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COSMOLOGY AND הֶבֶל IN QOHELETH

Reinterpreting הֶבֶל through the lens of the opening
and closing poems (Qoh 1:2-11 and 12:1-8)

A Dissertation

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Abstract

The translation of הֶבֶל (hebel) with vanitas has had a profound influence in the history of exegesis of the book of Qoheleth often characterized as the most pessimistic, skeptical, and nihilistic book in the Hebrew Bible, having as author a despondent man. This dissertation provides a corrective to the "vanity", "meaningless", "absurd" or negative reading of הֶבֶל in Qoheleth, by arguing that הֶבֶל has a positive value, as it expresses not the absurdity or the meaningless of life, but its fleetingness/transitoriness/brevity, whose meaning is disclosed in the opening and closing poems (1:2-11 and 12:1-8). This dissertation thus argues that the הֲבֵל הֲבָלִים הַכֹּל הָבֶל which introduces and concludes the book of Qoheleth (1:2; 12:8) is an appeal to contemplate the order, the beauty of the cosmos, through the regularity, recurrence, and cyclicality of natural phenomena. It also calls attention to the fleetingness of human experience in the world, which Qoheleth highlights in the opening and closing poems but also by the use of transient markers (יְמֵי־חַיֵּי הֶבְלוֹ , 6:12; בִּימֵי הֶבְלִי 7:15; כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֵּי הֶבְלֶךָ, 9:9; יְמֵי הַחֹשֶׁךְ , 11:8; יְמֵי בְּחוּרוֹת , 11:9; הַיַּלְדוּת וְהַשַּׁחֲרוּת הָבֶל, 11:10; צֵל, מִסְפַּר and אַחֲרָיו). The shortness of life and the limited duration of human achievements do not empty human life of its true meaning and value. Rather, they tell of the very nature of humans and their actions. The *hebelness* is from God who made things as fleeting, temporary, transient compared to his own eternity. By using the term הֶבֶל, and by introducing and concluding his book with "nature" poems, Qoheleth reminds the readers of their transience in this world with its pressing and tragic problems, as well as comforting them with the fact that evil itself is temporary in its impacts on life. They will pass away. Hence, Qoheleth's opening and closing statement: הֲבֵל הֲבָלִים הַכֹּל הָבֶל (1:2; 12:8).

Acknowledgement

כִּי לְאָדָם שֶׁטּוֹב לְפָנָיו נָתַן חָכְמָה וְדַעַת וְשִׂמְחָה
וְלַחוֹטֶא נָתַן עִנְיָן לֶאֱסוֹף וְלִכְנוֹס
לָתֵת לְטוֹב לִפְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים
גַּם־זֶה הֶבֶל וּרְעוּת רוּחַ (Qoh 2:26)

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Above all, my gratitude goes to the One greater than mortals and who give knowledge, wisdom and joy in labor to the one whom he pleases: שֶׁטּוֹב לְפָנָיו.

Dedication

אֶת־הַכֹּל רָאִיתִי בִּימֵי הַבְלִי
יֵשׁ צַדִּיק אֹבֵד בְּצִדְקוֹ
וְיֵשׁ רָשָׁע מַאֲרִיךְ בְּרָעָתוֹ (Qoh 7:15)

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of

- ✓ my beloved mother (Emilia SOME) who used to address to me and to my brothers in proverbs and wisdom sayings, and who is now in her בֵּית עוֹלָם;
- ✓ my two older brothers (Bernadin SOME and Rufin SOME) who because of their fleeting nature have gone to their בֵּית עוֹלָם in the flower of their youth;
- ✓ Prof. Daniel Harrington, sj. who has encouraged me to further studies in Scripture and who has gone to his בֵּית עוֹלָם;
- ✓ and to all those whose life is endangered, shortened because of their righteousness.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Principal Abbreviations

Texts, Versions and Lexica

BDB	Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew And English Lexicon Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971-1980
BHQ	*Biblia Hebraica Quinta.*
BHS	*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia.*
GKC	*Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*
HALOT	*Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament.*
JPS	*Jewish Publication Society.*
JSB	*The Jewish Study Bible.*
LSJ	Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, Henry Sturat Jones. A Greek-English Lexicon. 9th ed. Revised supplement. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.
LXX	Septuaginta
LXX^A	Codex Alexandrinus
LXX^B	Codex Vaticanus
LXX^S	Codex Sinaiticus
NIDB	*New Interpretation Dictionary of the Bible.*
NIDOTTE	*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis.* Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zonderman, 1997.
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha.
Tg	*Targum*
TDOT	*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament .*
TLOT	*Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament.* Edited by Ernst Jenni, and Clauss Westermann. Translated by Mark E. Biddle. 3 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997.
Vulg.	Vulgate

Secondary sources: Journals, Series, major Works

AEL	*Ancient Egyptian Literature*. Miriam Lichtheim. 3 vols.
AIL	Ancient Israel and Its Literature
AB	Anchor Bible
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
ANE	*Ancient Near East*
ANET	*Ancient Near East Texts*
AS	*Aramaic Studies*
BABELAO	*Bulletin de l'Académie Belge pour l'Étude des Langues Anciennes et Orientales.* Université Catholique de Louvain
BFC	Bible en Français Courant
Bib	*Biblica*
BiInt	*Biblical Interpretation*
BJ	La Bible de Jerusalem
BSac	*Bibliotheca Sacra*
BTB	*Biblical Theology Bulletin*
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CBR	*Currents in Biblical Research*
CC	Continental Commentaries
CEB	Common English Bible
CEV	Contemporary English Version
Copt	Coptic Version
ELB	Elberfelder Bibel
ER	*Encyclopedia of Religion.* Edited Mircea Eliade. New York: Macmillan, 1987.
ETCSL	*The Electronic Texts Corpus of Sumerian Literature*
ExAud	*Ex Auditu*
GNB	Good News Bible
HAR	*Hebrew Annual Review*
HB	Hebrew Bible
HR	*History of Religion*
HRD	Herder Bibel 2005
HThKAT	Herders Theologischer Kommentar Zum Alten Testament
HUCA	*Hebrew Union College Annual*.

