was my portion

(קִלְקִל) for all my works"; and 3:22, "there is nothing better than that a man should enjoy his activity, for that is his portion (קִלְקִל)", joy is said to be a direct product of one's activity as one's lot or portion (קִלְקִל). Although portion generated from activity generally refers to the result of one's labour such as wealth, possessions and honour, it is here referring to the by-product of human activities, namely, joy, regardless of what the end products may be.

Moreover, more than half the passages on joy are related to activity or labour (2:10,24a; 3:13a, 22a; 5:17,18; 8:15; 9:9). In 8:15, mirth is said to be joined with (וַיִּשְׂמַח < הִלָּחַ, "be joined to, or attend") the labourer in his/her activity. When one works or involves in activity, joy is being experienced. That puts the labourer in the active role of generating joy. There is little or no direct 'gives-receives' relation with God, except indirectly when one sees that even the ability to labour comes from God (5:18). This is the joy of activity. Work or activity itself generates joy regardless of what the effects or fruits of the activity may be. To work is to enjoy; to be involved in activity is to enjoy life. The immediate source of joy is activity. Joy derives, in the first instance, from human activity and not God, unless, of course, one wants to push it further to the first cause of all things (as implied in 5:18).

Thus, for Qoheleth, though God may be considered as the primary source or more precisely the first cause of joy, human beings are not always seen as the passive receivers of joy. Human activities are the more immediate source of joy as joy is generated from works and daily activities. It is the joy of working or activity.

This idea gains further support from 10:19 when Qoheleth considers "bread, wine and silver" as the immediate source of human joy

and not God. Thus, in Qoheleth's thought, the concept that joy comes from God as a gift does not eliminate any immediate source of joy in life, such as activity, wealth or food. It only asserts that God is the first cause, the primary source of joy and is actively involved in the giving and withholding of joy in one's life (6:2). However, if God is the primary source of joy and human activity or wealth the immediate source of joy, then why is joy not always present in life? There are times when joy is absent even when human activities have occurred (4:8; 6:2; cf. 2:26). This leads us to consider the absence of joy in Qoheleth's thought.

(2) *The absence of joy.* There are several reasons in Qoheleth's thought for joy to be absent - whether such absence is genuine or not - especially in a life that is filled with activities.

(a) In 2:26, the punishment of God on the "sinner" is seen as a reason for the absence of joy. The opportunity for the "sinner" to enjoy what he/she has gathered and collected is being taken away by God from him/her. But since one may have already engaged in the activities of "gathering and collecting", it is possible that one has already experienced joy in the activities themselves. Thus, it may not be appropriate to consider this situation as a true or genuine absence of joy, except in a moral or religious sense.

(b) The situation mentioned in 6:2ff. seems to imply a genuine case in which no joy is found in a long life. The immediate reason is not given, except to point out that God is the primary cause, "God does not enable him (וְלֹא-יִשְׁלֹטֵינִי) to enjoy". But since "wealth, possessions and honour" are granted by God to the individual, it may be assumed that labouring is involved in reaping these benefits, and thus, joy in the material sense might have already been experienced in the course of human activities. But since the text explicitly maintains that this person experience no joy in

life, joy, then, is considered genuinely absent from life. Thus, it is possible that even engaged in activity, one does not necessarily have to experience joy. One has to choose to have joy in one's activity.

(c) In 4:8, a situation is described in which the labourer is too busy to experience joy in life or toil. The only reason given for the absence of joy is the rhetorical question, which the labourer never asks, "for whom am I labouring and depriving myself of pleasure?" The absence of joy from the life of such an individual may be blamed on the lack of interest in living and experiencing joy. Neither God nor the 'portion in activity' is to be responsible for the lack of enjoyment in such a life. This allows for another possibility besides (b), in Qoheleth's thought, for joy to be genuinely absent from life if one is not interested in enjoying life at all. In the case of (a) joy is said to be absented only in a moral or possibly spiritual sense.

In any respect, the absence of joy is unwanted and is regarded by Qoheleth as the most grievous thing ("an evil disease" אֵימָר עַל הַיָּמִיּוֹת [6:2]) that could happen, and something that should be avoided at all costs. This leads Qoheleth to emphasize that it is imperative to choose to enjoy life.

(3) *The urge to rejoice.* There are two underlying reasons, based on the above points (particularly [1] and [2]), that prompt Qoheleth to emphasize the urgency to enjoy life. First, the reality that joy could be absent from one's life (2:26; 4:8; 6:2ff.) which makes such a life undesirable, "an evil disease" and "no better than the still born". Second, to enjoy life is to do the will of God (9:7).

But there is a third reason in Qoheleth's thought why it is imperative to enjoy life. It is found in the connection between joy and remembrance (5:18,19; 11:8ff.; cf.9:10).



<sup>17</sup>Behold, what I have seen: it is good and beautiful to eat and to drink and to see good in all the labour that one labours under the sun the few days of one's life which God has given one, for this is one's portion.<sup>18</sup> Also every person to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept one's portion and to enjoy in one's labour - this is the gift of God.<sup>19</sup> For one will not much remember the days of one's life because God keeps one occupied with joy in one's heart.

Qoheleth states in 5:17-18 that it is appropriate for one to find enjoyment in one's activity within all the days of one's life because that is one's portion and is a gift of God. This is followed with two ׀ clauses in 5:19.<sup>45</sup> The first ׀ clause consists the Qal imperfect ׀׀׀׀ (he shall remember) and the second ׀ clause contains the Hiphil participle ׀׀׀׀ (cause to occupied, < ׀׀׀׀ 'to occupy', cf. 1:13; 3:10).<sup>46</sup> There is little doubt that the reason one shall not remember much the days of one's life (5:19a) is because one's life is filled with joy which comes from God as one's portion and as a gift (5:17-18) and that God "keeps one occupied" with joy (5:19b). The ׀ particle in 5:19b is generally translated as "because" or "for" (LXX, Vulgate, Luther, RSV, NIV, Barton, Crenshaw).

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<sup>45</sup>Gordis, *Koheleth: The Man and His World*, pp. 169-70, splits 5:19 into two clauses 19a and 19b, with the first clause (5:19a) follows 5:17 and the second clause (19b) follows 5:18. His translation of 5:17-19 is as follows:

<sup>17</sup>Here is what I have discovered: it is meet and proper for a man to eat, drink, and enjoy himself in return for the toil he undergoes under the sun in the scant years God has given him, for that is man's portion,<sup>(18a)</sup> and not long will he remember the days of his life.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, every man to whom God has given wealth and possessions and granted the power to enjoy them, taking his share and rejoicing in his labour, that is the gift of God,<sup>(19b)</sup> for it is God who provides him with the joy in his heart.

<sup>46</sup>Although most interpreters agree that ׀׀׀ means "to occupy" (Barton), the root can also mean "to answer" (Gordis) or "to afflict", though the third meaning - to afflict - is a little odd in this context. Crenshaw thinks all three are possible.

This interpretation has support from Barton who wrote, "One will not brood over life's brevity, if it is full of proper enjoyment."<sup>47</sup> But Gordis disagrees and argues that "joy deadens man's sensibility to the brevity of life is, to be sure, a perfectly sound idea, but it does not occur elsewhere in the book. Koheleth regards joy not as a narcotic but as the fulfillment of the will of God."<sup>48</sup> To argue against Gordis, it is not necessarily to think of joy as a "narcotic" because when one is happy, it could be a natural instinct or response not to remember, perhaps the absurd reality in life, especially when one's life is filled with joy. Furthermore, not remembering things of the past is not a foreign idea in Qoheleth's thought (1:11; 2:16; 9:15). If enjoying life is doing the will of God, the by-product of being joyful - not remembering "the days of one's life" - could also be seen as fulfilling the will of God.

What are "the days (יָמָיו יְדֵי) of his life" that one will not remember when one is occupied with joy? There are four possibilities: (1) literally all the days, every day that one lives (cf. 5:17); (2) all the joyful days; (3) all the evil days, the absurdity in life (cf. 9:9); and (4) the days of death or after-life (11:8; 12:1). Options (1) would suggest that the reason one will not remember any days of his life is because one's life is filled with joy. This sounds like hedonism and joy functions like a hallucinogenic drug. Option (2) would suggest the meaning that because one is joyful, one will not remember the joyful days of one's life. There is no point to this causal effect. Thus, although options (1) and (2) are probable interpretations they do not make much sense in Qoheleth's thought. Option (4) would suggest the meaning that one

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<sup>47</sup>G.A. Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 128.

<sup>48</sup>R. Gordis, *Koheleth: The Man and His World*, p. 255.

does not remember the days of death because one's life is filled with joy. This does not make much sense either in the context of 5:19 and may also be a contradiction of 9:10 because Qoheleth asserts there that all activities cease to exist in Sheol and, therefore, there is nothing there for one not to remember if 5:19 is interpreted in this light. Furthermore, the absurdity in the present life would be a more immediate matter not to be remembered by one than the future days of death. Option (4) also runs a danger of contradicting "the days of darkness" in 11:8 if it is correctly interpreted as the days of death, a point which will be discussed below. If these assumptions are correct, they leave option (3) as the most probable alternative. Thus, 5:19 may be understood as saying that the reason God gives joy is so that when one is joyful, one will not remember the evil days in life. This is fully consistent with Qoheleth's concept of לַחַיִּים that life is filled with absurdities; and therefore the wisest course for one to take is to enjoy life as God's gift and forget about the absurd elements in it.

Now let us turn to 11:8, "For if a man lives many years, let him rejoice (יִשְׂמַח, jussive) in them all; but let him remember (יִזְכֹּר) that the days of darkness will be many," which seems to contradict 5:19. 5:19 and 11:8 are the only places in the book where joy and remembrance exist together as twin themes. In both verses, Qoheleth gives the same advice to enjoy life, except in 5:19 the advice follows with "he will not much remember the days of his life", while 11:8 follows with "remember your days of darkness." The clue to this enigma lies with the interpretation of the phrase "the days of darkness" and its relation with 9:10. If "the days of darkness" refers to the days of death (cf. 12:1), then Qoheleth is saying in 11:8 that the reason one should enjoy life is because the days of

"darkness", death, are inescapable and imminent (cf. 12:1-7) and are enduring. One ought not to forget that this present life is short and all activities cease at Sheol (9:10). This interpretation gains support from 9:10 that since all activities cease in Sheol one should treasure and find enjoyment within the finite days of the present life. However, if "the days of darkness" in 11:8 refers to the evil and absurd elements in life, then not only does it not fit into its context (11:7-12:7), it also runs into the difficulty of contradicting the meaning of "the days of his life" in 5:19 as suggested above. Thus, the "days of his life" in 5:19 is best interpreted as the evil days or absurd elements in life.

To sum up the above, one may say that in Qoheleth's thought, the reasons that one should enjoy life are as follows: (1) by enjoying life, one is doing the will of God (9:7); (2) the absence of joy in life makes life not worth living (6:2ff.); (3) life is short and death imminent, and all activities will cease in Sheol (9:10; 11:8ff.); (4) it is the intention of God that by granting joy, one should not remember the evil days and the absurdity in life (5:19). Given all these reasons that one ought to enjoy life, Qoheleth does not in any sense promote hedonism. A final word of caution is added to his concept of joy, balancing out the emphasis on the importance of enjoying life.

(4) *The caution to the one who enjoys.* Qoheleth subtly introduces a word of caution in the concluding passage on joy to qualify his encouragement and command to enjoy life in 11:9. The caution comes at the appropriate place and time so as not to cause confusion over the importance of enjoying life as it has been expressed earlier. It comes in a statement issued right after the command to rejoice, "but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment." This judgment motif is in accord with the epilogue in 12:14

as well as in line with the fundamental concept that God is a sovereign deity in Qoheleth's thought. Though judgment has never been a fully developed theme in Qoheleth's thought, it comes in the last (11:7-12:1) and the first (2:24-26) joy passages and also insinuated indirectly in 3:14b, relating 'fearing God' with enjoyment. In 2:26, the first of the passages on joy, the absence of joy is seen as a judgment of God on the "sinner". It is essential and appropriate for Qoheleth, in his last passage on joy (11:7-12:1), to remind his readers of the warning issued in the very first joy-passage.

However, although in 2:26, the judgment of God on the "sinner" is to deprive the "sinner" of enjoying the fruits that he/she has gathered and collected, it is not certain what God's judgment will be in 11:9. It is clear that God will judge one for all "these things", such as one's "walk in the ways of one's heart and the sight of one's eyes." How and why God judge one for one's "ways" and "sights" is not clear at this point. But in the light of 2:26, it is probable that the judgment to be executed, if found guilty, will be depriving one from enjoying life, if God does look into one's "ways" and "sights" (3:17) soon enough (8:11).<sup>49</sup>

*Summary.* With the warning of a possible judgment at the last passage on joy (11:7-12:1) echoing the first one (2:24-26), Qoheleth concludes his thought on the enjoyment of life. Nowhere is his concept of joy subordinated to a greater theme, such as the concept

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<sup>49</sup>G. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, p. 196, has an interesting suggestion with insight from the nature of *yitrôn*, enduring profit or profit beyond this present life. He writes that "if Qoheleth is exploring the possibility of a *yitrôn* extending beyond the limits of this present existence, then such a future 'reward' stands or falls upon our present response to God's major gifts of life and work, and on his justice." But life after death is not Qoheleth's interest and the judgment on the "sinner" in 2:26 present a judgment in this life.

of הֶבֶל . In Qoheleth's thought, the ultimate source of joy is God, but it is often related more closely with the immediate source of joy, such as wealth and the portion (קֶלֶךְ) in activity. Although the absence of joy may be seen as an act of punishment from God on the sinner, lack of interest on the part of the human being in enjoyment can also be responsible for it. However, a long life without joy is regarded by Qoheleth as absurd and not worth living. Thus, the call to enjoy life is crucial to Qoheleth's thought and he sees life, especially an joyful life as a gift of God. The encouragement to enjoy life is so imperative that Qoheleth demands one to remember the duration and absurdity that lies in the after-life, so that one would treasure and find enjoyment in the present life. To distinguish his call to enjoy life from any hedonistic way of life, Qoheleth qualifies his concept of joy with a word of warning that God will judge one's every activities. With this impending judgment of God in mind, one is encouraged not to let the absurdities in life, הֶבֶל הַבְּלִיָּה , disrupt the aim of life - to be enjoyed.

### 3. *The Relationship Between hebel and Joy in Qoheleth's Thought*

So what is the relationship between *hebel* and joy? How are they related to each other as the dual structure of Qoheleth's thought?

Though there is less dispute over the centrality of the theme *hebel*, the centrality of the theme 'joy' has caused some concern. For instance, J.A. Loader<sup>50</sup> argues that there is only one fundamental idea in the book: the declaration of הֶבֶל. The 'call to enjoy

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<sup>50</sup>J.A. Loader, *Ecclesiastes: A Practical Commentary* (trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), p. 14. This is a translation from his Dutch edition, *Prediker: Een praktische bijbelverklaring*, 1984, which is based on his earlier monograph in BZAW 152.

life' is for him subordinate to this fundamental idea of הֵנַּךְ because it always occurs in connection with Qoheleth's conviction regarding the הֵנַּךְ הַכֹּל of everything. The 'call to enjoy life' passages also always refer to the הֵנַּךְ of life and to the fact that God as the giver of joy can terminate it at any time. But Loader's argument for הֵנַּךְ being the only fundamental idea of the book is too severe. The fact that the 'call to enjoy life' passages always occur with הֵנַּךְ passages does not necessarily mean that one is subordinate to the other; it is also possible that they co-exist together and possibly complement one another. In fact, a careful examination of these passages and their usage in Qoheleth suggests that they are not in opposition to each other, neither do they contradict each other.<sup>51</sup> Instead of denying and cancelling each other out, they confirm each other as the primary element in human existence according to Qoheleth.

Different from Loader who thinks הֵנַּךְ is the overarching concept of Qoheleth's thought, Ogden argues that those הֵנַּךְ phrases are points where Qoheleth answers his own programatic question about הֵנַּךְ, thus the theme of הֵנַּךְ is only secondary importance in Qoheleth's thought. Central to Qoheleth's thought is the call to enjoy life as a response to the programatic question and the negative answer. Instead of seeing both the call to enjoyment and the theme of הֵנַּךְ as the two concepts which are fundamental to the structure of Qoheleth's thought, Ogden narrowly thinks that only one of the two: the theme of הֵנַּךְ and the call to enjoyment, forms

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<sup>51</sup>R.N. Whybray in his article "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," *JSOT* 23 (1982):87-98 (92), remarks that "It seems to me that ... Qoheleth, without a doubt, consistently expressed the view that human life is 'a sorry business' (1:13) and that it is 'vanity'. However, he regarded this not as a contradiction of his positive teaching but as actually providing support for it."

the heart of Qoheleth's thought and he chooses the call to enjoyment unnecessarily.

Further support for seeing the two concepts as dual structure of Qoheleth's thought may be drawn from the "hebel-joy" and "joy-hebel" structure. Qoheleth begins with the "hebel-Joy" (1:2-2:26) structure and ends with the "Joy-hebel" structure (11:7-12:8), thus pointing toward a twin thematic significance. Loader, however, mistakes such structure as suggesting the subordination of 'Joy' under 'Vanity' so that the 'Vanity' theme embraces the 'Joy' motif. In fact, I have also observed that the words  $\text{הֵבֶל}$  and  $\text{שִׂמְחָה}$  are distributed in the book in such a way that the frequency of the word  $\text{הֵבֶל}$  decreases as the book progresses while the mood of the word  $\text{שִׂמְחָה}$  is being intensified; that is 26 out of 38 times the word  $\text{הֵבֶל}$  occurs in chs. 1-6 in twenty-two verses and only 12 times in chs. 7-12 in eight verses, while the word  $\text{שִׂמְחָה}$  occurs 10 out of 17 in the first six chapters and 7 out of 17 in the last six chapters where major joy-passages occurred (8:15; 9:7-9; 11:7-12:1). The 'enjoy life' passages become more emphatic as the seven passages on joy develop; this is supported by R.N. Whybray who observed that the mood changes to the imperative in 9:7-9a and 11:7-12:1a.<sup>52</sup>

As the study of the concept of joy has shown, almost all the seventeen appearances of the word  $\text{שִׂמְחָה}$  'joy' (2:1,2,10 (2x),26; 3:12,22; 4:16; 5:18,19; 7:4; 8:15(2x); 9:7; 10:19; 11:8,9) occur in a context where  $\text{הֵבֶל}$  is also found. But none of these contexts suggests the subordination of one to the other. For instance, both  $\text{הֵבֶל}$  and joy occur twice in the context of Qoh.11:7-10 and they do not contradict but complement one another as co-existing elements in human life. Qoheleth affirms the existence of both joy and  $\text{הֵבֶל}$

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<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 87f.



as parallel elements in reality. He encourages one "to rejoice" because that is one's 'portion' (11:9,10; cf.2:10; ,3:22) and at the same time, he also affirms the "absurdity" (הֵבֵל) in daily human experience, though he urges one not to let this absurdity disrupt the aim of life - to be enjoyed.

Throughout the book, joy and *hebel* stand side by side as dual concepts in Qoheleth's thought and he never tries to set one against the other. In 11:7-10, one is commanded to enjoy this present life because death is certain and imminent and what comes after death is הֵבֵל (11:8b). It is clear in Qoheleth's thought that, life without enjoyment is an example of absurdity (הֵבֵל) (4:8; 6:2-6; cf. 11:7-10). The absence of joy in life has various causes and only in a specific situation, where one is not interested in enjoying or experiencing joy, can joy be considered genuinely absent in one's life, and such life is deemed not worth living. It is also clear from the analysis of Qoheleth's concept of joy that the source of joy is anything but הֵבֵל; it never generates joy. Thus, הֵבֵל is either a description of, or a judgment issued to, a situation or event, while joy is a prescription to one whose life is presented with the reality of הֵבֵל. With the existence of various הֵבֵלִים in life, such as the ineffectual gathering of wealth and impermanent attempting to be wise, Qoheleth has clearly reflected life's reality. Through his concept of joy, Qoheleth has responded to the reality of absurdity with a new faith in life. The absence of either of the two, *hebel* or joy, renders Qoheleth's thought incomplete. The two concepts formed the basic structure of Qoheleth's thought. All the other secondary themes may be discussed within this structure of thought. As will be studied later, the discussion of various secondary themes in Qoheleth's thought is related subordinately to the two concepts, and they, as secondary

themes, never stand as an independent idea, unrelated to the structure of Qoheleth's thought.

#### 4. Conclusion

The concept of joy and the concept of *hebel* form the fundamental structure of Qoheleth's thought. Qoheleth's concept of  $\eta\eta\eta$  reflects his understanding of the reality in which he lives. With this realization, Qoheleth does not opt for a pessimistic view of life; instead, he makes it crystal clear that the wisest course to take is to enjoy life. But since God is the first cause and the primary source of joy in life, one should 'fear God', knowing that God judges (2:26; 11:9b) and remember that God is still the giver ( $\eta\eta$ ) of joy, and borrowing Qoheleth's words, who can "dispute with one stronger than he?" (6:10).

#### D. THE VARIOUS SECONDARY THEMES AND THEIR RELATIONS TO THE DUAL STRUCTURE OF QOHELETH'S THOUGHT

There are various important themes that are secondary to the two primary concepts in Qoheleth's thought. They are secondary because they are themes that Qoheleth explores in the course of arguing his views on *hebel* and joy. Structurally, these secondary themes are subordinate to the two concepts within the structure of Qoheleth's thought. What follows is a study of the relationship between the two primary concepts and the various secondary themes within the structure of Qoheleth's thought.

1. יְהָרֵן<sup>53</sup> and חֵלֶק<sup>54</sup>

The concept of יְהָרֵן 'profit' has long been a topic of scholarly investigation.<sup>55</sup> However, חֵלֶק 'portion' is left mostly unnoticed.<sup>56</sup> The two terms have a close relationship with one another as well as with הֵבֵל and joy. While Qoheleth categorically denies the possibility of the existence of any יְהָרֵן, enduring profit, in all human activity, he repeatedly affirms that there exists a חֵלֶק in human activity. While there is no יְהָרֵן, thus making all activity הֵבֵל, Qoheleth nevertheless asserts that within such activity, there is a חֵלֶק for one to enjoy. Activity and חֵלֶק seem to co-exist together (2:10; 3:22).

The questions concerning the origin and nature of this חֵלֶק are of equal importance. It has generally been considered that the 'portion' comes from God, and is given to those whom he favours. The key passages are 5:17 and 18. Though this cannot be denied, it must be argued that there is a more immediate origin; it derives from activity itself (2:10; 3:22). That is the חֵלֶק of joy for the one who labours: the joy of activity. But חֵלֶק may be terminated as activity comes to a pause. In Qoheleth's thought, the phrase "one's portion (חֵלֶק)" in activity can have two levels of meanings: (a) the portion that derives from activity itself (3:22; cf. 2:10; 9:6), i.e. the joy of activity; and (b) the portion that is the consequence of the activity (2:21; 5:17,18; 9:6,9; 11:2), i.e. wealth or possession. These two levels of meanings are supported by the fact that the verb [תָּן] 'to give' is always associated with the meaning

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<sup>53</sup>Cf. 1:3; 2:11,13; 3:9; 5:8 (Ev. 9),15 (Ev. 16); 7:12; 10:10,11.

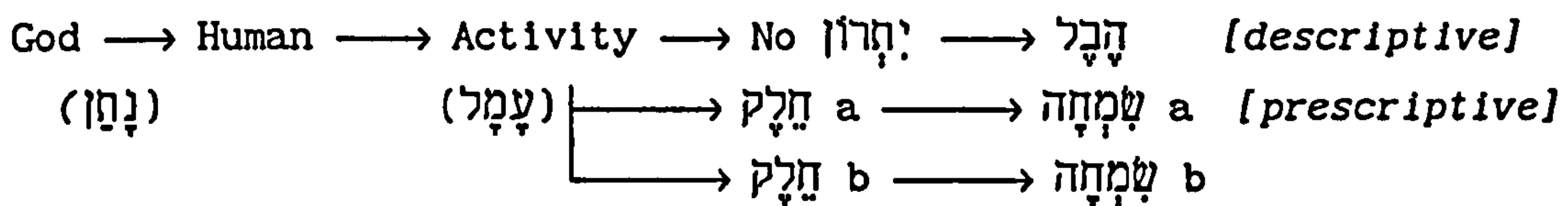
<sup>54</sup>Cf. 2:10,21; 3:22; 5:17 (Ev. 18),18 (Ev. 19); 9:6,9; 11:2.

<sup>55</sup>James Williams, *op. cit.*; W.E. Staples, "'Profit' in Ecclesiastes," *JNES* 4 (1945):87-96.

<sup>56</sup>D.J. Kamhi, "The Root *HLQ* in the Bible," *VT* 23 (1973):235-39.

of level (b), with either God or the human being as the giver or taker of the portion; on the other hand, the portion, or joy, that derives from activity itself, as in level (a), cannot be given or taken away from the labourer, unless perhaps one has in view only the primary cause of activity or joy, or takes the position that the labourer does not enjoy his/her activity at all.

The relationship between יְהָרֹן and הֶבֶל, חֵלֶק and שְׂמֵחָה; profit and absurd, portion and joy, may be seen as follow:



Although labour or any activity (gathering wealth and wisdom) that leads to no profit is absurd, activity itself may generate joy as one's portion. Action or investment of effort that does not yield the expected effect or 'profit' (יְהָרֹן) renders the event or situation 'absurd' (הֶבֶל). However, within the absurdity, one can almost always find a 'portion' (חֵלֶק) in the activity itself, if not beyond, and 'joy' is one of the most fundamental elements in the חֵלֶק and is the most sought after 'portion' of all. To enjoy (שְׂמֵחָה) one's portion (חֵלֶק) in activity is doing the will of God.

Closely related to חֵלֶק and שְׂמֵחָה as well as הֶבֶל and יְהָרֹן is the term, עָמַל, for "toil, activity, work, or labour." The root עמל occurs 35 times in the book, 22 times as the substantive. According to the analysis of Fabrizio Foresti, the term means either 'activity, toil, or work' in 1:3; 2:10,11; 3:9; 4:4,8,9; 5:15; 8:15,17; 9:9; 10:15 or 'the fruit of work, income, profit' in 2:18-24a; 3:13; 4:6; 5:14,17,18; 6:7.<sup>57</sup> He concludes that "the two meanings

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<sup>57</sup>Cf. Fabrizio Foresti, *op. cit.*, analyses the range of possible semitic roots before studying the distribution of the root in the Hebrew Bible and finally its occurrences in Qoheleth.

are strictly related to each other: the first has given origin to the second, according to a process largely attested in Semitic linguistics." This finding supports the above analysis on the concept of *קָלָה* and joy; that joy can be generated either from *עֲמָל* 'activity' or 'work' itself as a *קָלָה* 'portion' to the labourer, or from *עֲמָל* "the fruits of work or income" as a legitimate *קָלָה* 'portion' to the labourer.<sup>58</sup>

## 2. Wealth (*בָּכָה*, *עֲשָׂר*, *כֶּסֶף*)

Closely related to the themes of *יְהוָה* and *קָלָה* is the theme of wealth. Qoheleth employs terms like, *עֲשָׂר*, 'riches', *סִגְלָה* 'possession', *בָּהָר* 'gold', and *כֶּסֶף* 'silver'. 'Wisdom', *חָכְמָה*, also may be considered as analogous to wealth in 7:12. In Qoheleth's thought wealth (2:7,8,18ff.; 4:8; 5:9-6:9) is often set in a broader context where *יְהוָה* and/or joy is discussed. The ineffectual gathering, collecting or transferring of wealth may lead to absurdity. But Qoheleth has never in any sense discounted the gathering of wealth from his own course of action because wealth could also lead to enjoyment. Qoheleth has never in any sense seen wealth as evil. In fact he even thinks it is absurd if one labours and does not accumulate wealth or enjoy wealth (6:2). He sees wealth as good and encourages one to enjoy all that has been earned with gratitude (9:7). Wealth is seen negatively only when it is related to the search for *יְהוָה*; the gathering or enjoyment of wealth may not lead to any *יְהוָה*, enduring profit, and that is absurd.

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<sup>58</sup>Hinckley G. Mitchell, "'Work' in Ecclesiastes," *JBL* 32 (1913): 123-38 (126) has an interesting observation of Qoheleth's use of the words for 'work': *עֲמָל* and *עֲשָׂה*. Mitchell observes that "*עֲשָׂה* is constantly, but *עֲמָל* never, used of divine activity or the outcome of its application, though both have been used of human activity."

### 3. 'Wisdom' חֵכְמָה

Although wisdom may be seen as analogous to wealth, "For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money; and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it" (RSV),<sup>59</sup> it may be discussed here as a distinctive quality of life. The theme of wisdom (1:12-2:26; 4:13-16; 7:5-7; 7:11-8:1; 8:16,17; 9:11-10:11) is discussed mostly in relation to joy and the absurd. It is absurd when the possession of wisdom does not lead to any remembrance and when death nullifies any distinction between the wise and the fool. Though in the first person narrative in 2:1-10, Qoheleth seems to deny the value of wisdom, but in fact he is only claiming the *no* חֵכְמָה of all human activities including the accumulation of wisdom. He in fact praises wisdom in the following verse, 2:13 (cf. 7:19; 9:18). Since Qoheleth praises wisdom as well as quoting traditional wisdom sayings with approval or relative approval, and if Whybray's analysis of Qoheleth's use of quotation is right, then it is difficult to argue that Qoheleth sets out in his thought to refute the traditional sages.

Qoheleth's concept of wisdom, when related to 'knowledge' and 'skill' (cf. 2:21) as synonyms, is threefold: (1) it is associated with the natural or the physical world; (2) it is associated with human beings, as social beings in the sociological world; (3) it is associated with God, the spiritual realm. As an ancient sage, Qoheleth is more interested in the sociological world where he discusses themes such as social justice, political administration and relationship with neighbours. When discussing the 'spiritual' realm, Qoheleth loves to use phrases such as 'cannot find', 'cannot

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<sup>59</sup>This reading is supported by *BH*, Barton, Levy, Rashi and Gordis. The *NIV* has "Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter" (7:12a); cf. C.F. Whitley, p. 65.

know' and 'who knows?' to classify the area of his ignorance and impotence. With only passing reference does Qoheleth mention the physical or natural world, of which the modern day scientific wisdom does a better job.

It is through his wisdom about the sociological world that Qoheleth formulates the concept of *לֵבָל*, and constructs the concept of joy, inserting in between, his ignorance of the divine world.

#### 4. Death *מָוֶת*

Death is another theme in Qoheleth's thought that relates closely to the concepts of joy and *לֵבָל*. Death is the element that forces Qoheleth to invalidate any distinction between human and beast, the wise and the fool, because one fate awaits all, death. The invalidation of their distinctions by death leads Qoheleth to declare the *לֵבָל* statement in 2:15 and 3:19. The non-*יָרֵךְ* of the wise over the fool (2:15; 6:8) also leads to another declaration of absurdity. But on the other hand, the certainty and imminence of death and the absurdity that lies beyond death prompts Qoheleth to encourage his readers to enjoy their life while they can (11:7-12:1; 9:7-10). The inescapability and imminence of death as the theme of the concluding pericope (12:1-7) is to accentuate the urgency and importance to enjoy life (11:8). In Qoheleth's thought, death is not regarded as the worst thing that can happen in one's life because a long and labourous life that finds no place for joy is worse than being born dead. The reality of death not only leads to the existence of some absurd elements in life, but also encourages one to find enjoyment in this present life.

## 5. Remembrance זְכוֹרָה

This is a most neglected theme in Qoheleth studies. It appears as a constant thought of Qoheleth (1:11; 2:16; 5:19; 9:15; 11:8b; 12:1a). The theme occurs together with the theme of joy in 5:19 and 11:8b. In 1:11 and 2:16, it occurs with the זְכוֹרָה theme. One suspects that remembrance is also closely related to the concept of enduring profit, זְכוּלָה (1:11; 2:16), as remembrance is something transcending the boundary of time.<sup>60</sup> The absence of remembrance leads Qoheleth to issue the זְכוֹרָה judgment (2:16; cf. 9:15). But beyond that, remembrance, as in awareness, of the days of death, 'the days of darkness', becomes a cause for one to see the enjoyment of life as an imperative task (11:8-12:1a). More subtly in Qoheleth's thought, is that, not being able to remember the elements of absurdity in life is seen as an intended effect of enjoying life which comes as one's portion from God as a gift (5:19).

## 6. God אֱלֹהִים

The word אֱלֹהִים occurs forty times in the book and is almost 'omnipresent' in the thought of Qoheleth, but Qoheleth never claims he knows much about God. He constantly reminds his readers that human wisdom is impotent when it comes to the knowledge of God. For Qoheleth, God is the primary source of joy. But in his concept of זְכוֹרָה, he seldom thinks that God creates the absurd reality. It is the daily activities which surround human beings that Qoheleth finds full of absurdity. He makes no attempt to regard God as the source of absurdity, though he sees God as the primary source of

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<sup>60</sup>One is reminded of Albert Camus in *The Outsider*, in response to the question how he pictured his life after the grave, answers that "A life in which I can remember this life on earth. That's all I want of it."



joy. Though he never emphasizes the judgmental acts of God in life, he always affirms that acts of justice by God will be carried out at the right time (2:26; 3:17; 7:17; 8:10-13; 11:8b). A delay in the carrying out of justice prompts Qoheleth to consider certain situations where act and consequence has little relation as absurd. Although he firmly asserts that God's way and mind is beyond human reach (3:10-14), he is unwilling to see God as the source of absurdity in reality, rather, he prefers to see God as the primary source of joy.

This idea of God as the primary source of joy leads Qoheleth to include one of the common elements in the wisdom world in his concept of God, namely, the idea of 'fearing God'. This idea occurs five times in the book (3:14; 5:6 [Ev. 7]; 7:18; 8:12,13; 12:13). The first (3:14) and the fourth (8:12,13) occurrences are related to the concept of joy, while the others are words of caution (5:6 [Ev. 7]; 7:18; 12:13). In 3:14, after describing the superiority of God over human beings, Qoheleth introduces 'God fearing' as a cautious way of life (3:14) intended by God. This is supported not only by 7:18 where Qoheleth firmly believes that the God-fearer will come out well in the face of the 'left' or 'right' decision, but it also receives a strong echo in 12:13 as a final word of caution at the closing of the book.

*Summary.* The various secondary themes in Qoheleth's thought as discussed above are closely related to the dual structure of Qoheleth's thought. Together with the concepts of *hebel* and joy, they form the total structure of Qoheleth's thought. Without the arguments of these secondary themes, Qoheleth is not able to present his understanding of reality in full and thus, not able to formulate a total structure of his thought. When these secondary

themes are joined to the two primary concepts, Qoheleth's thought which is both descriptive and prescriptive forms a unity and coherent whole.

#### E. CONCLUSION

This chapter has been devoted to the study of the structure of Qoheleth's theological thought. It differs from other proposals in its understanding of the dual structure of Qoheleth's thought, the two concepts -  $\text{לֵבָלֵב}$  and joy - as the primary structure to which all the other secondary themes lend their support to form a coherent structure for the theological thought of Qoheleth. The prescription from Qoheleth to all humankind who live in a world that is filled with absurdity is "to eat and to drink and to be merry." This call to enjoy life is in itself a theological statement of faith, as is recently recognized by Graham Ogden. While others either saw the concept of  $\text{לֵבָלֵב}$  as the only primary theme of the book or were unwilling to organize and to relate the various themes in Qoheleth's thought into some coherent structure, this chapter has argued that a coherent structure exists in Qoheleth's theological thought; theological in the sense that not only the presence of God is presupposed in his world view and discussion of the way of life, but is built into the structure of his thought. His thought is theological in the sense that he explains to his readers in a coherent manner the things he believes, the reality he understands and the life that he loves to enjoy. Based on this understanding of the structure of Qoheleth's theological thought, I will attempt a theological reading of the book in Chapter III.

- CHAPTER III

A THEOLOGICAL READING OF QOHELETH: QOHELETH'S THOUGHT IN ITS  
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## CHAPTER THREE

### A THEOLOGICAL READING OF QOHELETH:

#### Qoheleth's Theological Thought in Its Sequential Unfolding

Following the analysis of the structure of Qoheleth's theological thought in Chapter Two, this chapter presents a theological reading of Qoheleth, as his thought unfolds through the chapters of the book. This reading is based on the final form of the MT as we have it in the Hebrew Bible and the thought structure as argued in the previous chapter.

#### A. INTRODUCTION

The book of Qoheleth consists of A) Title (1:1)<sup>1</sup>; B) Main Body (1:2-12:8); C) Epilogue (12:9-14).<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this chapter, the main body (1:2-12:8) will be the focus of the reading.

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<sup>1</sup>The book begins with a self declaration, "The words of Qoheleth, the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (cf. 1:2a,12,16; 2:7,9,12; 7:27; 12:9,10). Speculation on the historical identity of the author of the book or 'Qoheleth' does not help in understanding Qoheleth's thought as presented in the book. Neither does identifying the form of the book as being similar to the didactic autobiographies of the Akkadian texts, as did Tremper Longman III's article "Comparative Methods in Old Testament Studies: Ecclesiastes Reconsidered," *TSFB* Mar.-Apr. (1984):5-9 (7), help to understand Qoheleth's thought in its own terms. The use of title and first person speech may imply that the author's intention was to present an historical reality to the reader rather than a fictitious story. The didactic autobiographical form, in a way, reminds one of the 'teaching' nature of the wisdom book.

<sup>2</sup>Gerald Sheppard's attempt to present "The Epilogue to Qoheleth as Theological Commentary," *CBQ* 39 (1977):182-89, is less successful in presenting a "theological commentary" on Qoheleth than a "theological commentary" for biblical wisdom and the canonical non-wisdom traditions.

Framed by two statements on הַבָּל, 1:2-12:8 forms the main body of the book. It contains Qoheleth's theological thought in which he not only presents the two concepts of הַבָּל and joy (i.e. שְׂמֵחָה and the expression 'to eat and to drink', אָכַל and שָׁתָה), but also elaborates them through the argument of various themes such as יָרָוץ (profit), חֵלֶק (portion), עֲמָל (activity, fruits of labour), עֲשָׂר (riches), כֶּסֶף (silver), זָהָב (gold) for 'wealth,' חָכְמָה (wisdom), שְׂמֵחָה (mirth), זְכוֹר (remembrance) and אֱלֹהִים (God).

### 1. The הַבָּל הַבָּל Statements (1:2; 12:8)

הַבָּל הַבָּל "Absurdity of absurdity, utterly absurd" is the most intriguing observation of Qoheleth's wisdom on daily human activities in which actions often do not yield reasonably expected results, or else acts and consequences correlate in the most unexpected manner. This is what Qoheleth means by הַבָּל, 'absurd'!<sup>3</sup>

The numerous occurrences of the root הַבָּל in the book and the two הַבָּל statements in the superlative form found at the beginning and end of the main body, show that הַבָּל is a crucial idea of Qoheleth. The first הַבָּל statement (1:2) is followed by the Prologue (1:3-11) and the second statement (12:8) by the Epilogue (12:9-14). In between these statements on absurdity, Qoheleth unfolds his thought on the absurdity of daily human activities. But that is not all that Qoheleth argued through his observations and experiences, for the existence of various absurdities in life will necessarily demand some advice for humankind whose existence is threatened by the reality of the absurd in everyday life. This demand leads to his

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<sup>3</sup>This understanding of the meaning of הַבָּל is in fundamental agreement with that of Michael Fox in his article "The Meaning of *HEBEL* for Qoheleth," *JBL* 105 (1986):409-27. A similar interpretation of הַבָּל as 'absurd' is found also in Crenshaw's new commentary on *Ecclesiastes* (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1988).

advice: enjoy life and be happy. Thus, לִּהֲנֹת as the primary thought in Qoheleth's investigation is accompanied by the advice to enjoy life. The relationship between these two concepts provides the coherence for Qoheleth's theological thought.

## 2. A Poem on Endurance (1:3-11)

Qoheleth begins his argument for absurdity by exploring the reality of the absurd, focusing on the search for הִתְרוֹן. This is introduced by a thematic rhetorical question in 1:3, "What is the profit (הִתְרוֹן) to a person in all his labour (עֲמָלוֹ) that he toils at (שֵׁי־עֲמָלוֹ) under the sun?" This programmatic rhetorical question receives the negative answer - There is no הִתְרוֹן - at various points in the rest of the book (1:3; 2:11,13; 3:9; 5:8 [Ev. 9], 15 [Ev.16]). The negative answer also forms part of the basis for the לִּהֲנֹת statements, though the nature of הִתְרוֹן referred to in these cases is unclear.

The poem (1:4-11) which follows the rhetorical question helps in part to define the scope and limits of the phrase "under the sun" (1:3) which describes the sphere within which Qoheleth conducts his search for הִתְרוֹן. This in turn helps to clarify the nature of הִתְרוֹן for which he is searching - the enduring profit. The poem also relates to the world of the reader which makes the evidence of his argument practical and relevant to everyday life. The poem characterizes both the natural world (1:4-7) and the world of humankind (1:8-11), focusing on two aspects of their activities: (1) the consistent circularity and regularity of the natural phenomena; and (2) the enduring and ceaseless as well as the non-enduring and non-lasting effects of their activities and non-activity. The first is characterized by the series of participles (שׂוֹאֵף, זוֹרֵחַ, הֹלֵךְ, נֶאֱדָר); while the second is characterized by the term עוֹלָם (1:4b),

אֵין זְכוֹר (‘no remembrance’, 1:11; cf. 2:16, ‘no enduring remembrance’) and זְכוֹר (‘enduring profit’, 1:3) and possibly עֲלֵי (‘endurance?’; thus 1:8a, “All things [the natural phenomena] are enduring”).<sup>4</sup>

The first part of the poem (1:4-7) describes the natural world: earth, sun/fire, wind/air and rivers/water, which form part of the supporting system for human existence. These natural substances run their set courses faithfully, regularly and repetitiously. The point of describing them is not to point out their ‘futility’ (הִבָּטָל never appears in the poem), but rather the opposite, to characterize the nature of their activities and the realm where humankind lives.

The observation of the regularity within the activities of the natural world is then reflected onto the world of humankind, drawing forth three reflections: (1) Humankind marvels at the consistency, and regularity of the natural phenomena (1:8);<sup>5</sup> (2) the cyclical nature of the natural phenomena suggests to humankind that history might be capable of repeating itself; everything repeats itself, thus nothing can be claimed a new discovery (1:9-10); (3) Not only does history repeat itself, but that history is never remembered (1:11); nothing which happens on earth endures, while

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<sup>4</sup>The adjective עֲלֵי is generally translated as ‘weary’ or ‘wearisome’ (cf. Deut. 25:18; 2Sam. 17:2). But the verb עָלָה or עָלָה and the noun עָלָה frequently means ‘activity’ (Gen. 31:42; Job 39:11,16) or ‘result of activity’ (Deut. 28:33; Ps. 78:46; 109:11; 128:2; Neh. 5:13; Hag. 1:11; Isa. 45:14; 55:2; Jer. 3:24; Ezek. 23:29; Job 10:3), cf. BDB p. 388. R.N. Whybray in his forthcoming article “Ecclesiastes 1:5-7 and the Wonders of Nature,” in *JSOT*, suggests the translation, “all things are constantly in activity” (1:8a). Here I take the meaning a step further to mean ‘endurance’ (cf. BDB, p. 388, # 3021, “2. grow or be weary, from toil, exertion, endurance”).

<sup>5</sup>See R.N. Whybray’s forthcoming article in *JSOT*, “Ecclesiastes 1,5-7.”

the earth endures forever (1:4b). A sense of irony is present when 1:9-10 are compared with 1:11. The 'no remembrance' of former things (1:11) leads to the non-enduring effect of history (because history was not remembered), which in turn causes one to claim incorrectly a new discovery (because one does not remember that it has previously occurred), though such 'new discovery' is not 'new' at all (1:10). There is a vicious circle envisaged here. The emphasis is, however, not on the illogicality of claiming a new discovery (as the poem excludes any sense of beginning and end, first and second), but on the ultimately ephemeral nature of human activity which is in direct contrast with the enduring and continuous nature of natural phenomena. This leads back to the rhetorical question of 1:3, asking whether there is any enduring profit in all human activity. Thus the poem, in part, has answered the rhetorical question that there is no *וְרֵחַ*, no enduring profit, in any human activity as they labour 'under the sun' - that is to say, under the enduring regularity and circularity of the natural phenomena. Everything under the sun goes on and on, and humans cannot find any *וְרֵחַ* (enduring profit) in their activities.

However, if the focus is on each of the individual cycles of the natural phenomena, then their activities could be interpreted as having no enduring effect because as each cycle appears, the previous cycle vanishes as if nothing had happened or even existed before, then it is analogous to the non-enduring effect of human activities: 'There is no remembrance (*וְרֵחַ*) of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to happen among those who come after' (1:11; cf. 2:16; 9:15; 11:8b; 12:1a).<sup>6</sup> Thus,

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<sup>6</sup>As discussed earlier in Chapter II, the absence of 'remembrance' in human activity leads Qoheleth to issue the *וְהָאֵל* (absurd), declaration.



it points once again to a negative answer to the *וְיָרֵד* question.