IEJ	*Israel Exploration Journal*
Int	*Interpretation*
IOSCS	International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies
IOSOT	International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament
ISBE	*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*
ITC	International Theological Commentary
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JBQ	*Journal of Biblical Quarterly*
JEA	*Journal of Field Archeology*
JNES	*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JSOTSup	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*
KAI	*Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften*. Herbert Donner, and Wolfgang Röllig. Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1962.
KJV	King James Version
MLB	Modern Language Bible
MT	Masoretic Text
NABR	New American Bible Revised
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NIB	New Interpreter's Bible
NICOT	New International Commentary of Old Testament
NIRV	New International Reader's Version
NIV	New International Version
NIV	The New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NJPS	TaNaK: The New Jewish Publication Society
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OL	Old Latin
PBI	Pontifical Biblical Institute
RANT	*Res Antiquae*
RB	*Revue Biblique*
REB	Revised English Bible
RevScRel	*Recherches de Science Religieuse*,
RIMA	The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Assyrian Periods

RINAP	Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period
SJOT	*Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*
SJT	*Scottish Journal of Theology*
SyH	Syro-Hexaplar
Syr	Syriac (Peshitta)
TAD	*Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt*. 3 vol. B. Porten and Yardeni, eds. Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Science and Humanities, 1986.
TDOT	*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*
THB	*Textual History of the Hebrew Bible*
TOB	*Traduction Œcuménique de la Bible*,
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ	*Westminter Theological Journal*
ZUR	Zürcher Bibel

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The noun הֶבֶל which introduces and concludes the book of Qoheleth is recognized by scholars as one of the key terms in the book, yet is a *crux interpretum*.[1] Antoon Schoors boldly affirms that הֶבֶל "is even the key word *par excellence*, more than any of the more frequently occurring words, because it is found at strategic points of the exposition and embodies the thinking and the mood that pervade this sapiential book."[2]

So far as the prominent role and meaning of הֶבֶל are concerned in the understanding of the book, there is, however, no consensus. The Hebrew word הֶבֶל presents, indeed, a difficult interpretive problem. Most studies have attempted to understand the term etymologically, functionally, metaphorically, even contextually. Thus, focusing on the book's use of הֶבֶל, this thesis will concentrate on finding the meaning of הֶבֶל that will explain the most features of the book, begining with his cosmological poems in 1:2-11 and 12:1-8.

Our quest for the meaning of הֶבֶל in Qoheleth recalls Martin Heidegger's philosophical investigation for the meaning of *Sein* (Being). This contemporary philosopher observes indeed that *Sein* is the most universal concept, indefinable, and the self-evident concept.[3] It is a concept that is mostly taken for granted. However, Heidegger claims that even though one seems to understand *Sein*, its meaning is still veiled in darkness, and which is manifested in *Zeit* (Time), and in the *Dasein* (Being There). According to Heidegger,

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[1] Russell L Meek, "Twentieth and Twenty-first-century Readings of Hebel (הֶבֶל) in Ecclesiastes," *in CBR* 14,3 (2016): 279.

[2] Antoon Schoors, *Ecclesiastes* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 40.

[3] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1st. English edition by John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (London: SCM Press, 1962), 170-173.

Dasein is the *Lichtung*, the lighted space in which *Sein* manifests as beings.[4] The best ways to understand the *Sein* is, thus, to look at its *disclosedness* in the *Dasein* in the world.

These considerations on the meaning of *Sein*, and its *disclosedness* in the *Dasein* are also true for the meaning of הֶבֶל in Qoheleth. Like *Sein*, הֶבֶל is always thought to be universal term, indefinable. Like *Sein*, its meaning is veiled in darkness to commentators, and readers of Qoheleth, even though one seems to understand it. Like *Sein,* which discloses its meaning in the *Dasein*, the meaning of הֶבֶל in Qoheleth is disclosed in the "nature" poems, through the movement of the natural phenomena and the everydayness of human life in the world. Creation provides the context of human existence. Qoh 1: 2-11 introduce humanity to the context of that existence (the world), and the poem in 12:1-8 provide humanity's exit (death).

Hence, we approach the discussion of הֶבֶל in the perspective that הֶבֶל is a "situation", a "state of being," expressed mainly in the "nature" poems (1:2-11; 12:1-8). In other words, we propose to explain the word in the context of creation, in particular in the relation of human to non-human creation, inanimate and animate "nature". It is not, therefore, meaningless that Qoheleth begins and ends with cosmology. Their literary purpose would be not only to illustrate his הַכֹּל הָבֶל statement, but also to provide an interpretive key for הֶבֶל.