On the one hand, daily human activity is like the individual ephemeral cycles of the natural phenomena; it meets with no enduring effects, or more specifically, no enduring profit. On the other hand, the day-in and day-out activity of everyday life is like the ceaseless, continuous and enduring system of the natural phenomena, 'one generation comes and one generation goes' (1:4a), the earth stays 'forever' (*עוֹלָם*) accompanying the ceaseless motion of nature's activity as well as human daily activity.

In sum, the prologue (1:3-11) serves two purposes: (1) it introduces Qoheleth's programmatic question on *וְיָרֵד* which inevitably leads to one of the main themes of the book, the declaration of *הֵבֶל*, 'absurdity' on human daily activity; and (2) it defines the scope and limits of his empirical and theological thought orienting the reader to the world of human existence, i.e. a world where human activity has no enduring profit within a system of regular, circular and enduring natural phenomena.

### 3. Profit and Portion (1:12-2:26)

After orienting the readers to the scope and environment of his search for *וְיָרֵד* (enduring profit), Qoheleth turns to *חֵכְמָה* (wisdom), *שִׂמְחָה* (mirth, pleasure) and *עֲמָל* (toil or fruits of toil; cf. 2:18) as the themes of his explorations and observations arguing for the non-*וְיָרֵד* and *הֵבֶל* in human activity. However, that is not all that Qoheleth does because the no *וְיָרֵד* answer and the *הֵבֶל* declaration introduce a broader and more serious question on human existence: i.e. what is the wisest and best course of action for humankind in a world where there is no *וְיָרֵד* and thus is a world of absurdity, an environment where actions do not yield the expected

effects? The answer as he argues, is found in the concluding part of this unit in the form of a 'better'-proverb (2:24-26).

(1) Qoh. 1:12-18

It is Qoheleth's instinct as a sage first to argue from his perception of the world through wisdom, since the ancient sages had long proclaimed to the world that wisdom was the key to successful, profitable and quality living. Consequently, his perception of the world leads him to utter a הַבְּלָה statement: the world as perceived through his wisdom is filled with the elements of the absurd (1:14b). He emphasizes the extent of his search as 'all that is done under the heavens,' without describing more specifically what he has acquired through his wisdom at this point. The הַבְּלָה declaration is followed with an aphorism in 1:15, quoted in support of his statement that the reality of the absurd is something beyond human power to change. Lest anyone question his wisdom, he goes on to emphasize its quality as the best available in the nation (1:16-17a), but only in order to reassert his earlier claim (1:17b). In support of his claim, another aphorism is quoted (1:18), that the more wisdom one possesses, the more burden one will acquire because wisdom enables one to perceive better the reality of absurdity. It must be pointed out that nowhere in this unit does Qoheleth condemn חֲכָמָה as הַבְּלָה, rather it is this חֲכָמָה that enabled him to perceive and thus to argue that the world is full of הַבְּלָה.

(2) Qoh. 2:1-26

After arguing that the world, as he has perceived through his wisdom (1:12-18), is full of absurd reality, Qoheleth sets out to elaborate further on what he sees as absurd. The first aspect of life which he tests (נִסָּה) is שְׂמֵחָה. He introduces the test with a general הַבְּלָה statement in 2:1, that "it is absurd (הַבְּלָה הֵיאֵהוּא)" (2:1), though the reason for declaring what as הַבְּלָה is not immedi-

ately known. The introduction is followed by a description of his test of *שְׂמֵחָה* in various human daily activities (2:1-11): physical (2:1-3), material (2:4-6), the pleasure of lordship (2:7a), of possessing great wealth (2:7b-8a), sensual pleasure (2:8b), the pleasure of being the greatest person - the wealthiest and wisest king - in the world (2:9) and the pleasure of being able to do whatever one desires (2:10). Finally he declares them 'all' to be *הֶבֶל* because he finds no *יִתְרוֹן*, no enduring profit, in any of these activities (*הַכֹּל הֶבֶל וְרַעוּת רִוּחַ וְאֵין יִתְרוֹן*) (2:11). Thus, mirth that does not yield any enduring profit as the expected effect is absurd.

However, although the negative answer to the *יִתְרוֹן* question is the conclusion (2:11) to the entire test on 'mirth', Qoheleth makes an interesting observation. For the first time, Qoheleth argues, despite his negative conclusion, that there is a *קִלְקֵל*, a 'portion' - enjoyment - for humans who are involved in activity (2:10; cf. 3:22). In other words, activity in itself is a *קִלְקֵל*, an enjoyment to the person who is involved in it, though it does not yield any *יִתְרוֹן*, 'ongoing' or 'enduring' profit (2:10,11).<sup>7</sup> As long as there is activity, there is a *קִלְקֵל* for the labourer. But when activities cease, so does the *קִלְקֵל*. There is no *יִתְרוֹן* in these activities and they are absurd, *הֶבֶל* (2:11), because action does not yield any

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<sup>7</sup>For the discussion on the difference between *יִתְרוֹן* and *קִלְקֵל*, see Chapter II, D.1. This idea of *קִלְקֵל* appears again in 2:21; 3:22; 5:17,18; 9:6,9; and 11:2, where Qoheleth presents his idea of enjoyment in life. Though Qoheleth's search for *יִתְרוֹן* has led to a declaration of the *הֶבֶל* statement, his later discovery of *קִלְקֵל* as joy in activity presents a new idea - the idea of joy - in human activities where *קִלְקֵל* is found. This new idea, with an optimistic view of life, intensifies as the book progresses toward ch. 12 and at various intervals is like a high-pitched note shattering the *הֶבֶל* mood of pessimism, bringing new life to a demoralizing world.

enduring profit. Qoheleth expects an enduring profit (וְיִתְרוֹן) from the test on שְׂמֵחָה and found none, but instead, he finds a קֶלֶק in human activity.

The 'no וְיִתְרוֹן' and הַכֹּל statements in 2:11 is followed by the main theme - the search for וְיִתְרוֹן in wisdom - of the unit 2:12-17. Here Qoheleth compares wisdom with folly and readily admits that there is temporal profit or advantage<sup>8</sup> in wisdom over folly as light over darkness. But this admission is soon undermined by the perception that death nullifies any distinction between the wise and the fool, and that there is no enduring remembrance of them after death (2:16). Despite the acts of the wise being distinctively different from and more profitable than those of the fool, especially in reference to the consequences of their acts and quality of life, death nullifies this distinction. Thus, it is still absurd even when there is temporal profit to the wise over the fool because such temporal profit is nullified when death arrives and thus no enduring profit is envisaged beyond death. This incongruity of act and consequence leads Qoheleth to proclaim that life is filled with the absurd (2:15-17). Death not only nullifies the expected difference between the wise and the fool, but also that between the beasts and humans mentioned later in 3:19. Death brings a cessation to all activities (cf. 9:10) and there is "no enduring remembrance" (2:16; cf. 1:11) after death for the wise or the fool. Thus there is no וְיִתְרוֹן, no enduring profit, for being

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<sup>8</sup>The word וְיִתְרוֹן must be understood here in a weaker sense than is generally the case in most of the rest of the book. This weak sense occurs in three other verses, 5:8, 7:12 and 10:10 with reference to wisdom and knowledge, though the syntax is somewhat obscure in 5:8. Temporary 'profit' or 'advantage' is acknowledged in these verses. It is never referring explicitly to the consequences or returns of human toil or activities, in which case no וְיִתְרוֹן is proclaimed.

wise or foolish (2:15). Qoheleth promptly issues a statement of absurdity (לִבְיָדָה) (2:15b; cf. 2:17) because the action of the wise does not lead to the expected effect of being different from the consequence of the fool and being 'remembered'.

After grieving (2:17) over the absurdity of death nullifying the distinction between the wise and the fool, Qoheleth moves on in 2:18-23 to examine לְמַעַל, 'activity', 'labour', 'toil' or 'the fruits of toil' and argues that the same absurdity awaits him in life. Human beings have no control over the effects of their actions; act and consequence are often matched in the most unexpected manner. Qoheleth sees absurdity in two areas: (1) the wise labourer might have to leave the fruits of his/her labour to an unknown successor - wise or fool (2:18, 19); and (2) the labourer has to leave the fruits of his/her labour to be *enjoyed* by someone who has not laboured for it (2:20-21). That the fruits gathered by the hard work of a wise labourer may have to pass on to a *fool* and be enjoyed by a *fool*, is pronounced to be absurd in 2:19b and 21b, where it is also called a 'great evil' (הַרְעָה גְּדוֹלָה, 2:21b).

However, there is a third aspect of the absurdity alluded to in 2:22-23: the act of labouring in wisdom on the part of a wise labourer does not lead to the expected effect of being secure or confident in oneself. Instead, it leads to a consequence of sleepless and painful nights and days because he/she does not know who the successor and enjoyer of his/her fruits of labour shall be. Qoheleth declares "even this, it is also absurd (גַּם-זֶה הוּא לִבְיָדָה הוּא)" (2:23b): action does not lead to the expected consequence.

Following the description of the absurdity in the test of הַמְתָּחָה, 'mirth' (2:1-11), the observations on הַחֵכְמָה, 'wisdom' (1:12-18; 2:12-17) and לְמַעַל, 'activity', 'toil' or 'the fruits of toil' (2:18-23), Qoheleth comes to an intriguing and somewhat unexpected

conclusion (2:24-26) for the entire section (1:12-2:23). He advises one to enjoy life and be happy; in particular this means, to find enjoyment in one's activity (2:24).<sup>9</sup> This is only the beginning of Qoheleth's increasingly intensified seven-fold advice. Qoheleth argues that the most rewarding and probably the only promising element in human activity is to find enjoyment in one's activity; especially in light of the fact that human activity is like the endless cycles of the natural phenomena (1:4-7) with no enduring 'remembrance' (וְיִזְכְּרוּ) and 'profit' (וְיִתְרֹם) (1:11; 2:16; 1:3; 2:1, 11,13) to the previous cycle of activity.

A theistic belief also compels him to argue that the enjoyment of life comes from God (וְהָאֱלֹהִים הֵם הַמְּשַׁלְּמִים, 2:24b-25). If the phrase in 2:26c 'This also is absurd and striving after wind' (וְזֶה-אִשְׁרָיִם וְהִתְקַבֵּץ) is understood to be the concluding phrase for the entire unit 1:12-2:26, the וְהִתְקַבֵּץ-statement is used as a general statement referring to the reality of the absurd as mentioned in 1:12-2:23. But if 2:26c is referring to the immediate context of 2:24-26, Qoheleth is declaring the criss-crossing of acts and consequences between the 'sinner' and the 'one who pleases God' as absurd. The acts of gathering and collecting of the 'sinner' do not yield the reasonably expected effect of being able to enjoy the fruits of his/her activities is deemed as absurd. If the act of labouring and the consequence of enjoying the fruits of labouring comes to humankind as God's gift, the activity of the divine giver (וְהַמְּשַׁלְּמִים, 2:25-26a) is deemed by Qoheleth to be arbitrary to a point of absurdity. The absurdity of God's gift lies first in the fact that

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<sup>9</sup>See the earlier discussion of וְהִתְקַבֵּץ in 2:10,11. There is no evidence here to show that this advice to enjoy life is a statement of resignation as some have held (e.g. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, p.11).

the sinner is given the undeserved opportunity of "gathering and heaping" instead of perishing, as the expected effect of being a sinner. Second, to give the result of the sinner's gathering and heaping to be enjoyed by the one who has not laboured, but one who pleases God (2:26b) makes a double absurdity in God's action of giving and taking. Equally absurd are the acts of the sinner which do not yield the reasonably expected effect of enjoying what he/she had gathered and heaped.

The section 1:12-2:26 may be summed up as follows. In his attempt to investigate if there is any  $\text{נְהִיגָה}$  in human activity, through his test of  $\text{שְׂמֵחָה}$ , observations on  $\text{נְהִיגָה}$  and  $\text{עֵמֶל}$ , Qoheleth argues that it is  $\text{הִבְרָל}$  (absurd) to find no  $\text{נְהִיגָה}$  (enduring profit) as the expected effect of human activity. However, he argues that although there is no  $\text{נְהִיגָה}$  to be found in any human activity (except in the weak sense when temporal 'profit' is mentioned, 2:13; 7:12; 10:10), and certainly not beyond death, there is a  $\text{חֵלֶק}$  (portion), in all human activity. This  $\text{חֵלֶק}$  is the joy in and arising from activity. It follows from this argument that human beings should do their best to secure their  $\text{חֵלֶק}$  and find enjoyment in their activity while there is opportunity, because  $\text{חֵלֶק}$  vanishes when all activities cease in Sheol (cf. 9:10). Thus his advice to humankind is to enjoy life and be happy. This provides Qoheleth with a new impetus to live in a world of absurd reality, the impetus appears again in 3:12,13,22; 5:17; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:8-9. Although his theistic belief compels him to advise one to revere God - the silent and unfathomable divine giver of "wisdom, knowledge and joy" (2:26a) - Qoheleth nevertheless thinks the interrelationship between the acts and consequences both of the 'sinner' and the one 'who pleases God' is also absurd (2:26c).

#### 4. The Seasons of Time lead to no $\text{הָרָוֶה}$ (3:1-22)

##### (1) Qoh. 3:1-15

As Qoheleth continues to argue for the non- $\text{הָרָוֶה}$  of daily human activities in ch.3, another phenomenon in human existence is being presented as an example of non- $\text{הָרָוֶה}$ . He argues that despite the fact that there are various occasions and fragmented moments in life (3:1-8), beautiful ( $\text{הַיָּפֵה}$ ) and 'endurance' ( $\text{עוֹלָם}$ ) as they are part of life, nevertheless, they do not add up to any 'enduring profit',  $\text{הָרָוֶה}$  (3:9). Not only that Qoheleth finds no  $\text{הָרָוֶה}$  in the various occasions in life, he also argues that human beings know nothing (3:11c) of the principles by which these occasions (3:1-8) come into being. Perhaps, their unknowability also constituted to the non- $\text{הָרָוֶה}$  effect. Finding no  $\text{הָרָוֶה}$  in the cluster of events in life, Qoheleth argues further that 'there is nothing better' than to enjoy life (3:12) and sees it as the divine intention that human beings should find enjoyment in their activities (3:13).

The advice is followed by a theological confession which declares Qoheleth's theistic belief in the sovereign lordship of God (3:14). God's action is enduring or 'eternal' ( $\text{לְעוֹלָם}$ ) and needing no addition ( $\text{עָלְיוֹ אֵין לְהוֹסִיף}$ ) nor can anything be subtrated from them ( $\text{אֵין לְגַרְעַ וּמִמֶּנּוּ}$ ).<sup>10</sup> The last phrase of 3:14 is interesting because the word  $\text{רָא}$  could either be the Qal imperfect of  $\text{רָאָה}$  (to see) or  $\text{רָאָה}$  (to fear). Most interpreters understand the word to mean 'fear' rather than from the root  $\text{רָאָה}$  (to see).<sup>11</sup> So Crenshaw writes, "Qoheleth concludes that God has planned this way in order

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<sup>10</sup>Cf. Deut. 4:2; 13:1; Prov. 30:6 on the prohibition of addition and subtraction of words.

<sup>11</sup>Except Graham Ogden who argues that the word comes from the root  $\text{רָאָה}$  (to see), thus interpreted the phrase as "God has done (this) so that they might see (what precedes) from him," in *Qoheleth*, p. 57.



to instill fear in human beings."<sup>12</sup> If 'to fear' in the sense of afraid is the meaning here, this is the first time Qoheleth has given the reason for God's actions to be unfathomable, which is so that humankind should 'fear God' (cf. 5:6; 7:18; 8:12,13; 12:13). This argument is based on the fact that human beings have no say whatsoever concerning the effects of their actions, because life is in the hands of the unfathomable God whose ways of governing the effects of daily human activities seem arbitrary.

(2) *Qoh. 3:16-22*

This theological confession leads Qoheleth to investigate further the element of absurdity in an unjust society (3:16-17). As he observes injustice in society and expects some reaction to injustice from the sovereign judge, he argues that such an expectation leads inevitably to a new evidence of absurdity (3:19). The absurdity lies first in the fact that the acts and consequences of the righteous and the wicked have little relationship (3:16). Second, the absurdity lies in the fact that despite the fact that human and beast are distinctively different and so may be expected, and undoubtedly they are to remain so, death nullifies any distinction between them, and there is no *לְחַיִּים* for human over beast. Furthermore, not only that death nullifies the distinction between human and beast, the reality of the absurd in human affairs also puts humans on the level of animals, thus nullifies any distinction between them and that is absurd according to Qoheleth.

Having declared the absurdity that death provides no *לְחַיִּים* for the righteous over the wicked and humans over beasts (3:18-21), Qoheleth once again advises that one should enjoy one's activity

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<sup>12</sup>J.L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 99, translated the phrase as "God has acted so that they will be afraid in his presence" (92). Gordis, *Koheleth*, p. 156, translated as "for God has so arranged matters that men should fear Him."

(3:22; cf. 3:12). This enjoyment is the *הֵלֵךְ* in human activity, the joy of work, the definite, positive reward in human activities. Though activity itself does not yield any *יְהוֹרֵן*, one should nevertheless find enjoyment in one's activity (3:22b).

As in 2:18-26 (where a positive piece of advice came after the expression of a negative attitude toward life's absurdity, i.e. *הֵבֵל* [2:18-23] leading to *שְׂמֵחָה* [2:24-26]), 3:1-22 is also filled with the two ideas of *הֵבֵל* and *שְׂמֵחָה* alternating with each other; no *יְהוֹרֵן* (3:1-9) nevertheless *שְׂמֵחָה* (3:12-14, 17); *הֵבֵל* (3:18-21) but *שְׂמֵחָה* (3:22). Thus, the expressions of a negative attitude toward life in 3:1-9 and 3:18-21 are followed by a positive affirmation of faith in the deity that life is to be enjoyed in 3:12-14,17 and 3:22. It is as if Qoheleth is weighing his philosophical and theological opinions on life and trying to decide in which position he should stand. This alternation certainly affirms the centrality of the dual ideas, *הֵבֵל* and *שְׂמֵחָה*, in Qoheleth's thought.

##### 5. Absurdity in Personal, Community and National Life (4:1-16)

Having argued that there is no *יְהוֹרֵן* in human activity which are thus full of absurdity, Qoheleth turns to explore the absurdity in personal, community and national life (4:4,8,13-16); pointing out various absurdities in reality (4:4,7,8,16). He first looks at social oppression (4:1-3) and through a 'better-proverb' (4:3; cf. 4:6,9,13) praises those who do not have to witness social injustice. Here he makes one of his most sceptical statements about life: "I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive; but better than both is he who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun" (4:2,3).

However, Qoheleth's position is not an advocacy of suicide because in 9:4-6 he states, "he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward; but their memory (מִזְכָּרָם) is forgotten (נִשְׁכַּח) ... there is no more share (חֵלֶק) for them forever (לְעוֹלָם) in all that is done under the sun."<sup>13</sup> Thus, his praise of the dead and the unborn in 4:2-3 is relative to the degree of their exposure to social injustice. In other words, Qoheleth is grieved over various social oppressions and over the fact that human beings have no choice but to remain impotent, and to see (יִרְאֶה), or even to experience oppression personally. Thus, his praise of those who have never existed is a praise of those who do not have to experience oppression.

Though the word מִזְכָּר is not mentioned in 4:1-3, it is obvious that the idea of absurdity is present. The absurdity lies in the fact that the wickedness of the oppressor is not being met with the consequence of its action and neither does the one being oppressed is being greeted with comfort. The effect of being oppressed does not generated from one's act of injustice, but rather, from the wickedness of the oppressor. Qoheleth sarcastically argues that death is the only way of avoiding the reality of injustice, which is the same as saying there is no way of escaping in this present life because absurdity is a fact in life. It is absurd in that despite one's sense of justice, one will still be surrounded by injustice: our instinct does not match with our experience.

Turning to social life, Qoheleth takes up another example of absurdity. He argues that it is absurd that those hard workers do

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<sup>13</sup>In this passage (9:4-6), Qoheleth argues that death also terminates the portion that comes with activity.

not find time for enjoyment in life as the expected effect of their activities, nor do their activities that are motivated by envy of others' possessions lead to any enduring profit, וְיִרְחֹק (4:4-6).<sup>14</sup>

The absurdity lies in the fact that enviousness of others' possessions leads only to discontentment and thus, devotes more time to accumulate wealth and leaves little or no time for joy (cf. 4:7-8). However, Qoheleth does not swing to the other extreme, advocating idleness - that is folly (4:5). Instead, he praises those who are able to 'rest' because they are the ones who can be contented with their own modest work, thus they are the ones that can enjoy life; "A handful of rest is better than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind" (4:6).

Turning to consider another case of absurdity, וְהָרַק (4:7,8d), Qoheleth argues that the 'workaholic' who has no time to enjoy life, thus deprives oneself of joy in activity is absurd (4:8b). Absurdity also lies in the fact that even though this 'workaholic' has no one to leave his/her wealth to, he/she never seems to be satisfied with the quantity of the wealth he/she has accumulated because discontentment drives him/her to spend more time in accumulating more wealth and thus, never find 'rest' (4:4-6) nor enjoyment in either the fruits of his/her activity or even in the activities themselves. Thus there is no וְיִרְחֹק nor joy in his/her activity or life. In sum, it is absurd that this person has deprived himself/herself of any joy or וְיִרְחֹק from his/her activity. The activity of the 'workaholic' does not lead to any effect; no enduring profit (because he/she has no one to leave his/her wealth to) and no joy (no time to find rest nor enjoyment). In fact, if

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<sup>14</sup>As discussed in Chapter II, the absence of enjoyment in one's activity leads Qoheleth to declare that is absurd: activity does not lead to the expected effect of enjoyment. Similarly, activity that does not lead to any enduring profit is also absurd.

he/she is too busy and has no time to be concerned with the effects of his/her action, he/she should at least enjoy working, and have the joy of possibly getting rich (4:8b). But if he/she cannot even have their קָלָה, enjoyment in activity, then this is declared to be absurd because their actions do not yield any effect (4:8c).

With the הַבָּל declaration on the lonely and joyless life (4:8), Qoheleth turns to encourage companionship in life because there is a 'reward' (רָצוֹן functions exactly like קָלָה, 4:9b) in communal activity that one does not get in solitary activity. Thus, Qoheleth praises those who live a communal life (4:9-12).

As Qoheleth broadens his argument to include examples of absurdity from the national or international arena (4:13-16), particularly on the transfer of monarchical power, he observed another absurdity (4:16). The absurdity lies in the fact that as one monarch or regime comes the other goes, it does not lead to any enduring remembrance although the events of the monarch's life are amazingly memorable (4:16b; cf. 1:11; 2:16). There is no enduring profit, but merely repeats events like the endless cycles in the natural system (cf. 1:4-7).

These examples of absurdity from the personal, communal and national life have once again demonstrated and supported Qoheleth's argument on the absurdity of reality - human activity that leads to no expected effect is declared absurd.

#### *6. Fear the Unfathomable God (4:17[5:1]-5:8[9])*

After analysing the absurdity in the social and political realms, Qoheleth applies his wisdom to religious affairs (4:17-5:8). Obviously Qoheleth is familiar with the common religious practices, such as sacrifices, paying vows and praying before God. Qoheleth does not discourage or condemn these activities *per se*,

rather he is more concerned with the appropriate attitude for an inferior worshipper before a superior God (5:1). This concern arises from his realization that life is full of absurdity, actions and effects often correlating in the most unexpected ways. This grasp compels him to warn anyone who goes to the temple to worship God to go with a cautious and reverent attitude, because the consequences of human actions are in the hands of God<sup>15</sup> who is often silent and unfathomable and whose actions often seem absurd (cf. 2:26). This understanding of God leads Qoheleth to accompany his warning (4:17-5:5) with the advice to fear God, which occurs for the second time (5:6; cf. 3:14) - an irresistible demand of the divine superior for submission from the helplessly impotent human being.

#### *7. Absurdity in the Material World (5:9[10]-19[20])*

Having applied his wisdom to sacred matters, Qoheleth then deals with its opposite, the secular or material arena. He argues that there is absurdity in the gathering of wealth in 5:9-11, after which he proceeds to describe the general human attitude towards wealth, possession and labour, which inevitably leads to the programmatic question of what the *לֵבָב* is. He argues that it is absurd that the act of accumulating wealth does not lead to the effect of being satisfied (5:9), with no enduring profit to the accumulator (5:10). Instead, a proverbial saying is used to encourage those who are able to be contented with their lot (5:11).

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<sup>15</sup>It is interesting to note that Qoheleth may have purposely omitted the use of the personal name of God even in his close quotation from Deuteronomy 23:22 (Qoh.5:3a). This omission may imply that Qoheleth does not intend to limit his counsel to temple-goers solely to Yahweh-alone worshippers. The admonition is for all religious or deity worshippers.

As he proceeds to describe his observations concerning wealth and the gathering of wealth (5:12-16), he argues that there is no  $\text{יְהִי־טוֹב}$  (5:15,16) in any human activity that involves labouring or the gathering of wealth and possessions. Twice he calls it  $\text{רָעָה־חֹלָה}$ , a sickening evil (5:12,15). If earlier he has argued that the accumulation of wealth should lead to the consequence of being able and having the opportunity to enjoy it, or being able to pass it on to someone worthy of its possession (cf. 2:18ff.; 4:7ff.), it is here that he denies categorically any enduring profit to the wealthy. He argues that acts and consequences often do not have a rational correlation. There is no enduring profit, no  $\text{יְהִי־טוֹב}$ , and it is absurd to strive for wealth and possession (5:15):<sup>16</sup> "As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil, which he may carry away in his hand ... just as he came so shall he go [like the natural phenomena described in 1:4-7]; and what  $\text{יְהִי־טוֹב}$  [is there] for him who has toiled for the wind [in endless cycles with nothing enduring, cf. 1:6]" (5:14-15).

Having convinced his readers that the material world is full of absurdity with no enduring profit, Qoheleth once again advises one to find enjoyment in human activity within the short span of life that God has given to all (5:17-18). This is the fourth of his seven advices to find enjoyment in one's activity, yet here, four new elements have been added.

(1) He changes the 'nothing is better' ( $\text{אֵין־טוֹב}$ ) form in the previous advice (2:24; 3:12,22) to "it is good and it is beautiful ( $\text{טוֹב־וְיָפֵה}$ ) (RSV "to be fitting") ... and to see good ( $\text{וְלִרְאוֹת־טוֹבָה}$ )" (5:17a). Qoheleth no longer puts his advice in a 'better-

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<sup>16</sup>See discussion in Chapter II on the concept of  $\text{קָנָה}$  on wealth.

proverb' form in the comparative or relative sense, but he firmly states his advice that one ought to enjoy life.

(2) A sense of an imperative to enjoy life is indirectly implied in the phrase "the few (ַפְּעֻמָּה) days of his life" (5:17b); life is short and opportunities are few, therefore one should enjoy all one can and when time allows. This idea that life is short and must be enjoyed is fully elucidated in his last advice in 11:9 (cf. 11:7-12:7).

(3) The concept that joy is a gift of God, mentioned briefly in 3:13, is explicitly expanded in 5:18, "Also, to every human being God has given (ׁוּנְתַן) wealth and treasures, and power to eat of it, and to accept his portion (ׁוּלְקַח), and find enjoyment in his labour - this is the gift (ׁוּנְתַן) of God." This expanded advice agrees with his earlier declaration (5:9-16) that accumulation of wealth and possessions leads to absurdity (ׁוּלְבַדּוּלָהּ), if there is no enjoyment for the labourer in his activities. This can also be seen in his discussion immediately following this advice in 6:2.

(4) Most striking is his attempt here to suggest the expected consequence of humankind being given the ׁוּלְקַח or joy in their activities by God as a gift. The expected consequence of a joyful life is that one would not remember the negative aspects of life (5:19), such as the realities he designates as ׁוּלְבַדּוּלָהּ. Ironically, it is interesting to note, even though Qoheleth himself may have been unaware of it or its a silent assent (because no ׁוּלְבַדּוּלָהּ statement is issued here as in 2:24-26), that this is exactly where a further absurdity lies: that the acts of God giving human beings the enjoyment do not yield the effects one would expect, i.e. that human beings would not remember the absurd elements in life. At least Qoheleth is aware of the reality of ׁוּלְבַדּוּלָהּ.



With the advice to enjoy life as the conclusion to this section (5:9-19), Qoheleth has taken an active role, not only to encourage his readers to find enjoyment in life, but constructively and increasingly aggressively<sup>17</sup> trying to persuade his readers that this is the right course to take in a world of absurdity.

#### 8. *Life Without Joy is Absurd (6:1-9)*

In this section, Qoheleth argues that living without enjoying is absurd and gives various examples of absurdity. The first example of absurdity is a situation (6:1-2) where God gives wealth, possessions and power to a person but does not give him/her the ability to enjoy all these gifts. In 6:2 he declares that it is absurd (לְבַדָּהּ) for God to give wealth without also giving the ability to enjoy such wealth. This is the very opposite kind of absurdity to that in 5:19, if there is an absurdity, where God gives one the gift of enjoyment so that one will not be aware of the absurdity in life (5:19).

Then he continues to argue that one who has many heirs and lives many years is worse than the still born if one's life is not greeted with joy (6:3-6; cf. 4:2-3,8), and it is absurd for such a blessed life not to experience any joy. Two other examples of absurdity is given in 6:7,9 and 6:8. In 6:7,9, it is absurd if activity does not lead to enjoyment due to discontentment (cf. 4:7ff.). In 6:8, the absurdity lies in the fact that there is no הִנְיָהּ to the wise (cf. 2:15-16). These examples strengthen Qohe-

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<sup>17</sup>As can be seen in the change of mood in his latter advice in 9:7 and 11:9 which are all in the imperative mood. Whybray has observed correctly that in 2:24, the advice is a "plain statement"; in 3:12,22a, the advice is placed after an "asseverative phrase"; in 5:17, there is a "more solemn introduction"; in 8:15a, it is in "even more decided terms"; and in 9:7a-9a and later it is in the imperative mood. See, "Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy," *JSOT* 23 (1982): 87-98 (87-88).

leth's thought on the absurdity of human life, and drives home his negative answer to the programmatic question about *הֵרֵן*? he asked at the very beginning in 1:3 (cf. 6:8) - there is no *הֵרֵן*?, it is absurd, *הֵרֵן לֵךְ* (6:9).

Not only that, embraced within these descriptions of the absurd is Qoheleth's clear and constructive argument that the absurdity lies in the absence of enjoyment in human activities, in addition to the already undeniably profitless activities themselves. It also leads to his crucial thought that the ability to enjoy one's activity as one's *הֵרֵן* is absolutely essential and provides the ultimate motive for living in the world that has no *הֵרֵן*? and is full of *הֵרֵן לֵךְ*.

#### 9. *Wisdom Unattainable (6:10-7:29)*

In the first six chapters of the book, Qoheleth has argued that the absence of *הֵרֵן*? leads to absurdity. (Seven out of the ten occurrences of *הֵרֵן*? are found in the first six chapters.) Having progressively intensified his advice to enjoy life, to find the *הֵרֵן* in human activity, Qoheleth moves on in this section to focus on a very different topic - the inferiority of human beings to God and their helplessness in various situations. The Unattainability of wisdom and the impotent of human wisdom is the theme of Qheleth's thought in this section.

##### (1) *Qoh.6:10-7:14*

He begins the section by introducing three questions concerning human powerlessness and inferiority in face of daily events and God: "what advantage?" (6:11), "who knows?" (6:12a; 8:9; 9:1,10,12; 10:14,15; 11:2,5,6), and "who can declare or tell?" (6:12b; 10:14b). Later on, he also includes the question "Who can find out?" (7:14,24,27-29; 8:17).

The introduction is followed by a series of proverbial sayings (7:1-12) edited by Qoheleth leading to the conclusion in 7:13,14 which has a theological overtone. This series demonstrates that although there exist various wisdom teachings which are intended to serve as guiding principles for a successful and quality life (7:1-12), most events do not follow these guiding principles (7:13). Life is full of events that are contrary to this wisdom advice. If the series of sayings appear to be perversions of proverbs, they only prove that Qoheleth is not an idealist (or traditionalist), but an realist, fully aware of the irregularities in life. Human beings are helpless to do anything (7:13) but to accept the irregularities as well as the regularities in life, knowing that God is the unfathomable divine superior (7:13,14) whose hand is on the effects of daily human activities. Knowing that 'prosperity' and 'adversity' will both characterize one's life without a detectable pattern of how God send them for future prediction (7:14c), Qoheleth encourages one to enjoy the prosperity that comes along (7:14a), but <sup>to</sup> be prepared to accept the occasion when adversity prevails (7:14b). In other words, the fact that human wisdom cannot gain access to the principles by which the divine superior acts, forces human beings to accept helplessly whatever comes into one's life including the reality of absurdity. If human wisdom is impotent to ascertain the principles by which God acts in human life, the question remains how should human beings conduct themselves when they do not know what consequences may reasonably be expected to arise from an action?

## (2) Qoh.7:15-18

Qoheleth addresses this question in 7:15-18. After citing an example of irregularity in human life which does not conform to wisdom's guidelines (7:15), Qoheleth continues by prescribing a

course of action aimed not at promoting a quality of life, but at giving instructions for a defensive way of life - *staying alive* (7:16-17). He encourages his readers to follow this defensive way of life because it is based on the principle that God is superior and unfathomable. Human beings have no access to the principle by which God acts and therefore fearing God is the best defensive act inferior human beings can perform - in order to stay alive (7:18). Whoever does it will 'come forth' from the 'left' or 'right' situation well, with a life that will prevent premature death - "why should you die before your time?" (7:17); and self-destruction - "why should you destroy yourself?" (7:16). However, this life will not necessarily be a life of quality and success as the wisdom convention promised.

(3) *Qoh.7:19-24*

At this point, Qoheleth pauses to reconsider the act of striving for wisdom (7:19-29; cf. 1:12-18; 6:10-7:14), and affirms the value and goodness of wisdom (7:19). As he is aware that there is no sinless righteous person on earth (7:20), he encourages a cautious attitude towards speech, casual talk and relationship with others (7:21,22). He concludes the quest for wisdom in an autobiographical form (7:23-25; cf. 1:12ff.) confessing that although he wants very much to strive to be wise (7:23), wisdom is unattainable, "it [wisdom] was far from me, deep, very deep" (7:23c,24). The more he wants to be wise the more he is not wise!

(4) *Qoh.7:25-29*

Since the inaccessibility and unattainability of the wisdom that governs daily human activities convinced Qoheleth to abandon the subject, he turns (עֲבוּרָה) instead to investigate folly (לִצְפָּה) and madness (הוֹלָלוֹת), pointing out three enigmatic findings concerning male and female. Qoheleth's first finding is that woman is bitterly

corrupted (7:26). The second finding is that man is no better than woman, man is equally corrupted, if not slightly better than woman (7:27,28). These findings on the corruption of men and women ultimately lead to the third finding about humankind (7:29). It is in the third category that the creation of male and female is called into question. Qoheleth argues that although humankind is to be responsible for their own corruption, the creation of humankind involves certain aspects of absurdity (although the word חֲזָקָה is not used here): the action of God in creating human beings upright does not lead to the expected effect. Instead, the act of creation results in human beings seeking out "many devices" (7:29). In other words, the act of creation itself could also be considered as absurd.

#### *10. To Fear Is To Live (8:1-17)*

Following up an earlier subject on the inaccessibility and unknowability of wisdom (8:1; cf. 7:23f.), Qoheleth, in a series of prohibitions and commands, gives instructions to his readers on how to conduct themselves before the superior (8:2-9). He advises his readers to please their superior (8:2) and to avoid unpleasant moment with their superior (8:3). The reason for these advices is based on the view that although the action of the superior is unpredictable and unknown to the inferior (8:7), the superior (i.e. monarch or God), nevertheless, has the power to carry out his/her will to punish or to reward (8:3-5a). Although Qoheleth encourages the inferior to adopt an attitude of obedience before the superior, it is not that he approves of human domination over other humans, "man lords it over man to his hurt" (8:9b). The reason for this discouragement may lie in his conviction as expressed earlier that

no one is perfect (cf. 7:20), humans are corrupted (cf. 7:27-29), especially those who are in power (cf. 8:3,4).

In 8:10, Qoheleth turns to give an example of absurdity and attempts to provide a reason in 8:11 for the existence of the absurdity. He observes that by frequenting the temple, the wicked person receives that which should rightly belong to the righteous - the praise of the community (8:10c)<sup>18</sup> and a decent burial (8:10a).<sup>19</sup> He declares this event as a  $\text{לְהַלְלֵךְ}$  event and repeats this in 8:14, pointing out that the actions of the righteous and wicked do not always result in what one would normally expect. The reason that the wicked receive the praise and decent burial rightly belonging to the righteous is not because the wicked are not judged (cf. 3:17), but rather they are not judged soon enough to discourage wickedness (8:11). But this delay of judgment does not justify wickedness because earlier (7:16,17) Qoheleth advises one not to be wicked as such action only brings self-destruction. Here, he advises that "it will be well with those who fear before God" (8:12a) and "it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God" (8:13).

These theistic verses that are bracketed between 8:10 and 8:14, where the phrase 'fear God' occurs twice, support his earlier advice (8:2-5; cf. 3:14; 5:6; 7:18) that one should fear one's superior despite the arbitrariness of the actions of the superior

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<sup>18</sup>Here, I follow the LXX ( $\kappa\alpha\iota\ \acute{\epsilon}\pi\eta\nu\acute{\epsilon}\theta\eta\sigma\alpha\nu$ ) and several other manuscripts  $\text{וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֹּיִם}$ , "and were praised", Hithpael of the root  $\text{חָוַה}$  "laud, praise."

<sup>19</sup>The LXX has  $\epsilon\iota\varsigma\ \tau\acute{\alpha}\phi\omicron\upsilon\varsigma\ \epsilon\iota\sigma\alpha\chi\theta\acute{\epsilon}\nu\tau\epsilon\varsigma$  =  $\text{מִן\ הַקְּבֻרִים\ מִן\ מוֹבְאֵיהֶם}$  "the wicked being carried to their tombs." The Vulgate, Peshitta, Rashi, Jerome read "the wicked buried". Gordis, *op. cit.*, has "the wicked brought to their grave with pomp" (295).

because the superior has the power to reward and punish. This advice is also in accord with the advice in 7:16-18, since both passages refer to actions (righteous and wicked) that do not lead to effects which could be reasonably expected (blessing and curse, respectively). Qoheleth is clearly reaffirming in 8:12,13 his teaching of 7:15-18, concerning the right course of action one should take in face of absurd reality.

But unlike 7:18, Qoheleth develops his advice further in 8:12,13 to include the advice to find enjoyment in human activity (8:15). Thus Qoheleth no longer prescribes only a defensive course of action (7:16-18) but also a positive and imperative advice to enjoy life in a world that is full of absurdity.

At this point, Qoheleth has augmented his earlier advice on enjoyment - to enjoy life as one's  $\text{קָלֶה}$  even though there is no  $\text{תְּרִיבָה}$  in all the  $\text{הַבְּלָה}$  activities - with the advice to fear God and enjoy life in face of the absurdity that righteous actions receive a response appropriate to wicked actions. With the advice to enjoy life (8:12,13,15) despite the absurd elements in life, he is also implying the ineffectual, if not error, of wisdom teaching concerning reward and retribution because the acts of the righteous/wicked do not yield the expected effects of being rewarded/punished. His advice to enjoy life has also grown more affirmative and decisive than before; "So I commend ( $\text{אֲשַׁבְּחֶנּוּ}$ ) mirth" (8:15a). If his earlier advice (2:24ff.; 3:12,13; 3:22; 5:17,18) to enjoy life is seen arising out of the discovery of a  $\text{קָלֶה}$ , enjoyment in activity despite the fact that there is no  $\text{תְּרִיבָה}$  in human activity and the world is full of elements of absurdity, then this latter advice (8:12,13,15) to fear God and enjoy life may be said to arise out of the realization that the teaching of reward and retribution - the blessing of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked - is

often not true. The reason for his advice to fear God may also lie in his confession at the conclusion of this section (8:1-17), that the action of God, the way God exercises his power regarding the effects of human actions, is inaccessible even to one who claims to be wise (8:17).

### 11 Enjoy Life, No Matter What! (9:1-11:6)

Qoheleth continues, in this section, to intensify his advice to enjoy life (9:7-10) which stands out sharply in the midst of his reflections on various subjects: God's superiority (9:1); death awaits all humankind (9:2-6); the unknowability and unpredictability of various undesirable and unexpected moments in life (9:11-12); the strength and weakness of wisdom (9:13-10:1); and the unexpected and irregular in life (10:2-11:6).

#### (1) Qoh. 9:1-10:1

He begins his reflection on the superiority of God under whom human beings are unable to secure the expected effects of their actions (9:1). The deeds of the righteous and the wise are in the hands of God and no one knows what their consequences are. The absurdity in life suggest that the consequences of their actions are often not what they would <sup>have</sup> expected. The criss-crossing of the acts and consequences of the righteous and the wicked reminds Qoheleth of the reality of death which nullifies any distinction between the wise and the fool, the righteous and the wicked (9:2). Although humankind knows nothing about the actions of God regarding the consequence of human action, there is one thing Qoheleth knows for sure, i.e. one fate awaits all - wicked or righteous - indiscriminately (9:2-3). Unlike his earlier reflections on the same theme on death in 3:19-21 and 4:2-3, here, Qoheleth praises those who are alive because there is no זכרון! (memory), no חלק (portion),



no  $\text{נְכָרִים}$  (reward) and no  $\text{אַהֲבָה}$  (love) or  $\text{שׂוֹנְאֵי}$  (hatred) (9:6a) for those who are in Sheol forever ( $\text{לְעוֹלָם}$ ) after this present life (9:10). But even though we all know that death greets all human beings, no one knows when this undesired fate will arrive, just as no one knows when the many unexpected moments will occur in life (9:11-12a). If these unexpected moments suddenly occur in one's life (tough luck! 9:12b), there is nothing one can do about it because one "does not know his time ( $\text{לֹא יָדָע}$ )," like fish or birds caught by surprise (9:12a).

In between these reflections on the unknowability and unpredictability of God's action and those unexpected moments in life is Qoheleth's intensified advice to enjoy one's life (9:7-10). The unit 9:7-9a marks an advance in Qoheleth's advice on enjoying life. As he makes various recapitulations of his earlier reflections in 9:1-6 and 9:11-16,<sup>20</sup> he also takes the readers a step beyond his advice of 5:17,8 and 8:15, with an advice cast in the form of an imperative, command to enjoy life.

First, there is a change in the tone of his advice; a command to enjoy life is issued in 9:7, rather than just a decision on his standpoint as in 3:12,13,22 or an introduction or commendation as in 5:17,18 and 8:15.

Secondly, instead of regarding enjoyment in life as a gift ( $\text{תְּרוּמָה}$ ) of God, he asserts that the act of enjoyment itself is 'doing the

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<sup>20</sup>9:1-6 contains recapitulations of the unattainability and unknowability of wisdom (9:1; cf. 6:10ff.); death nullifies the expected distinction between the righteous and the wicked, etc. (9:2-3a; cf. 2:14b,15; 3:19-21); humankind is wicked (9:3b; cf. 7:29; 8:9b); and no remembrance of the dead (9:4-6; cf. 1:11; 2:16; 4:2,3,16). 9:11-16 contains the recapitulations on the unknowability of what the reasonably expected consequence of an action might be (9:11; cf. 7:13,14; 8:4-8) and the seasons of time (9:12; cf. 3:1-11); the test of wisdom (9:13-16; cf. 4:13-16).

will of God', "God has already approved what you do" (9:7b). God is in favour of one who enjoys life.

Thirdly, it is implied in 9:8 that righteousness or good conduct should accompany one's act of enjoyment. This may be related to the idea of judgment in 2:26, namely that God gives enjoyment to those who please him and the task of hard labour without enjoyment to those who sin and displease him (cf. 11:9b; 12:13,14).

Fourthly, enjoying one's marital life as one's  $\text{קָלָה}$  (9:9) is a new addition to his earlier idea of joy (cf. 2:10; 3:22; 5:18), where joy is closely related to 'portion,'  $\text{קָלָה}$  and 'activity,'  $\text{עָמַל}$ .

These elaborations and intensifications of the advice to enjoy life are not intended by Qoheleth to be taken as mere passing comments. Rather they represent his conviction that the advice contains the best course to be taken in a world full of absurd reality as argued through his observations, experiments and explorations, from which his conviction is derived.

Lest one think that the four additional elements mentioned above are all that Qoheleth has advanced in his advice to enjoy life in 9:7-9, a strange idea is introduced following the 'enjoyment' advice in 9:10. An element of excellence is added to his advice on enjoyment and human activity, i.e. to do the best in one's work, to combat any idleness and pessimistic attitudes in a world of absurd reality where no  $\text{חָכְמָה}$  is found and with no attainable wisdom. The addition of this idea - striving for excellence - is attributed to the realization that there is no activity beyond death. One might have noticed that Qoheleth's concept of death in 9:10 has its preamble in the earlier verses: death is seen as one of the elements which nullify the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, the beast and the human (2:14-16; 3:19-20), it is also seen as a better alternative than having to encounter social

oppression (4:2,3) and is much better than a wealthy and long life without enjoyment (6:2,3). It is here that death is seen as a point of cessation for all human activities. This confession is crucial to Qoheleth's idea of the absence of any remembrance which leads to no זכרון and thus the הִנָּה declaration. Death marks the end of a cycle, a life span, like the individual cycle of the natural phenomena (1:4-7) where a new cycle begins and the previous cycle vanishes without any remembrance (cf. 1:11). Death as the point of cessation of the life cycle is also crucial to his later argument, i.e. the necessity of enjoying life while there is opportunity, because life is short and death is imminent (11:7f.).