Thus, after we survey, in the first chapter, scholars' attempts to define the meaning of הֶבֶל, giving attention to Fox, Crenshaw, Schoors, Fredericks, Krüger and Schwienhorst-Schönberger, we will, in the second chapter, situate and understand Qoheleth's worldview (*Weltanschauung*) in relation to the biblical sages' understanding and view of the

[4] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 171.

world. Therein, we will examine creation language in the HB and the ANE, looking closely at creation texts that are representative of others (Psalm 148, Genesis 1, Genesis 2-3, Isaiah 35, Proverbs, Job, Sirach, Wisdom and some ancient Near Eastern texts), highlighting and showing the intrinsic relation between human being and the other creatures. In fact human being exists in the midst of beings. We will argue that a major and constant indication of the demarcation between the non-animate world (the three domains of earth, sea, sky) and the animate world is that the non-animate natural world is "eternal," characterized by endlessly recurring movement, whereas the animate world (individual life forms) is mortal, that is, birth is followed by death; each life form is endowed with a seed to continue the species, but not of the individual.

With this background, we will examine in the third chapter two texts from Qoheleth that offer an especially detailed look at the relation of nature and humanity- Qoh 1:2-11 and 12:1-8. We will demonstrate that the two texts, partly alike and partly different, explore the contrast between humans and nature and provide the background of the word הֶבֶל.

In light of the cosmic and natural setting of these poems, we will study in the last chapter the most important occurrences of הֶבֶל in Qoheleth and propose a definition. We will contend that הֶבֶל has a positive value as it expresses not the absurdity or the meaningless of life, but its fleetingness/transitoriness/brevity, whose meaning is disclosed in 1:2-11 and 12:1-8 through the movement of the natural phenomena and the everydayness of human life in the world, and which Qoheleth later on substantiates throughout the book by the use of transient markers (יְמֵי־חַיֵּי הֶבְלוֹ , 6:12; בִּימֵי הֶבְלִי 7:15; כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֵּי הֶבְלֶךָ, 9:9; יְמֵי הַחֹשֶׁךְ , 11:8; יְמֵי הַיַּלְדוּת וְהַשַּׁחֲרוּת הָבֶל, 11:10; צֵל, מִסְפַּר and אַחֲרָיו). בְּחוּרוֹת , 11:9;

But before anything else, for a better approach of Qoheleth's "nature" poems (1:2-11; 12:1-8) as the interpretive key for the meaning of הֶבֶל, and because this study will deal with texts from wide range of space and time, certain introductory questions such as the historical context and the dating of Qoheleth will first be addressed.

First and foremost it should be noted that the ambiguity continues as we seek to place Qoheleth and his book in a historical context. There is no certainty over the date of writing, with both the Persian and the Hellenistic periods competing among scholars as contenders. That places the book somewhere between the fifth and the second century BCE.[5]

Basing his arguments on linguistic and socio-economic grounds, Seow places the book's origin in the Persian period, "specifically between the second half of the fifth and the first half of the fourth centuries B.C.E."[6] He argues in particular that Qoheleth's use of the words שָׁלַט/ שַׁלִּיט (2:19, 5:18; 8:8; 10:5) reflects the legal documents of the Persian period, and by the Hellenistic period it was used more generically and not in this technical sense. A cautionary note must be exercised since it is feasible that Qoheleth may have used the word in its earlier more technical sense although writing in a later period. Seow backs his claim of the book's dating to the Persian period with evidence of two Persian loanwords (פַּרְדֵּסִים in 2:5 and פִּתְגָם in 8:11).[7] Since there is no clear evidence of Persianisms in the Bible prior to the

[5] But prior to these views which fall under the category of contemporary, was the traditional view which supported a tenth century B.CE. date, in the time of Solomon. This view solely relies on comparing the text with ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature in Sumer, Babylon, and Egypt (Robert Gordis, *Koheleth, the Man and His World* (New York: Bloch Pub.Co., 1955), 10-15.20). For the Solomonic period of Qoheleth siee also Walter C. Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 28; Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 273.

[6] Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, *A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. AB 18c (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 20-21.

[7] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 37.

Achaemenid period (550-330), this would establish an earliest dating point for the book, rather than a definite dating. Seow's claim that the book reflects the socio-economic conditions and language is not irrefutably convincing, and his dating has been challenge[8] with most scholars dating the book in the later Hellenistic period.

We agree with scholars who maintains that Qoheleth is a Palestinian Jew of the third century BCE, who "engages two important traditions developing in the period in which he lived and taught: late Egyptian wisdom and Hellenistic culture, which extended its influence into Judah especially in the third century BCE during the reign of the Ptolemies."[9] Whybray asserts that the book presupposes a time of great economic activity and social turmoil, which fits the ethos of the middle of the third century.[10]

The discovery of textual fragments of the book in Cave IV at Qumran dating from the mid-second century BCE, and the probable use of the book by Ben Sira (180-164 BCE), also corroborate the claim of a Hellenistic context.

All in all we hold the view that the book was probably written in the Hellenistic period during the final quarter of the third century BCE , that is between 323-200 BCE, when Israel was ruled by the successors of Alexander the Great (third century BCE), more specifically during the Ptolemaic period. Qoheleth questions what it means to survive in a world where, for many, the economy was oppressive. Israel's colonial overlords exploited its economy. Taxation was high and fixed: if the crop failed, the farmers still had to pay.

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[8] Dominic Rudman, "A note on the Dating of Ecclesiastes," *CBQ* 61 (Jan. 1999), 47-52.

[9] Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 2007), 161.

[10] Roger N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*: *Based on the Revised Standard Version*. New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 10-12. See also Norbert Lohfink, *Qoheleth: CC,* trans. Sean McEvenue (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 5-6.

Inevitably, small farmers and laborers bore the brunt of this system, if they were unable to pay, were sold into slavery or forced to sell their land. This is the world of Qoheleth, and it is this world that Qoheleth fears. It is within this world that he searches to find the wisest way to live.