Knowing that death nullifies the distinction between the wise and the fool (9:2), and that he still prefers to be alive than being dead (9:4-6), especially a life full of wisdom than a life of folly (cf. 7:11), Qoheleth turns to consider the strength and weakness of wisdom in 9:13-10:1. Though he never doubted the value and strength of wisdom, as illustrated in the story in 9:13-16, and supported by a proverbial saying in 9:17, 18a, Qoheleth nevertheless thinks wisdom is very vulnerable (9:18b-10:1).

## (2) Qoh.10:2-11:6

Having ironically pointed out the vulnerability of wisdom (9:18b; 10:1), Qoheleth returns in 10:2-11:6 to examine the issue of the unexpected and irregular in life, with a view to demonstrating his earlier reflection (9:1, 11-12) on the unknowability of various occasions in life (cf. 3:2-8). This demonstration will ultimately lead him to admit once again that humankind "cannot know the work of God who made all things" (לֹא תִדְעַ אֶת-מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אֶת-הַכֹּל) (11:5b). He concludes with the command that one should enjoy life while one has the opportunity (cf. 11:7-9).

With such a view in mind, Qoheleth has compiled a series of proverbial sayings to demonstrate the various unexpected and irregular aspects of life alongside the many regularities. He sets side by side the regularities (10:2-4, 10, 12-15, 17-20a; 11:3) and the irregularities (10:5-9, 16, 20b; 11:1-2, 4) to demonstrate the unpredictability of various situations, perhaps also attempting to demonstrate the fact that the world is full of elements of absurdity, though the word  $\text{הַכֶּלֶל}$  is never used in this unit.

For example, in between his assertion on the expected and the regular, as well as the distinction between the acts and consequences of the fool and the wise in 10:2-4 and 10:12-15, he observes the irregularities and the unexpected situations of a fool sitting at the high place, or slaves riding on horseback while the prince walks on foot in 10:5-7. These examples of irregularities also rendered the conventional teachings on the distinctions between the fool and the wise invalid. Further examples are seen in 10:8-11, where the elements of unexpectedness and irregularity are most striking, though they also demonstrate the fact that actions and their effects match in the most unexpected manner. For instance, the act of digging a pit is followed by the unreasonable and unexpected effect of falling in one's own trap (10:8a); or "one who quarries stones is hurt by them" (10:9a).

In 11:1-6, Qoheleth again elaborates on the irregular and unexpected nature of life: the bread on the water remains there for several days without decaying or flowing away with the water (11:1); the decentralizing or dispersing of one's wealth rather than keeping the capital together for times of need (11:2); the farmer who listens to the 'weather forecast' shall not succeed in anything (11:4). Examples of the regularities are also illustrated:

dark clouds will empty themselves as rain on earth (11:3a) and trees will fall where they are expected to fall (11:3b).

With these illustrations, he asserts that because various irregularities surround daily human life and that God's way of doing things is impenetrable by human wisdom (11:5), it is best for human beings to carry out their actions to the best of their understanding (11:6a), and work to the best of their ability (cf. 9:10b). However, this still does not guarantee a perfect timing for all actions nor a reasonable relationship between acts and their consequences (11:6b). Those who act according to their wisdom expecting absolute regularity may not succeed (11:4) because the activities of God are unfathomable and unknowable to human wisdom (11:2b, 5). The advice that follows in 11:6 is best understood in the light of 9:10a as an advice to strive for excellence in all human activity (cf. 7:18; 9:10), and hope for the best because there is no easy alternative (11:6) in a world full of irregularities and unexpected moments, as well as absurdity.

#### *12. Enjoy, Life is Short! Death is at hand ! (11:7-12:8)*

The unfathomability of God, the irregularities, absurdity in life and the impossibility of knowing what to expect from an action drive Qoheleth to his final advice. Like his previous advice (9:7-9), this final advice is given in the form of a command - enjoy life!

After expressing the pleasantness and desirability of life over death (11:7), Qoheleth urges one to enjoy life in all the days of one's life knowing that what comes after is absurd (11:8). The urge is followed with a command to enjoy life especially while still in one's youth, affirming that life is meant to be enjoyed (11:8). Then, by means of four imperatives *רְגֹזוּ* (rejoice), *הִלְכּוּ* (walk), *עֲבֹדוּ*

(know),  $\text{רָצַח}$  (remove), and  $\text{הִעֲבִיר}$  (put away), he encourages his readers to treasure every enjoyable moment in life while the opportunity exists (11:9-10). The advice has also made its condition clear in 11:9b, "But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment," though it is not certain what the judgment could be. In light of 2:26 and 6:2, there is the possibility that the judgment could be the taking away of joy from one's life. Although according to Qoheleth, act and consequence have little relationship and judgment is often delayed with many wicked people around unpunished, he is certain that the superior divine has the power to punish the wicked (8:2-5) and will punish the wicked (3:17). Thus, he would still opt for a righteous life. In any respect, this is in accord with the concept of joy in 2:24-26 where the act of God's judgment is illustrated, and finds support in 9:8 where he encourages one to please God even in one's enjoyment (cf. 12:13,14). This command (11:9) is followed by a description of the imminence of death, the moment of death, striking home the message that life is short and the opportunity to enjoy life is scarce, therefore, one must treasure every moment in life to find enjoyment in it.

The encouragement to enjoy life at the beginning (11:8) of the unit is set in sharp contrast to the  $\text{לֹא־יִשְׂמַח}$  statement at the end (12:8), when death prevails over life (12:7). In order to inject a sense of urgency in finding enjoyment in life, Qoheleth first emphasizes that absurdity exists even in one's youthful days (11:10); thus one must not let the elements of absurdity in life distract one from the purpose of enjoying life. Second, through the vivid description of the certainty and imminence of death in 12:1-7, Qoheleth injects a sense of urgency into his command to enjoy life while still alive. Death as the end of a life cycle is described by means of the language of imagery.

The imagery employed in Qoheleth's description in 12:1-7 does not emphasize aging or old age (never the interest of the book). Rather, the language of imagery emphasizes the certainty, the inescapability and the imminence of death, aiming to strike home the effect and awareness that death is at hand, therefore one should enjoy life now before it is too late! The phrase  $\text{עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא-} (12:1, 2,6)$  clearly emphasize the moment before a life cycle approaches its terminating point (cf. 1:4-11). There will be no remembrance of the previous cycle as it vanishes and replaced by a new cycle, a concept well founded in the poem on nature in the prologue. Since there is no remembrance, no enduring profit and effects on each individual cycles as they vanish, their ephemeral existence are the only sphere within which joy can be found. Thus, the description is meant to encourage the finding of enjoyment in life and at the same time pointing out the moment of death after which no activity exists, the end of a cycle. With the separation of the body and spirit in view in 12:7, Qoheleth concludes the description and also the main text (1:2-12:8) with the  $\text{הַבְּלִיָּה הַבְּלִיָּה}$  statement which together with 1:2 framed the main body of the book.

In sum, Qoheleth argued that although human activity yielded no  $\text{יְהִי־רָוֶן}$ , activity itself produced the  $\text{הֵלֵק}$  which is enjoyment. Human beings are to strive for excellence in all their activities for enjoyment lies within activity itself. Though life is full of absurdity, life is to be enjoyed. Although the acts of the righteous and the wicked do not often result in what one might reasonably expect, one is advised to fear the unfathomable supreme creator who has a peculiar way of directing the effects of human actions.

### 13. The Epilogue (12:9-14)

The epilogue commends the theological thought of Qoheleth to a wider readership. It provides a personal profile of Qoheleth, focusing on his professional activity (12:9-10). Qoheleth is commended as חָכָם (wise) who taught knowledge and who שָׁמַע (listen), בִּקֵּשׁ (search), and כִּבְּשׁ (compile) many proverbs (12:9). Qoheleth research and edit "words of pleasure" (דְּבַר־יְשִׁיעַ). The nature of his teaching is expressed in 12:11 and concludes with words of exhortation in 12:12-14 concerning the activity of the sages and humankind.



## CHAPTER IV

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE POSITION OF QOHELETH'S THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT WITHIN ISRAEL'S THEOLOGY

#### A. INTRODUCTION

The analysis of the structure of Qoheleth's theological thought in Chapter Two was followed by a theological reading of the book in Chapter Three. This chapter will take the results of these two previous chapters a step further in order to investigate the position of Qoheleth's theological thought in Israel's theology and society. Similar interest has also been expressed by Frank Crüsemann who remarks that "the question of what Koheleth's place in society has to do with his thinking has hardly been raised. And yet for me that is what is really interesting about him."<sup>1</sup> Crüsemann's basic methodological principle is "to relate all statements in the text [Qoheleth] to the concrete 'social whole' [i.e. society as a whole] of the time from which the text comes and to which it speaks." He follows to suggest three steps to investigate the issue at hand: "(1) investigate the fundamental breakdown of the act-consequence connection; (2) make a concrete application of my findings to some major themes of Koheleth; and (3) turn to the political and social statements of the book."<sup>2</sup> Differing from Crüsemann's

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<sup>1</sup>Frank Crüsemann, "The Unchangeable World: The 'Crisis of Wisdom' in Koheleth," in *God of the Lowly*, ed. W. Schottroff and W. Stegemann (New York: Orbis Book, 1984), pp. 57-77; trans. Matthew J. O'Connell from the German, "Die unveränderbare Welt. Überlegungen zur 'Krisis der Weisheit' beim Prediger," in *Der Gott der kleinen Leute* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1979).

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 59.

suggestion, this chapter, based on the previous theological analysis of Qoheleth, will investigate the relationship between Qoheleth's thought and its position in Israel's theology. Later in the chapter, its place in the society will also be examined, or more precisely, to answer the question: where would Qoheleth's thought place him within Israelite society?

Since Israel's theology has traditionally been regarded as being Yahwistic and Qoheleth, along with Job and Proverbs, formed the wisdom corpus of the Hebrew Bible, the task of investigating the position of Qoheleth's theological thought in Israel's theology would be benefited by a general analysis of the relation between wisdom and Yahwism. Such an analysis will help to discover common denominators between wisdom and Yahwism, which in turn will be compared with the theological thought of Qoheleth. The comparison will ascertain the compatibility and/or incompatibility of Qoheleth's theological thought with Israel's Yahwism. This will be followed by a proposal regarding the position of Qoheleth in Israelite society.

### *1. The Debate on Wisdom's 'Place' in the Old Testament*

One of the main difficulties facing Old Testament theologians is how to treat the wisdom literature; what is its relationship to the rest of the Old Testament and what is its place in Old Testament theologies. The relationship between Old Testament wisdom books and the rest of the Old Testament has generally been seen in two mutually exclusive ways. On one extreme, wisdom influence was claimed to be present everywhere in the non wisdom books. This was based on common vocabulary, subject matter and world view.<sup>3</sup> On the other

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<sup>3</sup>Donn F. Morgan, *Wisdom in the Old Testament Traditions* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981); von Rad, "The Joseph Story and Ancient

extreme, Old Testament 'Yahwism', i.e. salvation history, was superimposed onto wisdom thought, thus misconstruing wisdom thought to be merely Israel's "response".<sup>4</sup>

The first extreme has prompted Crenshaw to investigate the issue of wisdom influence outside the wisdom corpus in his article, "Method in Determining Wisdom Influence upon 'Historical' Literature,"<sup>5</sup> in which he reaches negative conclusion concerning alleged wisdom influence in many texts outside the wisdom corpus. In response to the other extreme, he remarks that "the character of the wisdom corpus resists all attempts to impose Yahwism as the norm by which to assess its validity,"<sup>6</sup> even though it is not clear what the content of Yahwism is.

Murphy, approaches the issue differently, building on von Rad's insight that "the experiences of the world were for her [Israel] always divine experiences as well, and the experiences of God were for her experience of the world."<sup>7</sup> He suggests that

The problem of the relationship between wisdom literature and other portions of the Old Testament needs to be reformulated in terms of a shared approach to reality.... It is not a question of the direct influence of the sages or of the wisdom literature, but rather of an approach to<sub>8</sub> reality which was shared by all Israelites in varying degrees.

In response to Murphy, Whybray rightly warns against the danger of

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Wisdom," in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (London: Oliver and Boyd Ltd., 1966), pp. 292-300; in *SAIW*, pp. 439-47.

<sup>4</sup>G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), "We can begin with the assertion that the wisdom practised in Israel was a response made by a Yahwism confronted with specific experiences of the world" (307).

<sup>5</sup>J.L. Crenshaw, *JBL* 88 (1969):129-142; Also in *SAIW*, pp. 481-94; "Prolegomenon," pp. 9ff.

<sup>6</sup>J.L. Crenshaw, "In Search of Divine Presence: Some Remarks Preliminary to a Theology of Wisdom," *RevExp* 74 (1977):353-69 (362).

<sup>7</sup>G. von Rad, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>8</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom - Theses and Hypotheses," in *IW*, pp. 35-42 (39).

... reducing the concept of Israelite wisdom, outside the 'wisdom books' proper, to no more than native common sense such as is to be found generally in human nature. All literature would then be 'wisdom literature', in so far as it had any kind of intellectual content, and to say of any author's work that it showed traces of wisdom thought, would be to say no more than that he was not a fool.<sup>9</sup>

Although Murphy may not want to describe all Old Testament literature as wisdom literature, nevertheless, Whybray's warning remains valid.

Despite the fact that the relationship between the wisdom corpus and the rest of the Old Testament has yet to be adequately addressed, it is, nevertheless unwarranted to deny a place for biblical wisdom literature in Old Testament theology.<sup>10</sup> In the light of the two extremes mentioned above, the search for a relation between the wisdom corpus and the non wisdom books may be understood as a quest for a relationship between wisdom theology and Yahwistic theology - 'wisdom and Yahwism.'

## 2. *Wisdom and Yahwism*

In his 1975 article "Wisdom and Yahwism," Murphy discussed this issue and expressed dissatisfaction with the understanding of Yahwism that was based solely on the decalogue, the patriarchal promises, the Exodus and Sinai events, etc., and made the following bold challenge:

... Instead of inserting wisdom into Yahwism, with Yahwism as a kind of implicit determinant of orthodoxy, one might rather

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<sup>9</sup>R.N. Whybray, "Prophecy and Wisdom," in *Israel's Prophetic Tradition: Essays in Honour of Peter Ackroyd*, eds. Richard Coggins, et al. (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), pp. 181-99 (186).

<sup>10</sup>G.E. Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (Studies in Biblical Theology 8; London: SCM Press, 1952), seems to have ignored wisdom literature and indirectly denied it a place in his biblical theology.

turn the question around: How is Yahwism to be inserted into wisdom literature, into what was the daily experience of the Israelite?<sup>11</sup>

This question prompts one to investigate the nature of Yahwism? According to Murphy, the 'Yahwism' that is to be 'inserted' into wisdom should not only be "defined exclusively by the action of God in history: the patriarchal promises, the Exodus and Sinai events, etc.,"<sup>12</sup> but also the daily experiences of the Israelite as a responsible worshipper of Yahweh. To define Yahwism exclusively in terms of God's acts in history is too narrow because there were other areas of life not really touched by any of these, for example, personal diligence, self-control, attitudes towards the poor, pride, trust in one's judgment, etc. For Murphy, Yahwism exemplifies the total religious experience of the Israelite. This concept of Yahwism, however, runs the danger of being so broad as to include everything that is branded Israelite, thus making it too ambiguous and imprecise to be useful for a comparison with wisdom.

In his 1984 S.B.L. presidential address, Murphy attempts a more precise connection between Yahwism and wisdom, via the concept of creation theology within the framework of Old Testament theology, based on the understanding of Yahwism as the religion that embraces the total religious experience of the Israelite.<sup>13</sup> This idea of connecting creation theology to wisdom theology is, of course, nothing new (cf. W. Zimmerli<sup>14</sup>). This has been stated more recently by H.-J. Hermisson, "before we can ask about wisdom in Old Testa-

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<sup>11</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Yahwism," in *No Famine in the Land: Studies in honor of John L. McKenzie*, eds. J.W. Flanagan and A.W. Robinson (Montana: Scholars Press, 1975), pp. 117-26 (118).

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 119-20.

<sup>13</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Creation," *JBL* 104 (1985):3-11 (3).

<sup>14</sup>"The Place and the Limit of Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology," *SJT* 17 (1964):145-58. In *SAIW*, pp. 314-38.

ment theology, we first have to ask about the place of creation theology in wisdom."<sup>15</sup> To evaluate the arguments of Zimmerli, Hermisson or Murphy, one will need to know, first of all, what creation theology is and how this facet of Yahwism, as distinct from redemptive history as another facet of Yahwism, has been integrated into wisdom thought. Secondly, one needs to delineate, if possible, the content of wisdom theology, which shares the concept of creation theology as a common denominator with Yahwism.

### 3. *Wisdom and Creation*

The creation faith of ancient Israel has generally been considered by scholars to be chronologically late - attested in Second Isaiah, the Priestly writing and the late Psalms - and theologically secondary compared with the primary Old Testament concept of the history of salvation. Although von Rad has argued that creation faith was presupposed in the older tradition even if it appears more prominently in the later texts, he maintains that "the doctrine of creation was never able to attain to independent existence in its own right apart from soteriology."<sup>16</sup> This subservient role of creation was strongly challenged by H.H. Schmid<sup>17</sup> who

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<sup>15</sup>H.-J. Hermisson, "Observations on the Creation Theology in Wisdom," in *IW*, pp. 43-57 (44).

<sup>16</sup>G. von Rad, "The Problem of the Old Testament Doctrine of Creation," in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and other Essays*, pp. 131-43. In *COT*, pp. 53-64 and noted by B.W. Anderson in "Introduction: Mythopoeic and Theological Dimensions of Biblical Creation Faith," in *COT*, pp. 1-24 (7), "The independence of creation from soteriology, in his [von Rad's] view, came into Israelite faith through the influence of wisdom." G. von Rad's view is also found in Davie Napier's article, "On Creation-Faith in the Old Testament," *Interp* 10 (1956):21-42.

<sup>17</sup>H.H. Schmid, "Creation, Righteousness, and Salvation: 'Creation Theology' as the Broad Horizon of Biblical Theology," trans. B.W. Anderson and D. G. Johnson, in *COT*, pp. 102-17 (102); *idem*, "Schöpfung, Gerechtigkeit und Heil: Schöpfungsteologie als Gesamthorizont biblischer Theologie" *ZTK* 70 (1973):1-19 (15); Also Theodore M. Ludwig, "The Traditions of the Establishing of the Earth in

argued that creation theology has a much more central theological significance than has been generally realized - indeed, he sees it as the broad horizon of biblical theology as a whole, which is, of course, another issue.

Disagreeing with von Rad and Schmid, Zimmerli based on his study of the creation narrative in Genesis, particularly Gen.1:28 which legitimized humankind's going out to master the world, was the first to argue that "wisdom thinks resolutely within the framework of a theology of creation."<sup>18</sup> Despite Murphy's criticism that his approach is "too apologetic", Zimmerli, nevertheless, coined the phrase, "wisdom theology is creation theology."<sup>19</sup> Subsequently, scholarly interest in creation theology and its relationship to wisdom theology acted as a catalyst for the general acceptance of creation theology as a basis for the understanding of wisdom theology within the framework of Old Testament theology.<sup>20</sup> Creation theology is thus deemed by many to be an important and potentially

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Deutero-Isaiah," *JBL* 92 (1973):345-57 (357), argues that "creation faith in Deutero-Isaiah is not merely subsumed under election or redemption faith. The cultic tradition of creation appears to stand as an independent element in Deutero-Isaiah,..."

<sup>18</sup>W. Zimmerli, "The Place and the Limit of Wisdom," p. 148; In "*Ort und Grenze der Weisheit im Rahmen der alttestamentlichen Theologie*," in *SPOA*, pp. 121-37 (123), he states, "Soll diese Eigenart theologisch gekennzeichnet werden, so wird man sagen müssen: Die Weisheit des Alten Testaments hält sich ganze entschlossen im Horizonte der Schöpfung. Ihre Theologie ist Schöpfungstheologie."

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*; James L. Crenshaw, "In Search of Divine Presence," p. 362; H.-J. Hermisson, "Observations on the Creation Theology in Wisdom," p. 43; R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom - Theses and Hypotheses," pp.36-37.

<sup>20</sup>Of course, the tremendous number of scholarly studies on 'creation and wisdom' in Proverbs 8:22 has an intense impact on this issue. Gerhard Hasel in a recent article, "A Decade of Old Testament Theology: Retrospect and Prospect," *ZAW* 93 (1981):165-83, includes creation theology as one of the criteria for determining the success of a biblical theology. Recent treatment of the issue can be seen in R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Creation"; H.-J. Hermisson, "Observations on the Creation Theology in Wisdom."



fruitful concept by which to understand the role of wisdom thought in the Old Testament.

However, although the majority of scholars would agree, Preuss rejects this understanding in a series of studies.<sup>21</sup> Along with Mendenhall, Preuss asserts that wisdom is a foreign body within the Hebrew Bible and therefore cannot be considered Yahwistic. In response to Preuss, Murphy comments that "Preuss poses the question in the wrong fashion since the fact of the matter is that Israel worshipped Yahweh as the creator."<sup>22</sup>

If, as most scholars had understood, creation theology is inseparable from 'wisdom theology', thus making wisdom and Yahwism related via the concept of creation theology, then the question I asked earlier needs to be addressed: what is 'creation theology'? and how does it relate to 'wisdom theology', granted that 'wisdom theology' is definable? Interestingly, as Crenshaw observed in 1976, "Astonishingly, to this day no one has devoted a full scale essay to this problem despite the constant refrain in scholarly works that wisdom thought and creation theology are inseparably bound together."<sup>23</sup> Neither had any one attempted to delineate the

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<sup>21</sup>H.-D. Preuss, "Erwägungen zum theologischen Ort alttestamentlicher Weisheitsliteratur," *EvT* 30 (1970):393-417; *idem*, "Das Gottes bild der älteren Weisheit Israels," *VTSup* 23 (1972):117-45; *idem*, "Alttestamentliche Weisheit in christlicher Theologie," in *Questions Disputées d'Ancien Testament*, ed. C. Brekelmans (BETL 33; Louvain: 1974):165-81; cf. G. Mendenhall, "The Shady Side of Wisdom: The Date and Purpose of Genesis 3," in *A Light Unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob M. Myers*, eds. H.N. Bream, et al. (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1974):319-34 (324), also argues along this line, "With Solomon's charisma of wisdom, received at the old Gibeonite high place, almost certainly in connection with a pagan incubation ritual, the old pagan tradition of some gods as the source of royal or other wisdom was reintroduced into Palestinian politics. And this had nothing to do with the Yahwistic tradition, while the gods as the donors of technical wisdom goes back at least to old Sumerian myth."