Though written in a Hellenistic context, the book of Qoheleth surprisingly contains no linguistic examples of Greek borrowing. One might thus find in this absence of grecisms in Qoheleth an argument for Qoheleth's knowledge, connection and acquaintance to the Israelite wisdom tradition and its neighbors, through literatures. Suffice it to mention the historical writings of Herodotus, Berossus, and Josephus, which Qoheleth might have been in possession of, given the intellectual and cultural context of the Hellenistic period.

Chapter I THE MEANING OF HEBEL IN PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

Regarding the history of scholarship on the meaning of *hebel,* Russell L. Meek has provided a reliable and detailed survey in his article, "Twentieth- and Twenty-first-century Readings of *Hebel* (הֶבֶל) in Ecclesiastes."[11] Up to the twentieth century, there were, broadly speaking, two main lines of interpretation of הֶבֶל, one largely Jewish and the other largely Christian. The Jewish interpretation appears first in LXX,[12] continues in the targums and rabbinic material, and in the great medieval commentators. In Meek's words,

> Prior to the twentieth century, readings of הֶבֶל were somewhat predictable. Jewish interpreters understood הֶבֶל primarily in a metaphorical sense that extended from its denotative meaning, breath or vapor. Early Christian interpreters, on the other hand, almost exclusively followed Jerome's popular *vanitas* reading and interpreted both הֶבֶל and the book of Ecclesiastes accordingly.[13]

Thus, in this chapter we will briefly survey the history of the meaning of הֶבֶל in Qoheleth, by presenting and discussing some recent scholars' proposals. Prior to that, we will offer a brief review of the occurrences and translation of הֶבֶל in the Hebrew Bible, as well as in modern English and French Bibles.

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[11] Meek, "Twentieth and Twenty-first-century Readings of *Hebel* (הבל) in Ecclesiastes,*"* 279-297. Earlier surveys of scholarship on Qoheleth include James L. Crenshaw, "Qoheleth in Recent Research," *HAR* 7 (1983) 41-56, and Roland E. Murphy, "Recent Research on Proverbs and Qoheleth," *CBR* 1 (1993) 119-140.

[12] Some early Greek translations (Aquila and Theodotion, and Symmachus) render הֶבֶל according to its concrete and basic meaning of "breath" (ἀτμός) (Peter J. Gentry, *Ecclesiastes*. Septuaginta Vetus Testamentum Graecum auctoritatae Academiae Scientiarum Gottingensis editum XI.2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019), 127). The LXX translates הֶבֶל as ματαιότης, which has a similar range of meaning as הֶבֶל, including "emptiness, vanity, and transitoriness." Throughout the LXX, indeed, various terms are used to render the Hebrew word הֶבֶל, such as κενός (Job 7:16), καταιγίς (Isa 57:13), εἴδωλον (Deut 32:21; 1Ki 16:13.26) and μάτην (Ps 38:7).

[13] Meek, "Twentieth- and Twenty-first-century Readings of *Hebel* (הבל) in Ecclesiastes," 291.

I.1 BIBLICAL TRANSLATION OF הֶבֶל IN QOHELETH

Although the "vanity" thesis of Jerome has dominated the history of translation and interpretation of הֶבֶל in Qoheleth for over a thousand years, many modern Bible translators and commentators have come to understand that "vanity" is not the best rendering of הֶבֶל as it occurs in the book. As we mentioned earlier, the lack of consensus on the meaning of הֶבֶל whose literal sense is "breath, vapor," has led to different translations in the Bible. These translations are not neutral; they are expressions not only of a worldview but also and mainly of a theology.

As a matter of fact, a study of the translations in modern English or French Bibles are indicative of the problem. The NRSV, KJV, BJ, TOB, JPS, use "vanity"; whereas the REB, JB, NJB and NJPS translate הֶבֶל as "futile". Other versions such as NIV, NIB, NIRV, and the NLT render the term הֶבֶל as "meaningless," or "pointless" (CEB), "useless" for GNB, and "nonsense, nothing makes sense" for the CEV. Close to the literal meaning of הֶבֶל as "vapor, smoke", is the BFC (Bible en Français Courant) where הֶבֶל is read "fumée": "De la fumée, dit le Sage, tout n'est que fumée, tout part en fumée." A similar rendering is found in the Message Bible.

One might conjecture that the diversity of adopted translations of הֶבֶל in the above-mentioned Bibles (which are representative of other versions) expresses the desire of the translators and commentators to correct Jerome's "vanity" thesis. More importantly, the difference in meaning among these versions proves, indeed, how complex but important is the word הֶבֶל in the book of Qoheleth. Needless to stay, Qoheleth did not create the term הֶבֶל. Beside Qoheleth where it is used 38 times, it appears 40 times elsewhere in the Hebrew

Bible.[14] It first in the canonical ordering occurs in Genesis as a proper noun, the Hebrew name of Abel (הֶבֶל), Cain's brother (Gen 4:2).[15]

וַתֹּסֶף לָלֶדֶת אֶת־אָחִיו אֶת־הָבֶל
וַיְהִי־הֶבֶל רֹעֵה צֹאן וְקַיִן הָיָה עֹבֵד אֲדָמָה

The basic meaning of הֶבֶל, "wind" or "breath" is best illustrated in Isa 57:13: "The wind (רוּחַ) will carry them off, a breath (הֶבֶל) will take them away", and Prov 21:6, "The getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor (הֶבֶל נִדָּף)." In Isa 57:13, the term הֶבֶל is used in parallel to רוּחַ (breath, wind).

In other texts, הֶבֶל is used as a designation for false gods worshipped by the people of God[16] and hence is usually translated in this context as "idols." Sometimes, the term represents exasperations of individuals, that is, false hope. This is best expressed in Isa 49:4 where the servant Israel says, "I have labored in vain (לָרִיק); I have spent my strength for nothing (לְתֹהוּ) and vanity (וְהֶבֶל)."[17] Job complains about the brevity and uncertainty of his life: לֹא־לְעֹלָם אֶחְיֶה חֲדַל מִמֶּנִּי כִּי־הֶבֶל יָמָי (Job 7:16). Brevity as a rendering of הֶבֶל is also found in the Psalter (Ps 39:6-12; 78:33; 94:11; Ps 144:4).

From the foregoing brief survey of the occurrences and translations of הֶבֶל and its use in the Hebrew Bible we conclude that the term is used and understood either metaphorically or literally according to the basic meaning of הֶבֶל (wind, vapor or breath). It

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[14] The noun *hebel* occurs thirty-five times in the HB (apart from Ecclesiastes and apart from the occurrences of the name "Abel"), and the denominative verb הבל occurs five times: four times in the Qal (2 Kings 17:15; Ps 62:11; Job 27:12; Jer 2:5), and once in the Hiphil (Jer 23:16). Except in the latter case, it is always accompanied by the noun הבל.

[15] Eight occurrences of the name Abel are made in Genesis [Gen 4:2 (2x). 4 (2x). 8 (2x). 9.25].

[16] Deut 32:21; 1 Kings 16:13.26; 2 Kings 17:15; Jer 2:5; 8:19; 10:8.15; 51:18; Jon 2:9; Ps 31:7.

[17] See also Isa 30:7; Job 9:26; Lam 4:17.

is, unfortunately, the metaphorical reading of הֶבֶל that divides scholarly views about the meaning and interpretation of הֶבֶל as used in Qoheleth.

I.2 SCHOLARS' THEORIES ON הֶבֶל

The different approaches fall neatly into two major sets of contrasting categories:[18] those who hold a negative view of הֶבֶל and those who hold a positive view of הֶבֶל.

I.2.1 THE NEGATIVE VIEW OF הֶבֶל

Michael Fox's reading of הֶבֶל could be seen as akin to Jerome's *vanitas* thesis given the influence both readings had in the interpretation of Qoheleth. In fact, in his 1986 article on "The Meaning of Hebel for Qoheleth," Fox criticized the contextual reading and translation of הֶבֶל arguing that "the *hebel* leitmotiv disintegrates if the word is assigned several different meanings."[19] Hence his project was to look for a concept appropriate to all of the specific *hebel-judgments*. He thus proposes "an understanding of הֶבֶל that creates new semantic territory, defining הֶבֶל as "absurd.""[20]

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[18] A comprehensive survey on the history of the interpretation and meaning of הֶבֶל in the Hebrew Bible and mainly in Qoheleth is prominently found in the studies of Mark Sneed, "הֶבֶל as 'Worthless' in Qoheleth: A Critique of Michael V. Fox's 'Absurd' Thesis," *JBL* 136.4 (2017): 879-894; Meek, "Twentieth and Twenty-first-century Readings of Hebel הֶבֶל in Ecclesiastes," 279-297; Richard Alan Fuhr Jr, *An Analysis of the Inter-dependency of the Prominent Motifs within the Book of Qohelet*. Studies in Biblical Literature vol 151 (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 29-63; Mark R Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes: A Social-science Perspective*. Ancient Israel and Its Literature; No. 12 (Leiden, Boston, MA: Brill, 2012), 155-174; Doug Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes* (New York: T & T Clark 2006), 91-129; Douglas B. Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qohelet's Work* (Leiden, Boston, MA: Brill, 2002); Anderson, *Qoheleth and its Pessimistic Theology: Hermeneutical Struggle in Wisdom Literature* (Lewiston, ID: Mellen Biblical Press, 1997), 8-28; Michael Fox, "The Meaning of Hebel for Qoheleth," *JBL* 105.3 (1986): 409-427.

[19] Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet," 413-414.

[20] Fuhr, *An Analysis of the Inter-dependency of the Prominent Motifs*, 41.

According to Fox, "the best translation equivalent for *hebel* in Qohelet's usage is "absurd, absurdity"[21] although he acknowledges that this definition "finds no precise parallel elsewhere in the Old Testament."[22] In Fox's discussion, he refers to Camus' classic description of the word 'absurd' in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Commenting on Camus, Fox states that

> 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, in the broad sense of the human faculty that looks for order in the world about us. The quality of absurdity does not inhere in a being, act, or event in and of itself (though these may be called "absurd"), but rather in the tension between a certain reality and a framework of expectations.[23]

In discussing the semantic field of הֶבֶל, Fox is careful to distinguish "absurd" from terms such as "mysterious," "incomprehensible," and "ironic."[24] For Fox, the absurd is

> "a disjunction between two phenomena that are thought to be linked by a bond of harmony or causality, or that *should* be linked. The quality of absurdity..., is a relational concept, residing in the tension between a certain reality and a framework of expectations."[25]

The absence of rational relationship between expectations and outcomes is, according to Fox what characterizes the book of Qoheleth.[26]

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[21] Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet," 409.

[22] Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear down and a Time to Build up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 29.

[23] Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet," 409.

[24] Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet," 410-413.

[25] Michael V. Fox *A Time to Tear down and a Time to Build up*, 31.