<sup>22</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Yahwism," pp. 117-18 (123); *idem*, "Hebrew Wisdom," *JAOS* 101 (1981):21-34 (27).

<sup>23</sup>J.L. Crenshaw, "Prolegomenon," in *SAIW*, pp. 1-45 (26).

content of wisdom theology. Since then there have been several studies investigating creation theology as it relates to wisdom thought.

The following will investigate what creation theology is, particularly in relation to wisdom thought, since the coined phrase 'wisdom theology is creation theology' has gained popular acceptance. Its validity or legitimacy for understanding the wisdom corpus of the Hebrew Bible, particularly the book of Qoheleth will also be assessed.

## B. WHAT IS CREATION THEOLOGY?

Although Zimmerli coined the phrase 'wisdom theology is creation theology,' he never seems to have justified it by demonstrating the role of creation in wisdom thought.<sup>24</sup> Crenshaw comments correctly, "Any attempt to provide such an analysis of creation theology within the framework of wisdom needs to clarify the role of creation in the total thought of Israel before going on to demonstrate the distinctiveness of the function of creation theology in wisdom literature." The following will examine the contributions of various scholars to the issue of creation theology at large, before its implication in wisdom literature, and particularly in Qoheleth, can be construed.

After surveying various scholarly opinions on the subject of creation theology, Crenshaw makes two observations: 1) "Creation cannot be divorced from the concept of chaos (H. Gunkel)." and 2)

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<sup>24</sup>H.-J. Hermisson thinks Zimmerli only understands his own statement from a negative point of view, and Hermisson attempts a positive appreciation of the statement in "Observations on the Creation Theology in Wisdom," p. 44.

"Creation is not a primary datum of Israel's faith, but plays a subservient role to redemption (von Rad)."<sup>25</sup>

Schmid, however, rejects von Rad's view that creation is secondary in Old Testament theology, and argues that "the doctrine of creation, namely, the belief that God has created and is sustaining the order of the world in all its complexities, is not a peripheral theme of biblical theology but is plainly the fundamental theme."<sup>26</sup> He based his analysis on the concept of myth in creation in Israel's ancient Near Eastern neighbours and sees connections between 'creation,' 'order' and 'justice'.<sup>27</sup>

Taking his first observation, the concept of chaos, seriously, Crenshaw proposes three distinct points concerning creation and wisdom:

1) the threat of chaos in the cosmic, political, and social realms evokes a response in terms of creation theology; 2) in wisdom thought, creation functions primarily as defense of divine justice; and 3) the centrality of the question of God's integrity in Israelite literature places creation theology at the center of the theological enterprise.<sup>28</sup>

It is worth noting that in Crenshaw's exemplification of the second point, only Job, Proverbs and Ben Sirach are found appropriate, whereas Qoheleth is the major example for the first point.<sup>29</sup>

Although scholars generally understand biblical wisdom as a search for 'order', Murphy argues against it by suggesting,

... As I see it, wisdom's alleged search for order is our modern reconstruction. It asks a question never raised by

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<sup>25</sup>J.L. Crenshaw, "Prolegomenon," pp. 26-27.

<sup>26</sup>H.H. Schmid, *op. cit.*, p.111.

<sup>27</sup>H.H. Schmid, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-105, states that "In short, ancient Near Eastern cosmic, political, and social order find their unity under the concept of 'creation' ... law (in the legal realm), nature (famine, drought) and politics (threat of the enemy) are only aspects of one comprehensive order of creation."

<sup>28</sup>J.L. Crenshaw, "Prolegomenon," p. 27.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 26-35.

Israel: On what conviction is your wisdom based? Answer: on the order of the universe. Such an answer seems logical and probably correct; but Israel never asked it, nor consciously assumed the answer that we give to it. Secondly, the emphasis on order seems to me to be induced by an overreliance upon the parallelism between Egyptian *Maat* and Hebrew  $\text{הַחֵן}$ .<sup>30</sup>

But Murphy is not consistent in his view because 'order' becomes a major theme in his formulation of "Wisdom - Theses and Hypotheses."<sup>31</sup> Equally ineffective is his view of wisdom as a "shared approach to reality" among the Israelite and the ancient Near Eastern people. In his 1984 presidential address, after criticizing the concept of creation and wisdom as articulated by von Rad, Westermann and Zimmerli as "mirror images" and accusing them of housing creation in an "insecure home",<sup>32</sup> Murphy proposes a two-fold concept of creation: "1) Creation as 'beginnings,' and 2) Creation as the arena of human experience where people lived out their lives."<sup>33</sup>

Approaching the issue of creation theology differently, Anderson<sup>34</sup> argues for five theological dimensions of biblical creation faith, based on the function and role of mythopoeic language: 1) Creation of a People, 2) Creation and Order, 3) Creation and Creaturely Dependence, 4) Creation as Origination, and 5) Creation and New Creation. According to Anderson, not all of the five dimensions need be present at one time or in one text. It is one's task to understand how each is received in a particular circle or stream of tradition and to perceive how they are related in the Old

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<sup>30</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom - Theses and Hypotheses," p. 41, n. 4.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 35-36, "Biblical wisdom issues from the effort to discover order in human life."

<sup>32</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Creation," p. 4.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 5ff.

<sup>34</sup>B.W. Anderson, "Introduction: Mythopoeic and Theological Dimensions of Biblical Creation Faith," in *COT*, pp. 1-24.

Testament. It appears that Anderson's five theological dimensions of biblical creation faith follow closely the path of salvation history.

Another line of thought on creation theology is found in Hermisson's recent article, where he makes several observations based on Proverbs 10-29, the Wisdom Psalm 104, Psalm 89 and Job 38-41. He observes that,

... 1) Creation is the basis not only of regularity, but of a meaningful and satisfactory order of events in the world, a purposefulness of created beings and things, 2) the image of Yahweh's creative activity as the foundation of the orders of the world: meaningful and rational orders, and also at the borderline of cognition, a knowing which itself was created by Yahweh and thus properly associates with the orders and function, and 3) Creation did not only happen at the beginning of the world, but takes place continuously; therefore, the orders have not become rigid, but necessarily remain flexible.<sup>35</sup>

For some reason, he does not include any passage from Qoheleth in his attempt to formulate a creation theology.

Attempting to distinguish 'sacred' and 'profane' wisdom, McKane and Scott argue that the old proverbs in the Old Testament were originally secular and were later transformed by the Yahwist into more religiously flavoured wisdom sayings.<sup>36</sup> This concept falls into the extreme of superimposing Yahwism onto wisdom thought, thus inviting the criticism from Murphy that "A distinction between religious and secular is not applicable to Old Testament wisdom teaching,"<sup>37</sup> though "one cannot deny that the Israelite distinguish-

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<sup>35</sup>Hermisson, "Observations on the Creation Theology in Wisdom," pp. 46-47.

<sup>36</sup>William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970); R.B.Y. Scott, "Wise and Foolish, Righteous and Wicked," in *Studies in the Religion of Ancient Israel* (VTSup 23; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972), pp. 146-65 (164), "McKane's distinction between sayings with or without religious content and terminology is justified, but can be carried further."

<sup>37</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom - Theses and Hypotheses," p. 40; cf. F.M. Wilson, "Sacred and Profane? The Yahwistic Redaction of Proverbs Reconsidered," in *The Listening Heart*, eds. K.G. Hoglund, et al.

ed between the two but they are not separated as independent areas. The world, as the creation of God, is the arena of his activity and of human life."<sup>38</sup>

Jenks<sup>39</sup> proposes three basic theological presuppositions or principles that undergird even the oldest section of Proverbs, chapters 10-29:

1) That this is an orderly world, ruled by Yahweh, its wise creator; 2) That knowledge of this order is possible to the person who opens himself to wisdom; and 3) That the wise man who thus aligns himself with God's order will experience good things, while the fool will suffer for his folly.

Without going into detail, it is obvious to any reader that Qoheleth would disagree with all three of Jenks' theological presuppositions.

Another attempt to associate Qoheleth's theological thought with creation is that of Müller<sup>40</sup> who attempts to depict the thought structure (*Denkstruktur*) of Qoheleth by means of a phenomenological model and concludes that

The thought of Qoheleth is shaped by the structure of a "creator" religion; the weakness of his religious outlook is that the world order established by the heavenly creator falls victim to a value vacuum. The scepticism of Qoheleth matches this pessimistic ambience of his religion; it is so radical in

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(Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), pp. 313-34.

<sup>38</sup>R.E. Murphy, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-41, n. 3. He cites Ps.19; Job 28:24-27; Wis.13:1-19, as examples that manifested various aspects of the divine - even in the most 'worldly' things.

<sup>39</sup>Alan W. Jenks, "Theological Presuppositions of Israel's Wisdom Literature," *HBT* 7 (1985):43-76 (44).

<sup>40</sup>H.-P. Müller, "Neige der althebräischen 'Weisheit'. Zum Denken Qohäläts," *ZAW* 90 (1978):238-64. Müller attempts to "(1) die Denkstruktur des <Predigers Salomo> mit Hilfe eines phänomenologischen Modells nachzeichnen, das auf ihn m. W. noch nicht angewendet worden ist, sie suchen (2) die geistesgeschichtlichen und zugleich politisch-sozialen Bedingungen zu prüfen, die die Ausprägung dieser Denkstruktur bei Qohälät erklärbar machen; schließlich nennen sie (3) einige Motive, die die theologische Bedeutung der althebräischen Weisheit, wo sie blüht und wo sie zur Neige geht, für heutiges Verstehen erhellen könnten" (238). Quotation from Müller's own English summary in p. 264.

its grounding in the ways of God that it ultimately prevents man from passing any judgment upon the creator and his world, and so opens the way to a theologically motivated joy in living. The background to Qoheleth in the history of thought is Palestinian Hellenism of the third century B.C. This allowed Egyptian and Mesopotamian motifs which were consistent with the spirit of the age to grow together into a unity. Its social location is to be found in a displaced Upper Class which was deprived of its power by the Diadochi and their collaborators.

It is doubtful that Qoheleth would be aroused by a theological motivation to enjoy life if he is a sceptic and his religion pessimistic. It is also difficult to perceive how Qoheleth could have believed in a world order established by the heavenly creator on the one hand, and believed such an establishment has fallen victim to a value vacuum on the other hand. Furthermore, it is most unlikely that Qoheleth would "prevent man from passing any judgment upon the creator and his world," for he does it himself in his concept of  $\text{הֵבֵל}$  (absurdity). Müller does not see much of Yahwism in Qoheleth's thought, although he labels Qoheleth's theology as a 'creator' or 'originator' religion.

In view of the diversity, complexity and uncertainty of various scholarly understandings of creation theology, it is difficult, though may be appropriate, at this juncture to sum up what they have said about creation theology. The following is a collection of what various scholars have understood to be creation theology and their legitimacy and relevancy as well as appropriateness to Qoheleth's theological thought will be assessed accordingly.

1) Creation as "beginnings" (Murphy), 2) Creation and chaos; "the threat of chaos in the cosmic, political, and social realms evokes a response in terms of creation theology" (Crenshaw). 3) Creation, order, justice; "In short, ancient Near Eastern cosmic, political and social order find their unity under the concept of 'creation' (Schmid); "this is an orderly world, ruled by Yahweh,

its wise creator" (Jenks); "creation functions primarily as defense of divine justice" (Crenshaw); is "the basis not only of regularity, but of a meaningful and satisfactory order of events in the world, a purposefulness of created beings and things" (Hermisson), and 4) "creation activity of God deals with the creation of man with human situations, or matters within man's sphere of activity" (Hermisson), thus creation may be understood "as the arena of human experience where people live out their lives" (Murphy).

### C. 'CREATION THEOLOGY' AND QOHELETH'S THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT

Since his 1964 article, Zimmerli has continued to recognize wisdom as a "legitimate" element in Israel's theology. Perhaps he has realized the difficulty of applying his concept of creation theology and wisdom theology to Qoheleth and Job and urges the need for weighing the importance of Job and Ecclesiastes in the total view of wisdom.<sup>41</sup> Taking Zimmerli's point seriously, it remains difficult, if not impossible, for one to construe a consistent and total view of wisdom theology under the concept of creation theology, largely due to the apparent scepticism in Qoheleth, and perhaps Job. Hermisson, however, thinks that the difficulty is only an apparent smokescreen when he remarks that "anyone who sets out systematically to look for the theology of creation in the 'proper' wisdom writings will arrive at a result which is disappointing at first."<sup>42</sup> He asserts that "creation is the basis of a meaningful and

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<sup>41</sup>W. Zimmerli, "Erwägungen zur Gestalt einer alttestamentlichen Theologie," in *Studien zur alttestamentlichen Theologie und Prophetie: Gesammelte Aufsätze II* (Theologische Bücherei 51; Munich: Kaiser, 1974), pp. 27-54 (45-7); cf. R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Yahwism," p. 125, n. 4.

<sup>42</sup>H.-J. Hermisson, "Observations on the Creation Theology in



satisfactory order of events in the world, a purposefulness of created beings and things." But when he comes to Qoheleth, Hermisson confesses the incompatibility of such a concept of creation with Qoheleth, "for Ecclesiastes, ... not all wisdom managed to resolve the perplexity over the good order and the incomprehensibility of the world and the aloofness of the creator God."<sup>43</sup> He also plainly admits that "[creation] 'theology' is hardly presentable in the form of individual proverbs; therefore if only on the ground of their conformity to the literary type, one must not expect too much of the older collections of Proverbs, but must look for other texts."<sup>44</sup> It is not impossible that this comment of Hermisson also implies that Qoheleth does not conform to the convention of creation theology. Taking this hint as a departure, we will examine the elements of creation theology and assess its validity in Qoheleth's theological thought.

### 1. Creation as 'Beginning'

Although creation as the 'story' or 'doctrine' of 'beginnings' is one of Murphy's two proposed elements for creation theology, he states that "the contribution of wisdom on this score has been ambiguous because of the uncertainty of the translation of מְנַחֵם (craftsman or nursling?) in Prov. 8:30."<sup>45</sup> Despite Murphy's assigning a central role to this text in his articulation of creation as 'beginning', it is difficult to see why he does so, especially

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Wisdom," p. 43.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>45</sup>R. E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Creation," p. 5.

when, following von Rad,<sup>46</sup> he perceives in Prov. 8:22-31 a divine origin for 'Lady Wisdom', identifying her as the 'Lord'.

Anderson is more explicit in his discussion of creation under the theological dimension of 'Creation and Originality'. Basing himself on the priestly creation story and Job 38, he argues that "the story speaks of a new beginning in God's purpose, that 1) a cosmic order that is without blemish and is harmonious in all its parts, and 2) it portrays the radical dependence of the cosmic order upon the transcendent Creator."<sup>47</sup>

What is Qoheleth's response to the above concept of creation as the beginning? To be sure, Qoheleth has never doubted it, in fact he even affirms the concept of "creation as the 'beginning'" which stresses that God is the creator who brings the world into existence (Qoh. 1:4-7; 3:11; cf. 12:1). But he is even more concerned with the purpose and meaning of human activity within such a created world, of which he either concludes with the rhetorical question "who knows?" expecting a negative answer (Qoh. 2:19; 3:21; 6:12; 8:1) or cannot find out (Qoh. 3:11; 7:14,24,27-29; 8:17). Qoheleth's understanding of creation in terms of 'order', as described by Anderson, is limited only to the order of the cosmic events; he is never sure of the human events. This is contrary to the ancient Near Eastern view of creation and order which saw a direct relation between cosmic order and social-ethical order, which will be discussed below at point three.

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<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 9, but Murphy thinks von Rad has not gone far enough just by identifying wisdom with 'order'. He draws on von Rad's interpretation of Prov.3:19 that "God established the earth into wisdom, not by wisdom," and goes on "to identify the Lady Wisdom with the Lord, as indicated by her very origins and her authority."

<sup>47</sup>B.W. Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

## 2. Creation and Chaos

The understanding of creation theology in terms of order and chaos came about largely as the result of mythological interpretation of the creation story. The struggle between the creator and chaos, good and evil, light and darkness, the oppressor and the saviour are well known in ancient Near Eastern mythologies. Without going into the whole arena of the battle motif, the sea monster and the struggle with chaos motif in ancient Near Eastern myths, one wonders whether Qoheleth needs any of these mythologies in his reflection of daily human experience? In his Poem of Time (3:1-8), there are opposite pairs, but his presupposition is far from the battle motif between the creator and chaos. Neither does he, in his description of the cycle of activity (1:4-11), especially when he describes the sea (1:7), have in mind the battle between Ba'lu and the sea god, Yammu, of the Ugaritic myth. Neither do the struggles between the rich and the poor, the wise and the fool, the strong and the weak, the righteous and the wicked, etc., exemplify the struggles between chaos and order. They merely describe Qoheleth's observations of the various facets of daily human experience. They never reflect any battle motif between order and chaos.

However, Crenshaw sees the intrusion of chaos in Qoh. 7:29, where he suggests that "The meaning of the verse is clear in spite of these difficulties (הַשְׁבִּיחוֹת, 7:29; הַשְׁבִּיחוֹת, 7:25,27). It asserts that humankind alone is responsible for the corruption of the order of the created world."<sup>48</sup> One wonders whether Crenshaw reads too much of the order and chaos motif into Qoheleth. Nowhere in Qoh. 7:29 is humanity identified with the force of chaos in creation. Qoheleth merely asserts that humankind have chosen to pursue their own

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<sup>48</sup>J.L. Crenshaw, "Prolegomenon," p. 28.

(corrupted) way despite the intention of the creator to create them 'upright'. Qoheleth, in his concept of  $\text{לְהַבִּיל}$ , promotes the idea that absurdity abounds in human activity. He never implies that human-kind's non-'uprightness' is the cause of the absurdity in human activity. Despite the fact, as recognized by Qoheleth, that God has made everything 'beautiful' ( $\text{יְפָיִף}$ , 3:11), human activity is haunted by absurdity. Certainly the  $\text{יְפָיִף}$  in 3:11 does not grow out of a victory battle of any kind. If there is any sense of chaos in Qoheleth, it is to be sought in his concept of  $\text{לְהַבִּיל}$  (i.e. 3:16; 6:2; 7:15; 8:10,14) and his exposition on the idea of irregularity (9:11; 10:6-9; 11:1,4). But even in them, chaos is only perceived from the human's point of view because the occasions where chaos - absurdity and irregularity - occurs are in the hands of God (3:11; 9:11,12) and God is never perceived by Qoheleth as chaos. Qoheleth's view of the absolute sovereign creator who gives and takes is never envisaged in the battle motif between chaos and order in ancient Near Eastern mythologies.

### 3. Creation, Order, Justice

The concept of order in creation is forcefully argued by Schmid,<sup>49</sup> on the basis of his studies of ancient Near Eastern mythological texts and Egyptian wisdom literature. Drawing implications from the myth of creation and its relation to the New Year's Festival, Schmid argues a close relationship between creation and order.

First, he argues that in all ancient Near Eastern nations, "creation faith did not deal only, indeed not even primarily, with the origin of the world. Rather, it was concerned above all with the present world and the natural environment of humanity now."

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<sup>49</sup>H.H. Schmid, "Creation, Righteousness, and Salvation," in *COT*, pp. 103-5.

Secondly, he argues that "the order established through creation and newly constituted every year is not only the renewal of nature; it is just as much the order of the state." This he claims to be found in the motif of the battle against chaos which belongs to creation typology. He argues that

... In Mesopotamia, Ugarit, and Israel the *Chaoskampf* appears not only in cosmological contexts but just as frequently - and this was fundamentally true right from the first - in political contexts. The repulsion and destruction of the enemy, and thereby the maintenance of political order, always constitute one of the major dimensions of the battle against chaos. The enemy are none other than a manifestation of chaos which must be driven back.<sup>50</sup>

Thirdly, he argues from the Code of Hammurabi, especially the prologue, and the Babylonian *Enūma elish*, that "legal order belongs to the order of creation."

Thus he concludes that "ancient Near Eastern cosmic, political, and social order find their unity under the concept of 'creation.'" This, he claims, explains

... why in the whole ancient Near East, including Israel, an offense in the legal realm obviously has effects in the realm of nature (drought, famine) or in the political sphere (threat of the enemy). Law, nature, and politics are only aspects of one comprehensive order of creation.<sup>51</sup>

With reference to wisdom and creation, Schmid sees "a close connection between cosmic and social-ethical order," especially in the realm of ancient Near Eastern wisdom. To him, "the realization of the ethical-social dimension in wisdom is nothing other than the realization of the original order of creation." This concept, Schmid and others believe, "was given conceptual expression in ancient Egypt, where *Maat*, the concept for the order of creation,

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

is at once the central concept in both legal literature and wisdom literature."<sup>52</sup>

This concept of Schmid is challenged, not only by Murphy's statement, as pointed out earlier, "wisdom's alleged search for order is our modern reconstruction,"<sup>53</sup> but also finds incompatibility in Qoheleth's theological thought. Although in the formal sense of the book, Qoheleth appears to be searching for an order, in substance, Qoheleth actually seeks to argue through his observation and experience concerning the activity of humankind who live in a world of absurdity (לְהִלְכֻלְכֵּי), where act and consequence has little relationship. Qoheleth's aim is never in search of a cosmic order, although he observed the fact that the natural world exists according to its own course (1:4-7). It is doubtful whether Qoheleth entertains Schmid's idea that "an offense in the legal realm has effects in the realms of nature (draught, famine) or in the political sphere (threat of the enemy)." Neither does Qoheleth perceive the world in Jenks' terms: "this is an orderly world, ruled by Yahweh, its wise creator," or as Hermisson understands it, "creation is the basis not only of regularity, but of a meaningful and satisfactory order of events in the world, a purposefulness of created beings and things." It would be an affront to Qoheleth's wisdom, if creation is thought to have been perceived by him as "primarily a defense of divine justice," to use Crenshaw's words.

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<sup>52</sup>On this score, Schmid, *ibid.*, p. 115, n. 8, draws support from Otto Eissfeldt, *Prolegomena zur Frage der Gesetzgebung und Rechtsprechung in Ägypten*, p. 150, "The central concept, around which all the powers of government are oriented and which in the juridical sense may be regarded as the most general element of law, is *Maat*"; H. Brunner, *Die Weisheitsliteratur*, p. 93, "The central concept of wisdom teaching is that of *Maat*, 'law', 'justice', 'the primal power'; and S. Morenz, *Ägyptische Religion*, p. 120, "... the Egyptian ethic and its innermost aspect is *Maat*."