[26] Meek, "Twentieth and Twenty-first-century Readings of Hebel הֶבֶל in Ecclesiastes, 286; idem, "The Meaning of Hebel in Qohelet: An intertextual Suggestion" in *The Words of the Wise Are like Goads: Engaging Qoheleth*

It is, however, hard to read the entire book of Qoheleth using the term "absurd." The most striking examples, as we will discuss in chapter four, can be found in 6:12; 7:15 and 9:9 where Qoheleth uses the term הֶבֶל to mean the brevity or fleetingness of one's life, not their absurdity. We thus agree with Clifford's asserting that "to translate every occurrence 'absurd' (in modern existential sense) is too sweeping; the word is used in different senses."[27] What Fox is doing would be like "déshabiller saint Pierre pour habiller saint Paul", that is, moving from a less abstract term ("vanity") to a more abstract one ("absurd").

As we will argue in chapter four, the meaning of הֶבֶל is determined not only by purely lexical considerations but also by its context. In other words, its meaning should be given, not in reference to extra-biblical material, but rather by the text itself. Hence, the possibility of different meanings. Fox would agree with this view as he recognizes that "*hebel* is applied to different types of phenomena: beings, life or a part thereof, acts, and events."[28] Yet he does favor a univocal term, "absurd", and persists in his argumentation. This is evident in his response to Sneed's recent critique of his "absurd" thesis.[29] In reacting to Sneed, Fox strongly reaffirms his belief that "absurd" is the appropriate translation of הֶבֶל in Qoheleth.[30]

One can doubt, however, how objective is this existentialist philosophy concept of "absurd", which Fox posits as the divorce between one's expectation and the results. What seems to be highlighted here is the subjective aspect of "absurd." Absurdity reflects, indeed,

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in the 21st Century, ed. Mark J Boda, Tremper Longman, and Cristian G. Raţă (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 244.

[27] Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature*, 103. The most vehement critique of Fox's "absurd" thesis is done by Mark Sneed in *The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes:* 159-164; and in his recent article, "הֶבֶל as 'Worthless' in Qoheleth: A Critique of Michael V. Fox's 'Absurd' Thesis." 879-894.

[28] Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet," 410. 414.

[29] Sneed, "הֶבֶל as 'Worthless' in Qoheleth: A Critique of Michael V. Fox's 'Absurd' Thesis": 879-894.

[30] Michael V. Fox, "On הבל in Qoheleth: A Reply to Mark Sneed" *JBL* 138, no. 3 (2019): 559-563.

an individual's judgment of a particular event in a particular situation. It derives not only from the intellectual realm but from an individual's experience of life, for one person's absurd situations are not exactly another person's. It is worth noting here the proverbial saying "one man's meat is another man's poison" which puts forward the idea that what is acceptable to one may be unpleasant to another.

Although Qoheleth speaks from his own experience of life under the sun, the notion of הֶבֶל is beyond the individual scope and the effectiveness of actions or events. Said otherwise, הֶבֶל cannot be defined by one individual's experience of life and the seeming coherence or non-coherence of an action and the expectation of its result. For Qoheleth, in fact, as we will argue later, life is הֶבֶל, not because of the many absurdities in the world, but because of its fleetingness, its temporariness which, indeed, expresses the nature of the creature beings which are not made eternal.

Furthermore, as in the "vanity" thesis, there are instances in Qoheleth in which reading הֶבֶל as "absurd" makes the text impossible to read and to comprehend (6:12; 7:15; 8:10.14; 9:9; 11:8.10). Yet, Fox does not seem to reckon with this possibility, as he asserts: "the best way to consider the proposal to render *hebel* "absurd" ("absurdity") is to review the thirty-eight occurrences of the word in Qohelet. These may be organized in terms of the referent of *hebel,* whether particular or universal."[31]

The way in which Fox uses "absurd" is inappropriate as a translation of הֶבֶל. He claims that the book motto that one expects to see validated is in fact what "controls the

[31] Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet," 414.

way we read."[32] One should, therefore, redefine הֶבֶל in accordance with what he reads. But when he translates הֶבֶל as "absurd", it seems to be derived totally from the particular way he has read Qoheleth and to have nothing to do with the inherent semantic properties of the word, which Sneed characterizes as "lexical-semantic fallacies."[33]

His proposal has been influential and continues to be in the history of the meaning of הֶבֶל in Qoheleth. Scholars who have espoused Fox's translation include E.S. Christianson,[34] Sibley Towner,[35] William H.U Anderson,[36] Elsa Tamez,[37] Schoors and Crenshaw.

Crenshaw distinguishes two nuances in הֶבֶל in Qoheleth: the "temporal ('ephemerality') and existential ('futility' or 'absurdity')."[38] Although he agrees that there are instances in the book where the meaning of fleetingness and ephemerality best fit, Crenshaw prefers the existential denotation of הֶבֶל.[39] According to him the normal sense of הֶבֶל in Qoheleth is a judgment of futility or absurdity rather than a statement of fact regarding ephemerality.

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[32] Michael V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*. JSOTSup 71 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 168.

[33] Sneed, "הֶבֶל as 'Worthless' in Qoheleth: A Critique of Michael V. Fox's 'Absurd' Thesis", 889-891.

[34] Eric S. Christianson, *A Time to Tell: Narrative Strategies in Ecclesiastes*, JSOT 280 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 87.

[35] Sibley Towner, "The Book of Ecclesiastes: Introduction, commentary, and reflections," in *NIB*, ed. Leander E. Keck, and Richard J. Clifford (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 5: 267.

[36] William H.U Anderson, "The Semantic Implications of "*hebel*" and "*re'ut Ruah*" in the Hebrew Bible and for Qoheleth." *JNSL* 25.2 (1999): 59-73

[37] Elsa Tamez, When the Horizons Close: Rereading Ecclesiastes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 34.