<sup>53</sup>Murphy, "Wisdom - Theses and Hypotheses," p. 41, n. 4; "Wisdom and Yahwism," pp. 120ff.

Concerning the legal and socio-ethical dimensions of order in creation, no doubt social justice has been a major theme in ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature as well as in the Old Testament.<sup>54</sup> Although social injustice, i.e. political oppression (4:1), the reward of the wicked, the suffering of the righteous (3:16; 5:7), is observed as a fact of life by Qoheleth, neither he nor God ever try to make right what is crooked or to establish the correlations between 'right' and 'crooked' (1:15; 7:13). Instead, he simply acknowledges their existence and unchangeability since the authority is with God whose activity is unknown to humankind (8:17). Social injustice is a phenomenon that is inscrutable, unpredictable and beyond human ability to mutate. The concerns of Qoheleth are not with the origins of evil, the cause and effect of the existence of social injustice (though he mentions it in passing in 8:11) or the doctrine of retribution. Rather he is concerned with the art of survival (7:16-18; 8:12-13) in a world where injustice abounds and act has little relation to consequence. He is even more concerned with the formulation of one's course in life - to enjoy life while opportunity exists - knowing and accepting that the existence of injustice and death comes upon both righteous and wicked indiscriminately. Thus, Schimd's understanding of social justice and creation is incompatible with Qoheleth's theological thought.

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<sup>54</sup>Léon Epsztein, *Social Justice in the Ancient Near East and the People of the Bible*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1986), p. 140, is a recent attempt to survey the subject and concludes "the quest for social justice, which elsewhere came sharply to a halt (Mesopotamia, cf. T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 1976) or suffered a long eclipse (Egypt), was to be pursued by the people of the Bible almost without interruption down to our own days."

#### 4. *Creation as the arena of human activity*

The concept of creation as the arena of human activity where people live out their lives is proposed by Murphy as part of his two-fold concept of creation. He understands "creation to be the whole range of existing things, from humans to ants, not excluding the abyss and Leviathan. This is the world open to human experience." Hermisson thinks the older proverbs promote a similar idea, that the "creation activity of God deals with the creation of man, with human situations, or matters within man's sphere of activity." While defining creation in terms of the 'arena' or 'sphere' of human activity is broad enough to include practically 'everything under the sun', it runs the danger of being too vague and ineffective as a meaningful and useful concept. No doubt, Qoheleth is aware of the sphere of human existence and activity, as reflected in the prologue (1:4-7) where he describes the continuous active world of natural phenomena within which humans exist and act. But if that is creation theology, it would be saying nothing more than the obvious (perhaps, creation theology is the statement of the obvious). Surely Qoheleth's theological thought is more profound than merely identifying the sphere of human experience, which he does only in the prologue. He is more fascinated by what is happening within the arena of human activity. Understanding creation as "continuous and ongoing, providing the fundamental parameters within which humans live and die," as Murphy<sup>55</sup> and Hermisson<sup>56</sup> did, is only peripheral to Qoheleth's thought. To discover whether anything endures within the sphere where "one generation goes and one

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<sup>55</sup>R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Creation," p. 6.

<sup>56</sup>Hermisson, "Observations on the Creation Theology in Wisdom," p. 47.



generation comes" is one of his tasks and his firm conclusion is that nothing endures forever; no enduring remembrance, no enduring profit (Qoh. 1:3-11, 14).

### 5. Conclusion

Creation theology, as conceived by various scholars to be the theology of Wisdom, both with its complexity, variety and sophistication, has fallen short of being the centre of the theological thought of Qoheleth. It is surprising to realize how little attention has been paid to the wisdom of Qoheleth in the course of formulating wisdom theology. What constitutes the heart of wisdom theology will remain an open question until a comprehensive theological framework of the wisdom corpus (Job, Proverbs, Qoheleth) is provided. Wilson rightly comments that "Whatever the abstract possibilities of relating wisdom to creation, whatever the religious function of wisdom in other ancient Near Eastern cultures, the theology of wisdom in Israel must be understood in terms of the elaborations of this theology in Israel's own wisdom literature."<sup>57</sup>

Although being an ancient sage, and perhaps being aware of the wisdom of his neighbour, Qoheleth's wisdom hardly conforms to the Egyptian *Maat* or the order and chaos motif. He observed, experienced and acknowledged the existence of the cosmic and social events in his world. He acknowledged אֱלֹהִים as the wise Creator (cf. Qoh. 12:1) who has made everything beautiful in its own time, yet who is hidden from human wisdom (3:11; 7:14; 8:17; 11:5). Creation is something Qoheleth accepts as fact, but it is marginal to his theological thought structure. As observed by Vriezen, "He reasons from personal experience and on that basis all that he can retain

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<sup>57</sup>F.M. Wilson, "Sacred and Profane? The Yahwistic Redaction of Proverbs Reconsidered," in *The Listening Heart*, pp. 314-34 (329).

is belief in the Creator ... Even so we should not simply call him a sceptic."<sup>58</sup> Qoheleth's theological thought has prompted Vriezen to remark further that "No wonder, then, that the history of the canon shows that Ecclesiastes was always considered a border-line case as regards canonicity."<sup>59</sup>

Qoheleth's concern is to understand the world of reality and to determine what is the best course for him and humankind within the realities of life. In the process of understanding the reality of the world of human activity by means of observation, experiment, reflection and meditation, he formulated a theological framework. If Vriezen's remark is correct, and Qoheleth is not a sceptic, why then is Qoheleth "considered a border-line case as regards canonicity?" Perhaps, this has nothing to do with his scepticism. But in either case, the nature of Qoheleth's theology would be a crucial factor. What is Qoheleth's theological perspective, anyway? Would his theology label him a Yahwist? anti-Yahwist? or "middle-of-the-road"? Where does he stand theologically in Israel's theology?

#### D. QOHELETH'S THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

In order to determine the position of Qoheleth's theological thought within Israel's theology, one needs to delineate his theological perspectives. The following will first assess the theological perspectives of Qoheleth with a view to understanding whether he is a Yahwist or an anti-Yahwist or somewhere in between. Having established that the theology of Qoheleth is neither an authentic Yahwistic nor anti-Yahwistic theology, I will attempt to propose an

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<sup>58</sup>Th.C. Vriezen, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (London: Lutterworth, 1967), p. 270.

<sup>59</sup>Th.C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology*, 2nd edn. (Massachusetts: Charles T. Branford Co., 1970), p. 84.

alternative statement of his theological position which would truly represent his theology as one that does not contain a polemic against Yahwism in its broadest sense, but one that is faithful to the daily experience of most Israelites.

### 1. *His Awareness of Yahwism*

Despite the alleged scepticism and pessimism in Qoheleth's theological thought, there is evidence that possibly reflects his awareness of the Yahwism of his day, as can be seen in his awareness of the book of Genesis and the Mosaic Law code.

#### a. *His Awareness of Genesis.*

In his observations of cosmic and social-ethical events, Qoheleth seems aware of Genesis 1-11. In fact, Hertzberg has suggested that Qoheleth might have had the book of Genesis in front of him when he composed the book.<sup>60</sup> Whether Qoheleth follows Genesis indiscriminately or with other intentions in mind needs to be studied. However, it is clear that he accepts the fact that God (אֱלֹהִים) has created the world and humankind should fear him (3:11; 12:1).

#### (1) *Qoheleth and Genesis 1-3*

The הֶבְרָל theme in Qoheleth has been regarded as one of the crucial themes in the theological thought structure of Qoheleth. If one reads the book with Genesis 1-3 in mind, the הֶבְרָל theme can be seen as Qoheleth's doubt concerning God's purpose in creation: especially in Gen. 1:2f where God creates a 'good' (טוֹב) world out of the 'formless' (תוֹהוּ) and 'void' (בְּהוֹוֵה) cosmos. This is not the same as saying that Qoheleth does not believe God has a purpose. Far

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<sup>60</sup>H.W. Hertzberg, *Der Prediger* (KAT 17 ; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1963), p. 230, "das Buch Qoh ist geschrieben mit Gn 1-4 vor den Augen seines Verfassers; die Lebensanschauung Qoh's ist an der Schöpfungsgeschichte gebildet."

from it, Qoheleth never questions God's purpose in creation (cf. 3:11; 7:14, 29a); rather, he is doubtful if anyone can know and find out the purpose and meaning of it, let alone knowing how God works. Hiddenness is the theme of God's activity in Qoheleth's thought. Despite his doubtfulness, it is difficult to establish that Qoheleth is equating the 'void' (הַבְּרִיאַת) and 'formless' (הַיְהוֹמָת) with the 'absurd' (הַחֲסִידוּת); he will not go as far as to say that God should not have created the cosmos out of the originally 'void' and 'formless' situation (Gen. 1:2). Neither is he, in his concept of absurdity, suggesting any relationship with mythology concerning the struggle between God the Creator and the opposing forces which continues to this day. Although Qoheleth never doubts God's omniscience and omnipotence, he still falls short of being a pious Yahwist<sup>61</sup> who accepts the knowability of God's purpose in creation, perhaps through the law and salvation events. By denying the knowability of God, Qoheleth stands at a distance from the camp of Yahwism.

(2) Qoh. 1:3-11; 3:1-11; 7:13 and Gen. 8:20-22

In observing the circularity of the natural order and marvelling at the beauty of nature (1:4-7; 3:11) within which humans conduct their activities, Qoheleth could have Genesis 1 and 8:21f. in mind, "And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odour, the Lord said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man....

<sup>22</sup>While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." As in Genesis 1 and 8, Qoheleth undoubtedly perceives order in nature as created by

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<sup>61</sup>R.N. Whybray, "Conservatisme et radicalisme dans Qohelet," in *Sagesse et Religion, Colloque de Strasbourg (Octobre 1976)* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1979), pp. 65-81 (81), has a similar conclusion, "c'est le point de vue d'un juif de l'époque pour qui ni l'introversión des super-pleux ni les fantaisies eschatologiques de l'esprit apocalyptique ne peuvent résoudre les problèmes de la vie quotidienne. Mais ce point de vue n'est ni une hérésie ni un rejet des croyances juives en faveur d'une philosophie étrangère."

God. However, instead of affirming the end of the cursing, as promised by God after the flood, and the beginning of a new era of blessings, as the Yahwist might have seen it, Qoheleth states that "what has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done" (1:9); history is capable of repeating itself with little mutation. However, that is not to say that Qoheleth understands nature as a "Soulless mechanism which is regardless of human woes and human wishes and is without any discernable purpose,"<sup>62</sup> as Eichrodt did. Besides affirming the hiddenness of God's activity in creation (3:11; 8:17a), Qoheleth makes no attempt to develop a theology of creation.

After the 'Poem on Natural Phenomena' (Qoh. 1:4-7) and 'Poem on Time' (Qoh. 3:1-8), although Qoheleth asserts that "God has made everything beautiful in its time" (3:11a), a sense of the burdensome in creation is being injected through his idea of the hiddenness of God's activity and the reality of the absurd in human activity. It is not certain if the curse on Adam and Eve, if not on humanity (Gen. 3:14-19), has any influence on Qoheleth's thought.

Those pairs of opposites in Qoh. 3:1-8 reflect Qoheleth's honesty in his observation of the realities of life, rather than explaining away those undesirable occasions in life based on the principle of rewards and punishments, or suppressing them under the central theme of the redemptive acts of God in Yahwism. This seems to demonstrate the difficulty of subsuming Qoheleth's thought under that of Yahwism.

(3) *The Curse* Gen. 3:17-19; Qoh. 5:14-16; 7:29; 8:11; 9:3; cf. 2:26b

A.B. Caneday recently purports to have understood Qoheleth's theological presupposition from the point of view of the curse

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<sup>62</sup>W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament, II*, p. 161; cf. C.C. Forman, "Qoheleth's Use of Genesis," *JSS* 5 (1960):256-63 (257).

under which creation lies:

The difficulty of interpreting this book is proportionally related to one's own readiness to adopt Qoheleth's presupposition - that everything about this world is marred by the tyranny of the curse which the Lord God placed upon all creation. If one fails to recognize that this is a foundational presupposition from which Ecclesiastes operates, then one will fail to comprehend the message of the book, and bewilderment will continue.<sup>63</sup>

It may be true that Qoheleth affirms the existence of evil in daily human activity (Qoh. 7:20, 29; 8:11; 9:3), but he seldom goes into a serious search for the origins of evil. His affirmation of the existence of evil comes largely as a result of his observation on human activity, and not through philosophical reasoning or mythologizing; his epistemology is unique in this sense.

His belief that upon death humankind who are made of dust shall return to dust (Qoh. 12:7; 3:20), as in Gen. 2:7 and 3:19, has prompted scholars to compare Gen. 3:17-19 with Qoh. 5:14-16; 7:29; 8:11; 9:3, and argue for a theology of 'original sin' in operation within Qoheleth's theological presupposition. One wonders if that is a Christian reading of the book? Although Qoheleth may have been aware of the Yahwist's concept of curse and punishment in Gen. 3:14-19, there is no reason to read in 7:29, "God has made humankind upright, but they have sought out many devices," the doctrine of 'original sin'. Neither is that the reason for Qoheleth to emphasize the subject of human 'toil' (עֲמָל) (Qoh. 1:2; cf. Gen. 3:17 'in toil' [עֲמָלָא]). In fact, עֲמָל in Qoheleth often means 'activity', except in a few instance where 'hard labouring' as 'toil' is perceived (Qoh. 4:8). There need not be any correlation between Qoheleth's emphasis on the subject of human toil and humans' return to dust, and the cause and cost of sin as perceived by the Yahwist

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<sup>63</sup>Ardel B. Caneday, "Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?" *GTJ* 7 (1986):21-56 (21).

in Gen. 3:14-19. If in fact Qoheleth does mention the curse of sin, it is to be found in 2:26b where the sinners are 'cursed' to toil without enjoying the fruits of their toiling. But this is different from the 'curse' of Genesis where the sinners are cursed to toil in order to survive on the fruits of their toil. In this case, it seems beyond Qoheleth's ken to know the origins of human toil. Qoheleth has not shown keen interest in adapting the Yahwist's theology of humankind as beings created in God's wisdom, neither has he set out deliberately to oppose the Yahwist. Maybe Qoheleth does not even concern himself with the Yahwistic or any theology of sin?

*b. His Awareness of the Mosaic Law Code.*

The Mosaic dogma of reward and retribution as another facet of Yahwism has been thought by some to be Qoheleth's theological presupposition. His recognition of the sovereignty and freedom of God to give and take has been seen as an defence of authentic Yahwism. But if one examines more closely Qoheleth's sayings concerning reward and retribution, act and consequence, one will find that though the dogma may be what Qoheleth wishes to see implemented, he finds no enforcement of the dogma by God (Qoh. 3:16; 7:15; 8:14). The freedom of God's sovereign act to reward and punish was not seen in a positive light but as an arbitrary act. Although he may be challenging the conventional dogma of retribution, Qoheleth is not in any way trying to introduce another set of rules to govern social ethics or to harmonize the dogma of retribution with his observation. The alleged 'golden mean' teaching of Qoheleth in Qoh. 7:16-17 is actually a 'survival tactic' of Qoheleth; the rule for 'staying alive'. In fact Qoheleth prefers being wise and righteous rather than being a fool (Qoh. 2:13-14; 7:19).

The closest that Qoheleth comes to the Yahwism of the Mosaic covenant is his emphasis on 'fearing God' (יִרְאָ אֱלֹהִים) (Qoh. 3:14; 5:6; 7:18c; 8:12,13; 12:13), but even here, he also demonstrates an independent understanding by employing a formula different from that of Proverbs, יִרְאָ יְהוָה (fear Yahweh) or of traditional Yahwism. Also expressed is his unique combinations of fearing God and staying alive (5:6; 7:18; 8:12, 13) and fearing God and keeping his commandment (12:13).<sup>64</sup>

## 2. His Use of Yahwistic Language

Qoheleth's use of creation 'language' or vocabulary is peculiar. Although Hertzberg has suggested that Qoheleth might have the book of Genesis in front of him when he composed the book,<sup>65</sup> Qoheleth's choice of creation language may cast doubt on such idea.

The use of creation language other than the Priestly and Yahwistic creation terminologies might reveal something about Qoheleth's intention to dissociate his language from that of conventional Yahwism.<sup>66</sup> For example, the normal Priestly and Yahwistic use of 'create' (אֶרְבָּ) and 'good' (טוֹב) are replaced by 'made' (עָשָׂה) and 'beauty' (יָפִי) (Qoh. 3:11; cf. Gen. 1). The preference for אֱלֹהִים rather than יְהוָה throughout the book is most noticeable, especially in the 'fear God' (יִרְאָ אֱלֹהִים) formula which is different from Proverbs' 'fear of Yahweh' (יִרְאָ יְהוָה).

<sup>64</sup>In *The Courage to Doubt* (London: SCM Press, 1983), p. 193, R. Davidson understands Qoheleth's concept of fearing God as a surrender before the unknown God and such a "thought brings a chill into his [Qoheleth's] sensitive soul."

<sup>65</sup>H.W. Hertzberg, *Der Prediger*, p. 230, "das Buch Qoh ist geschrieben mit Gn 1-4 vor den Augen seines Verfassers; die Lebensanschauung Qoh's ist an der Schöpfungsgeschichte gebildet."

<sup>66</sup>R. Davidson, *op. cit.*, pp. 189ff., reaches a rather similar conclusion by comparing Qoheleth's attitude to the natural world (Qoh. 1:5-7) with that of the Psalmists (Pss. 8, 136, 104) who praise and marvel at creation.



In his advice for religious life in Qoh. 4:17-5:6, Qoheleth's religious (cultic) language demonstrates his familiarity with the characteristics of worship, i.e. sacrifices and vows in ancient Israel (as well as the ancient Near East). They also reveal that he might have been deliberately leaving out the name of Yahweh in his close quotation from Deuteronomy 23:22-24 (Evv. 21-23) in Qoh. 5:3-5 (Evv. 4-6); especially when quoting Deut. 23:22a (Ev. 21a), "כִּי-יִשָּׁרְךָ לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ (When you vow a vow to the Lord your God)," in Qoh. 5:3a (Ev. 4a), "כִּי-יִשָּׁרְךָ לַאֱלֹהִים (When you vow a vow to God)." His use of other religious language includes, 'the house of God' (4:17) and 'the holy place' (8:10) where he discusses his observations on the relation between act and consequence.

It is also a characteristic of Qoheleth to assign different meanings to the same word at different context. The rare word *תְּשֻׁבוֹת* (devices) in Qoh. 7:29 and the ambiguous term *עֲלָם* in 3:11, together with a handful of other words with multiple meanings, i.e. *הֶבֶל* (absurd, ephemeral), *עֲשָׂה* (toil, activity), strongly suggest a play on the different meanings of the words by Qoheleth to achieve ambiguity for its own aims.<sup>67</sup>

### 3. Social Justice and Reality

Social justice has been recognized to be a common theme in ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature and is deeply rooted in its mythology.<sup>68</sup> Though the Hebrew notion of justice has reference to a specific mode of life lived by Yahweh worshippers as seen in the

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<sup>67</sup>Ruth Page has formulated an interesting theological framework under the title *Ambiguity and the Presence of God* (London: SCM Press, 1985). With support from Ecclesiastes, she argues that "in an ambiguous world some action is unavoidable and even desirable, and that although it is finite it can be worthwhile" (p. 23f.).

<sup>68</sup>Léon Epsztein, "Social Justice," pp. 3-42.

Mosaic and Prophetic traditions, Qoheleth's concept of justice is neither related to mythology nor framed in the Yahwistic context. His understanding of social justice is formulated through his observations on human activity. He acknowledges what he has observed regarding justice and injustice as mere fact in life's reality. This acknowledgement becomes the necessary data in the formulation of his theological thought, as his approach to reality in daily human experience.

In Qoh. 4:1-3, after expressing emotionally his concern for those who are being oppressed, Qoheleth merely goes on to accept the fate of the oppressed and praises those who do not have to learn of social evil. He does not condemn the injustice as the prophets do, neither does he try to make straight what is crooked (Qoh. 1:15; 7:13). But his philosophy of life is far from being one of resignation or pessimism. Instead, he urges those who are young to treasure their opportunity to enjoy life all they can; that is a gift of God who has approved it (Qoh. 2:24a; 3:12; 3:22a; 5:17-18; 8:15a; 9:7-9; 11:7-12:1).

Although Qoheleth realizes that God is the one who determines who gets what and when, he observes that there is no observable pattern or guideline in God's activity, it is hidden away from humankind (11:5). Seeing no relationship between act and consequence, Qoheleth's notion of justice does not conform to Yahwism in either the Mosaic or prophetic traditions, especially in their concept of reward and retribution. Although he seems to suggest a different ethical approach to life that is based on the principles of fearing God, staying alive (7:16-18; 8:12-13), and enjoying life (11:9), that is not in contradiction with Yahwism nor does it merely follow the 'golden mean' principle of Hellenistic thought. By advising one to fear God, stay alive and enjoy life, he is

encouraging positive action in human activity despite life's reality in the unjust social world.<sup>69</sup>

#### 4. The Arbitrariness of God's Activities

The activity of God, according to Qoheleth, seems arbitrary because it shows no observable pattern or guideline that explains act and consequence. His actions are inscrutable even to faithful Yahwists who claim according to their Yahwism to know God. But in opposing traditional Yahwism Qoheleth is not saying that there is no God or 'God is Dead'. Instead, he affirms that God is at work (Qoh. 3:11; 7:14) and is actively involved, for example, in the giving and taking of wealth (5:19; 6:2) according to his own will in the arena of human activity (cf. Qoh. 2:24-26; 5:18-20; 6:2a).<sup>70</sup> But humankind cannot know or find out how or when God gives and takes (8:17; 11:5). The hiddenness of God expressed in Qoheleth is a far more concrete fact than the temporary emotional expression of the prophets, for example, Isaiah, in Isa. 8:17, "Yahweh concealed his face," or Deutero-Isaiah in Isa. 45:15, "Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself." It satisfies Qoheleth to bow before the 'mighty one' (Qoh. 3:14; 6:10; 7:13-14) and to advise others to fear God with a hope that one will be blessed (7:26b; 8:12-13), though no one knows how or when.

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<sup>69</sup>Ruth Page has an interesting thesis in *Ambiguity and the Presence of God*, p. 24, where she argues that "action is unavoidable and even desirable as response to the exigencies of life in a mutable, malleable and ambiguous world."