[38] James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1987), 57.

[39] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 58.

Thus, by taking הֶבֶל in the sense of absurd or futile, Crenshaw sees in 1:2 a totally negative assessment of life.[40] From the opening of his introduction to *Ecclesiastes*, Crenshaw strongly emphasizes his negative and pessimistic attitude towards Qoheleth's view of life. He declares, indeed, "life is profitless, totally absurd."[41] Through a series of analysis of major themes in Qoheleth, Crenshaw rejects any possibility of a positive endeavor in life from Qoheleth's perspective.[42] In sum, Crenshaw's skeptical and pessimistic view of Qoheleth is justified by his negative view of הֶבֶל.

More recently, in his commentary on *Ecclesiastes*, Schoors rejects the different families of הֶבֶל -the "vanity family", the "transience family," the "frustration family," the "symbol family"[43]- as unsatisfactory and unfitting. He writes, "none of the meanings we drew from the literature cited above is satisfactory, since they all go in the sense of futility, emptiness, vanity."[44] The only meaning that fits the immediate and broader context of הֶבֶל in Qoheleth is according to him Fox's "absurd" thesis.

For Schoors, as for Fox, הֶבֶל must be translated with a single term because it functions as a key word for Qoheleth. Schoors explains that absurd must be understood in its existential context. Still in the footsteps of Fox, Schoors defines "absurd" in reference to the "disparity between two phenomena that are thought to be linked by a bond of harmony or causality but are actually disjunct or even conflicting."[45]

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[40] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes,* 24.

[41] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 23.

[42] James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*. 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 2010), 129-140.

[43] Fuhr, *An Analysis of the Inter-dependency of the Prominent Motifs,* 59-63.

[44] Schoors, *Ecclesiastes,* 43.

[45] Schoors, *Ecclesiastes,* 43.

This negative and univocal view of הֶבֶל is not shared by all scholars as will be shown below.

I.2.2 THE POSITIVE VIEW OF הֶבֶל

In this category are scholars who not only take a contextual reading of הֶבֶל, but also view its meaning as referring not to absurdity, or to vanity, much less to meaninglessness, but rather to its fleetingness, temporariness, or brevity, or transitoriness, which is our view also.

I.2.2.1 Frederick's הֶבֶל understood as transience or fleetingness

Daniel C. Fredericks is a major proponent of the view that הֶבֶל must be read in Qoheleth according to its range of meaning throughout the Hebrew Bible. *Contra* Fox and his followers' theory of the univocal term, Fredericks argues that a single meaning for הֶבֶל in Qoheleth does not do justice to him. Moreover, Fredericks's view and understanding of הֶבֶל in Qoheleth are not primarily drawn from extra-biblical material, but rather from the use of this term in Bible.

In fact, following the traditions of the early Jewish interpreters, who understood הֶבֶל in its literal and basic sense, Fredericks posits "breath" as the primary and fundamental meaning of הֶבֶל, used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible to characterize human life, mainly its brevity and temporariness (Ps 144:3-4; 78:33).

Based on this usage, Fredericks holds that in Qoheleth הֶבֶל primarily connotes the concept of brevity, transience, fleetingness or temporariness. He writes "The fundamental meaning of this metaphor, hebel or "breath", in the OT is 'temporary', so the opening comments in Ecclesiastes are intended to announce this key frustration of humanity:

Everything is Temporary!"[46] It is Frederick's contention that brevity, fleetingness, transience, temporariness is the most accurate way to render הֶבֶל.

> It is as if Qohelet assumes that we have learned that life is like a breath, brief in length; that fact we know from many poets and sages, not to speak of our own experience. But now he wants us to be aware of the fact that *every* experience within life is breath, everything will pass.[47]

Fredericks supports his thesis by appealing to the relationship between הֶבֶל and the "inevitability of death." Life is truly fleeting, brief and temporary. It is worth noting that, although he opts for "transience" thesis, Fredericks recognizes that there are a few cases where הֶבֶל may connote something else, such as futility (6:4.11). Yet, these "should not invert the proportion toward a message of futility for the book as a whole."[48]

Certainly, "transience, temporariness, fleetingness" are apt descriptions of the world as Fredericks understands Qoheleth to view it. However, he is not the only proponent of this view. Prior to him was Kathleen Farmer. While quoting passages in the Hebrew Bible where הֶבֶל means 'transitory', she argues that the message of Qoheleth refers to transience rather than meaninglessness or worse.

> When we look closely at the ways in which the word is used in other parts of the OT, it becomes clear that the essential quality to which *hebel* refers is lack of permanence rather than lack of worth or value. A breath, after all, is of considerable value to the one who breathes it. However, it is not something one can hang on to for long. It is air like , fleeting, transitory, and elusive

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[46] Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes & the Song of Songs* (Nottingham, England :Apollos, 2010) 23.

[47] Daniel C. Fredericks, *Coping with Transience: Ecclesiastes on Brevity in Life.* The Biblical Seminar 18.(Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1993), 24.

[48] Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, 24.

rather than meaningless.[49]

Since the publication of Farmer and Fredericks, understanding of הֶבֶל to mean 'temporary' in Qoheleth has gained momentum among scholars. We will consider now the contribution of Thomas Krüger and Schönberger.