<sup>70</sup>According to J.J. Dreese's analysis, of the 30 occurrences of God as the subject of a verb in Qoheleth [1:13; 2:26(2x); 3:10, 11(3x), 14(2x), 15, 17(2x, read *sam* for *sham*), 18; 5:5(2x), 17, 18(2x), 19; 6:2(2x); 7:13, 14, 29; 8:15; 9:7; 11:5, 9; 12:7, 14] the verbal root [ן] (to give) occurs ten times and the root ׀לע (do) seven times.

## 5. His Concept of Joy

Qoheleth's concept of joy is mostly ignored by the Torah where 'law' has been the centre of Yahwism. The noun  $\text{הִנְדָּוָה}$  (mirth, joy) occurs 94 times in the Hebrew Bible but only 3 times in the Torah (Gen. 31:27; Deut. 28:47; Num. 10:10). The verb  $\text{הִנְדָּוָה}$  occurs 11 times in the Torah out of 154 occurrences and  $\text{הִנְדָּוָה}$  only once in Deut. 16:15 out of 21 occurrences in the Old Testament.

Although it is not certain if Qoheleth had Num. 10:10 in mind, Qoh. 5:18-19, "For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart" (5:19), certainly modifies the idea of remembrance as it relates to joy in Num. 10:10, "On the days of your gladness ( $\text{בְּיָמֵי הַשְּׂמֵחָה}$ ) ... you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; they shall serve you for remembrance before your God: I am the Lord your God."

Similarly, Qoheleth's concept of sinner, as Gordis puts it, "a sinner is he who fails to work for the advancement of his own happiness,"<sup>71</sup> is a twisted version of Deut. 28:47, that one would deserve punishment if one "did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart." Although pleasing God by observing the Mosaic law code has always been the ultimate goal of the Yahwist, Qoheleth challenges such understanding by commanding one to seek enjoyment in life as one's life goal because enjoying life is doing the will of God (Qoh. 9:7). That is a challenge rather than an antithesis to Yahwism.

However, it would be an affront to Qoheleth's wisdom if one thought of him as a hedonist. Qoheleth's encouragement to enjoy life is conditioned by responsibility in one's action to seek

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<sup>71</sup>R. Gordis, *Koheleth*, p. 91.

enjoyment because God will judge (Qoh. 2:26b; 11:9; 12:14). Here Qoheleth again twists the idea of judgment in Deut. 28:47 to suit his concept of joy.

#### *6. His Concept of Wisdom and Wealth*

Qoheleth's concept of wisdom is most interesting due to his honesty and bluntness in admitting the vulnerability of wisdom (9:18b) which other wisdom conventions dare not admit (cf. Prov. 15:33). He exhibits a similar attitude towards wealth, 'the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money' (7:12; cf. Prov. 16:16) and 'money answers everything' (10:19) a position which makes him different from other biblical wisdom thought (cf. Prov. 23:4,5).

#### *7. His Concepts of Profit and Portion*

These two concepts are rarely touched by Yahwism perhaps due to the concept of Yahweh's ownership as creator. As the two concepts are rooted in the commercial world, it is not difficult to perceive why the commercial interest among post-exilic Jews had been a challenge to the post-exilic prophets and the great conservative Yahwist Ezra. The accumulation of wealth as the main activity among the post-exilic Jews was interpreted by the prophets as a challenge to Yahweh's ownership and providence (cf. Haggai and Malachi). But Qoheleth's search for enduring profit is something new not only to Yahwism, but also to the post-exilic Jews who indulged in material wealth. The conclusion that human activity has no enduring profit and therefore is absurd would certainly provoke strong protest from the commercially minded Yahwist and non-Yahwist alike. However, the acknowledgement of a portion in human activity as God's gift to

humankind in their activity may be seen as a compromise with the Yahwist's work ethic (cf. Exod. 19:9).

#### 8. Conclusion

The theological perspectives of Qoheleth as analysed above demonstrated that Qoheleth is not a hardline conservative Yahwist, nor yet a radical anti-Yahwist. Qoheleth's theological perspective, though reflecting a knowledge of Yahwism, is faithful to the reality of the daily experience of most Israelites. He never attempts to be dogmatic with his theology, like a hardline conservative Yahwist such as Ezra. His theology is unique and personal. It touches tangentially on the Yahwistic faith, yet does not totally rebel against or conform to it. His theology has distanced itself from both the Yahwistic circle and the non-Yahwistic circle. His faithfulness to his observations and experiences of life, and his studying of various wisdom and religious ideas (cf. 12:9), prompted him to formulate or reformulate his theological thought as well as positions on religious and social issues. In this moment of formulation or transition, his theology is a kind of 'liminal' theology.

With this kind of unconventional theological thought, where does Qoheleth stand in Israel's society?

Davidson calls Qoheleth a radical conservative.<sup>72</sup> Whybray<sup>73</sup> argues that Qoheleth, though living in the Hellenistic world and well aware of Hellenistic philosophical thought, is nevertheless a radical Jewish wisdom thinker, rather than an importer of foreign concepts. Identifying Qoheleth's thought within the background of

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<sup>72</sup>R. Davidson, *Courage to Doubt*, pp. 184-202; cf. R. Gordis, "Its Religious Vocabulary," in *Koheleth*, pp. 87-94.

<sup>73</sup>R.N. Whybray, "Conservatisme et radicalisme dans Qohelet," p. 81.

Palestinian Hellenism of the third century when the process of amalgamation between various social cultures and religions was taking place, Müller argues that Qoheleth's "social location is to be found in a displaced Upper Class which was deprived of its power by the Diadochi and their collaborators."<sup>74</sup> I would propose that Qoheleth is a 'liminal intellectual', one who is temporarily detached from his previous attachment and has not yet found a settlement. He is in between, perhaps going through a transition.

#### E. QOHELETH'S POSITION WITHIN ISRAEL'S SOCIETY?

Where does Qoheleth stand in the social and religious world of Israel? Von Rad labels Qoheleth as one who pitched his camp on "the farthest frontiers of Yahwism."<sup>75</sup> But how was Yahwism represented in Israelite society? The concept that Israel is a monolithically Yahwistic society has been challenged by Morton Smith who argues that there were two parties in post-exilic Palestine: the 'Yahweh-alone' party and the syncretistic cult of Yahweh. He outlines the post-exilic history briefly as follow:

The Assyrian and Babylonian conquests put an end to the royal patronage of the cult of Yahweh but the popular, syncretistic piety on the one hand, and the exclusive devotion of the Yahweh-alone party on the other, continued and extended the cult. Accordingly, there were two phases of the extension. On the one hand, the syncretistic form of the cult was spread widely by Israelite deportation and/or emigration from the eighth century on, and evidently secured considerable adherence from gentiles .... On the other hand, the leaders of Yahweh-alone party seem to have been mostly carried off to Babylonia. There the party secured a strong and wealthy following among the exiles. At the time of the Persian conquest, it supported the Persians and thereafter succeeded in placing some of its members in high positions in the Persian court. With Persian support it eventually gained control of the rebuilt Jerusalem temple and then won over the populace, first of Jerusalem, later of Judea. This made it the largest and politically the most important group within

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<sup>74</sup>H.-P. Müller, "Neige der althebräischen 'Weisheit'," p. 263.

<sup>75</sup>G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. I, p. 458.

the cult of Yahweh. ... Consequently, the adherents of the old, popular form of the cult gradually assimilated their claims and practice to those of Jerusalem, and in effect were converted to the Yahweh-alone position. This process is traceable in Palestine before the Maccabean period. It was enormously accelerated, both in Palestine and abroad, by the success of the Maccabees ...

If Morton Smith is correct in depicting post-exilic Israelite society as religiously pluralistic society which mainly consist of two groups, with the Yahweh-alone party being the dominant one, then the conversion of members of the minority cult into the politically powerful 'Yahweh-alone' party was almost unavoidable. Thus, the crossing of individuals between 'religious camps' for various political, religious or social reasons is not impossible, and most probably it characterizes the social-religious situation of Qoheleth's time.

By pitching his camp at the farthest frontiers of Yahwism, is Qoheleth in the process of transferring himself to another campground (i.e. from being a non-Yahwist to a Yahwist?) or was he awaiting to be received and regrouped with the Yahwistic group? Or would he remain to be what he was, a 'liminal' intellectual? Indeed, it is probable that Qoheleth's theology reflects a thought process which has either gradually distanced him from Yahwism if he was originally a Yahwist, or gradually coming to term with Yahwism if he was originally a non-Yahwist.

As 'wisdom' is known to be a movement, rather than a static phenomena, and if the canonical and the non-canonical wisdom books form some kind of development, Qoheleth stands right in between them. It may not be difficult to conceive that if Qoheleth were a little more to the left, he might be out of the canon, and if he

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<sup>76</sup>Morton Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics That Shaped the Old Testament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), p. 83.



were a little more right, he may have already enjoyed a position better than his present one in the canon.

Thus, it is probable that Qoheleth was going through a period of transition. This transitional period is identified by the modern social anthropological term 'liminality'. If 'liminality' characterizes Qoheleth's situation, could Qoheleth then be a 'liminar' or 'liminal intellectual' who practices a 'liminal' theology?

### 1. 'Liminality' as a Social Setting

The term 'liminal' from Latin *limen*, meaning 'threshold' or 'borderline' was first used by the sociologist Arnold Van Gennep in *The Rites of Passage*, where he defines 'liminality' as "a place and moment in life-crisis rituals of preindustrial societies."<sup>77</sup> Later it was adopted by Victor Turner who used it to "designate the generative quality which lends motion to a society, forcing it out of a rigid system and into flowing process."<sup>78</sup> According to Van Gennep's study of ritual process, it consists of three stages: "1) separation (pre-liminal), 2) transition (liminal), and 3) incorporation (post-liminal)."<sup>79</sup> The first stage is a time of detachment of an individual or group from a fixed social structure and all prior cultural conditions. In the second phase, liminality is the social

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<sup>77</sup>Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 11; Ronald L. Grimes, "Ritual Studies: A Comparative Review of Theodor Gaster and Victor Turner," in *RSR* 2 (1976):13-25 (19).

<sup>78</sup>Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 95; Ronald L. Grimes, *op. cit.*, p. 20; L.G. Perdue, "Liminality as a Social Setting for Wisdom Instructions," *ZAW* 93 (1981):114-26.

<sup>79</sup>In his studies of "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology," *Rice University Studies* 60 (1974), p. 65, Victor Turner takes this concept of liminality further to include post-industrial, non-ritual phenomena and he coins the term 'liminoid' applying it to functional equivalents, e.g. hippies, artists, pilgrims; cf. Grimes, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

setting for the detached group or individual, in which there may be few or none of the previous cultural elements and at this stage, anti-structure emerges. Finally, when the transition is over, the group or individual is reincorporated into the social structure with a new position that calls for new behaviour based on the new norms.

Without going too much into the sociologist's arena, but with serious consideration given to Smith's historical outline of the post-exilic Palestinian social-religious situation, I assume the possibility of such social processes in post-exilic Isarel, if not in the Hellenistic world generally. The question thus remains, will Qoheleth fit into such liminality as a social setting?

## 2. Qoheleth as a 'Liminal Intellectual'

The social background of the wise has been a controversial matter. There are a host of opinions among wisdom scholars concerning who the wise are and the social settings in which they practice their wisdom. There are basically six possibilities concerning their social status. The most frequent suggestions are 'upper-class' or 'landed nobility'<sup>80</sup>, 'statesmen'<sup>81</sup>, 'governmental offi-

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<sup>80</sup>Robert Gordis, "The Social Background of Wisdom Literature," in *Poets, Prophets, and Sages* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), pp. 160-197 (187f.), "Their [Proverbs, Agur ben Yakeh, Ben Sira, Job and Koheleth] political and social view-points, like their religious and moral conceptions, reflect an upper-class orientation."; H.-P. Müller, "Neige der althebräischen 'Weisheit'," p. 263.

<sup>81</sup>William McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men* (London: SCM Press, 1965).

cialists'<sup>82</sup>, 'teachers' in either court or temple schools<sup>83</sup>, 'scribes'<sup>84</sup> and 'intellectuals'<sup>85</sup>. Concerning their social setting, there are four major proposals: 1) the family/clan/tribe (*Sippenweisheit*)<sup>86</sup>, 2) the court/royal court;<sup>87</sup>, 3) the school (court and/or temple)<sup>88</sup>, and 4) the 'intellectual tradition'<sup>89</sup>. According to Gottwald,<sup>90</sup> the social setting of Isarelite wisdom went through a historical development, though his historical reconstruction is inconclusive.

While Qoheleth may reflect some aspects from several of the above categories of social status, he cannot be placed squarely within any of the suggested social settings. There has been speculation that Qoheleth is a royal court sage, on the ground of his 'royal' language and his attempt to be identified with King Solomon. But his discontent over the issue of the social injustice perpetrated by the powerful would be difficult for him to remain as a royal court sage. In view of his use of language, his epistemology, his sympathy for the poor and oppressed, his recurring phrases and

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<sup>82</sup>B. Kovacs, "Is there a Class-Ethic in Proverbs?," in *Essays in Old Testament Ethics*, ed. by J.L. Crenshaw and J. Willis (New York: KTAV, 1974), pp. 171-190 (186), "Court and king sayings, instruction and discipline, an ethic of restraint, observance of proprieties, and a system of authority suggest a professional ethic of administrators or officials."

<sup>83</sup>H.-J. Hermisson, *Studien zur israelitischen Spruchweisheit* (WMANT 28; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1968), pp. 96ff.

<sup>84</sup>M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

<sup>85</sup>R.N. Whybray, *Intellectual Tradition in the Old Testament* (BZAW 135; Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1974).

<sup>86</sup>E. Gerstenberger, *Wesen und Herkunft des 'apodiktischen Rechts'* (WMANT 20; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965), pp. 110f.

<sup>87</sup>W. Richter, *Recht und Ethos: Versuch einer Ortund des weisheitlichen Mahnspruches* (Studien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 15; Munich: Kösel, 1966), pp. 110f.

<sup>88</sup>H.-J. Hermisson, *op. cit.*, pp. 96ff.

<sup>89</sup>R.N. Whybray, *op. cit.*

<sup>90</sup>Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 567-71.

themes, and the conclusion to his book, he represents a unique class of sage and 'tradition'. He and his followers might be classified best as 'liminal' intellectuals, though this may not be a formalized and static class of sages. They may have detached themselves from the higher learned societies of sages of Yahwism who may not have known much about the realities of life or who may have only known how to defend 'authentic' Yahwism such as the three friends of Job. It is also probable that they may be detaching themselves from the syncretistic cult and in the process of crossing over to the Yahweh-alone community. Thus, they may be going through a period of transition to reformulate their wisdom as a new breed of tradition, perhaps, incorporating a few of their previous cultural elements. Since Qoheleth has no parallel among the biblical sages, it is not inappropriate to classify him as a 'liminal' intellectual.

#### F. YAHWISM AND SYNCRETISM IN ISRAEL

Having proposed that Qoheleth is a 'liminal' intellectual and that his theology is a form of 'liminal' theology, the following will attempt to provide an historical setting for such phenomena with a brief sketch of the formulation and transformation of Yahwism in Israelite society.

##### 1. *From Conquest to Exile*

Since entering the land of Canaan at the time of Joshua's conquest, Israelites faced a severe threat of syncretism. As is evident from the book of Judges, Yahwism had become syncretistic. Throughout the monarchical period, although David was generally faithful to Yahwistic monotheism, Solomon was not able to maintain

this towards the end of his reign, possibly as a result of his commercial expansion. The beginning of the divided monarchy marks the beginning of a new political era as well as an official syncretistic cult, especially to the Northern kingdom of Israel. The syncretistic faith of the Northern kingdom prospers under various Israelite kings; such as Jeroboam I (1 Kgs. 11:26-14:19; 2 Chron. 10, 13), Ahab (1 Kgs. 16:19-22:40) and Jeroboam II (2 Kgs. 14:23-29), until the coming of the war-machine of Assyria. The prophets, such as Hosea, who call on Israel to turn away from syncretistic faith and return to authentic Yahwism call in vain. On the other hand, in the Southern kingdom, despite the emphasis of the prophetic oracles on the return to monotheistic Yahwism from syncretism, the effect of Josiah's reform did not last for more than half a century. The oracles of Jeremiah and Ezekiel are witnesses to the corruption of Judah's monotheistic faith. Yahwism was at its lowest point with the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of the people of Judah under the lordship of Babylonians.

The effects of the deportation and importation of people to and from Palestine by the Assyrians and Babylonians have proven to be so great that some historians believe that Palestine was full of ethnically heterogeneous groups.<sup>91</sup> Obviously with the two-way flow of emigrants, there is bound to be an active interchange of religious and cultural matters and thus the society was constantly in a state of flux or processual state.

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<sup>91</sup>Morton Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 82-98; Bustenay Oded, *Mass Deportations and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1979), pp. 75-115.

## 2. The Exilic Period

The criticisms of the two prophets, Ezekiel and Zechariah, representing the periods of exile and return, witnessed to the existence of syncretistic beliefs among the Israelites in Palestine. Upon returning to Palestine, Ezra and Nehemiah were lone Yahwists among a people of syncretistic faith, as reflected in the social issue of inter-marriage. However, due to their strong political position and wealth, they were able to influence and convert Palestinian Jews of syncretistic cult into their reformed monotheistic Yahwism. The returnees were mostly the upper-class wealthy people compared with the poor who remained in Palestine. Though the purity reforms of Ezra gained support in Palestine, syncretism remained, though in the minority. The denunciations of the post-exilic prophets and the social unrest in Palestine at the time of Nehemiah also suggest a mixture of ethnic groups with different sets of religious and social-ethical norms within the Israelite community.

## 3. The Post-Exilic Period

According to Morton Smith, after the completion of the Jerusalem wall, "the Yahweh-alone party no longer formed a distinct social class, since Nehemiah consistently writes of the people as a whole (contrast the reports from the preceding century in Ezra 1-6)."<sup>92</sup> Though there is a lack of historical material from this period, it is not difficult to draw evidence from the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha to demonstrate that a diversion from the Yahwism of the Deuteronomist or the Chronicler took place. The political unrest and the growth of sectarianism during this period of 'prophetic

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<sup>92</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 153.

silence' contributed to the fluidity and dynamism of a society's processual nature. With the rise of the Graeco-Roman culture on the one hand and the fading away of the early post-exilic culture on the other, it is no wonder that a sense of lostness is detected in the Hebrew sage.

Although the above is merely a brief sketch of the religio-historical situation of the period from the fifth to the first century B.C., it is enough to suggest the probable existence of liminal intellectuals within the society, and thus to provide a plausible social setting for Qoheleth and his unconventional theology.

#### G. CONCLUSION

Although I will not go as far as Mendenhall or Preuss in seeing an antithesis between wisdom and creation, neither will I postulate that in Qoheleth wisdom theology is creation theology. Instead, I have argued that regardless of how well the statement 'wisdom theology is creation theology' holds for Old Testament wisdom literature in general, it is certainly not the theology of Qoheleth in which creation is at the most marginal. The theology of Qoheleth is neither a theology of creation nor a hardline conservative Yahwist nor an anti-Yahwistic theology. It is a 'liminal' theology created by a 'liminal intellectual'. 'Liminal' in the sense of 'threshold' or 'borderline' perhaps best describes Qoheleth, as one who is going through a transition from a former social status or religious conviction to another.

## SUMMARY CONCLUSION

As each section and chapter of this thesis has its own conclusion and summary, this conclusion will not be extensive.

Although there is no conclusive evidence to support a claim for a logical development within the literary structure of the book, the book of Qoheleth is essentially a unity. The unity exists not only within individual pericopes, but also between them. Pericopes are related to each other by various themes, such as, *hebel*, joy, profit, portion, wisdom, wealth, remembrance, life, death, etc. An analysis of the literary structure of the book in Chapter One has successfully identified various pericopes and their respective themes.

The contents of these pericopes were further analysed in Chapter Two in order to delineate the structure of Qoheleth's thought. My analysis of the thought of Qoheleth has shown that it has a structure. This structure consists of two primary concepts and numerous secondary ideas. The two primary concepts are: *hebel* (הֶבֶל) and joy (שִׂמְחָה); secondary ideas include, wisdom, wealth, profit, portion, life, death, etc. Together they form the total structure of Qoheleth's thought. The two primary concepts not only make sense of Qoheleth's thought, but also bind various pericopes together to form a unity.

Also, I have argued in Chapter Two that the two primary concepts do not contradict each other, nor do they repel each other. Instead of one being set above the other, they are equals co-existing and



complementing each other as parallel elements of Qoheleth's thought. Through the concept of *hebel*, Qoheleth argued that life is full of the reality of the absurd when human activity does not lead to the expected effect, and also when an act has little or no relationship to its consequence. Qoheleth argued that activity (i.e. the test of mirth, cf. 2:1-11) without any 'enduring profit' (וְיִרְדָּף) is absurd, and similarly activity (i.e. accumulating wealth, cf. 4:7-8; 6:2-3) without enjoyment or activity (i.e. being righteous or wise, cf. 2:13ff.; 3:16ff.; 4:1-3) which receives the undeserved or the unexpected. Although Qoheleth argued that human life is full of absurdity, life is meant to be enjoyed as a gift from God (cf. the passages on joy). Thus, Qoheleth consistently argued that one should find enjoyment in one's life because God has approved it. He even commanded one to enjoy life while in one's youth because of the certainty and inescapability of death which might come at the most unexpected moment (cf. 11:7-12:7).

After the analysis of the structure of Qoheleth's thought, I provided a reading of the book, analysing its argument as it develops. This is by no means arguing for a logical development within the structure of the book. Rather, this was a reading of Qoheleth's thought in its sequential unfolding according to the flow of the book. The reading draws on the previous analyses of the literary structure of the book (Chapter One) and the structure of Qoheleth's thought (Chapter Two).

Having understood Qoheleth's theological thought, I proceeded to analyse in Chapter Four the position of Qoheleth's thought within Israel's theology. As Israel's theology is commonly represented as Yahwism or Yahwistic belief, I have analysed the relationship of

wisdom to Yahwism generally, and to creation theology in particular. As was argued in Chapter Four, Qoheleth's theological thought is not compatible with the usual scholarly understanding that wisdom theology is creation theology. Qoheleth's theology, although reflecting elements of Yahwism, cannot be taken as Yahwistic theology. However, there is also no evidence that Qoheleth's theological thought is anti-Yahwistic.

Being unconventional, Qoheleth's theological thought is best identified as a 'liminal' theology, with 'liminality' as its social setting. Thus, Qoheleth may be seen as a 'liminal intellectual', one who has temporarily detached himself from his previous social, economic, political and/or religious attachment and is in a process of being reincorporated into a new environment. As the syncretistic cult of Yahweh and the Yahweh-alone party had been neighbours for a long time in Israel, the possibility of Israelites crossing between the two 'camps' was likely. This would provide a possible social, economic, political and religious setting for our 'liminal intellectual'.

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