I.2.2.2 Thomas Krüger: הֶבֶל understood as futile and fleeting

Krüger offers a comprehensive view of הֶבֶל that focuses on the transitory nature of life and a limited view of הֶבֶל as it is applied to particular contexts. He writes

> the word הֶבֶל designates, on the one hand, the futility and absurdity of certain human convictions and wishes and, on the other, the "fleetingness" and transitoriness" of human life, which for the individual finds its definitive and irreversible end in death.[50]

According to the above statement, Krüger does not argue for an exclusive meaning of הֶבֶל but acknowledges that there are instances where the term הֶבֶל reflects the idea of "futility" or "fleetingness."

Krüger argues that, when referring to the nature of life or human lifespan, הֶבֶל means "fleeting," and "futile" when it is applied to event or values in life.[51] Thus the royal experiment (Qoh 1:12-2:26) falls into the lexical range of "futile" or "futility", whereas the opening poem (1:4-11) and the rest of the text (3:1-12:8) are statements about the transitoriness or fleetingness of all creatures, and human in particular, whose life is

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[49] Kathleen A. Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good? A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*. International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 145.

[50] Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary*. Hermeneia-a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible.(Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 3.

[51] Krüger, *Qoheleth,* 42-43.

temporary, brief, fleeting and impermanent. For example, the general judgment הַכֹּל הָבֶל in 3:19 refers in its context to the transitoriness of all living beings,[52] not to the "absurdity" of Fox and his followers, or the "meaningless" of Tremper Longman.[53]

I.2.2.3 Schwienhorst-Schönberger and the "Windhauch" thesis

In his commentary, Schwienhorst-Schönberger distances himself from the "vanity" thesis and the "absurd" thesis as well. *Contra* the translation of הֶבֶל as *Eitelkeit (vanity)*, Schwienhorst-Schönberger returns to its basic meaning as "breath, vapor." Hence, he renders הֶבֶל by *Windhauch*, rather than *Eitelkeit*. The meaning of "breath" is not, however, univocal. It metaphorically denotes something weightless, worthless, empty, powerless and helpless. It is also an image of the ephemeral character of human life, its brevity.

In using *Windhauch* rather than *Eitelkeit,* Schwienhorst-Schönberger is highlighting the temporariness or the fleetingness of things, mainly human experience. Thus, rather than seeing the 'breeze statement' (*Windhauchaussage*) in the form of הַכֹּל הָבֶל as a universal statement for "absurdity," Schwienhorst-Schönberger argues that this statement is anthropological (*anthropologische Aussage*).

> Das Lexem bezieht sich auf anthropologische Sachverhalte. Es handelt sich bei der Windhauchaussage also nicht um eine universale, sondern um eine anthropologische Aussage. [54]

According to him, the *Windhauch* does not indicate the theme of the book but denies the negative part in answering the question about the content and condition of the

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[52] Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 43.

[53] Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 59-65.

[54] "The lexeme refers to anthropological facts. Thus, the lexeme is not a universal but an anthropological statement" in Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*. HThKAT (Freiburg Im Breisgau: Herder, 2004), 84.

possibility of human happiness (*Möglichkeit menschlichen Glücks*). This happiness cannot be found without God. The function of the *Windhauch* statement would thus be to justify, explain and illustrate the temporariness, or the fleetingness of humans' gain or happiness in this world (*der Mensch in dieser Welt keinen bleibenden Gewinn finden kann*),[55] not their absurdity.

Schwienhorst-Schönberger in fact, denies any possibility of understanding the teaching of Qoheleth as a "philosophy of the absurd". As he argues, the book brings up the absurdity of a way of life, namely that of a king, not in order to prove that it is necessarily imposed on humans, but to show how it can be broken through.[56] Even if there are absurdities in life, these are not eternal, but fleeting, temporary.

I.3 CONCLUSION

The above survey on the history of translation and interpretation of הֶבֶל, does not pretend to be exhaustive. It is just representative and indicative not only of the importance of the term הֶבֶל but also of its complexity. This term is capable of many meanings, which scholars attempt to grasp. Hence, the semantic diversity pertaining to הֶבֶל, such as vanity, meaninglessness,[57] absurdity,[58] enigmatic,[59] futility,[60] fleetingness.[61]

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[55] Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 85.

[56] Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 85.

[57] Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 59.

[58] Michael V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia, PA: JPS, 2004), 3.

[59] Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academy, 2009), 104.

[60] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes,* 57.

[61] Krüger, *Qoheleth,* 42.

There is, however, a consensus that the term הֶבֶל literally means “vapor’ or “breath”; that it is metaphorically used in Qoheleth, as elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. What makes the discussion complex and inconclusive is that “breath or vapor” can mean transient, incomprehensible, intangible, enigmatic, fleeting and unseizeable. It is difficult, however, to see “breath or vapor” in themselves, absolutely, as absurd, vain, or meaningless things. In any case, the literary context is of great importance to determine the meaning of הֶבֶל in the book. Depending then on the context, any number of the propositions mentioned above in the survey may be the best definition for הֶבֶל in the particular context in which it stands.

For this, we turn temporarily away from analyzing the word הֶבֶל to look at literary contexts-first at creation language in the Bible to better understand the “nature language” that contrasts with or explicates הֶבֶל.

Chapter II CREATION LANGUAGE IN THE WISDOM TRADITION

In the introduction, we began our investigation of the important word הֶבֶל in Qoheleth by surveying what previous scholarship has said. We stated that we would attempt to define and read הֶבֶל by looking at its use within the book of Qoheleth and, in particular, by its juxtaposition to the "nature" poems at the beginning and end of the book of Qoheleth.

The rationale behind our proposal to understand הֶבֶל by looking at creation texts, is that not only creation provides the context of human existence, but also the wise devote considerable attention both to creation and the place and role of humans within the natural world.

This chapter will thus investigate the way in which traditions about creation have been interpreted in the Wisdom literature of the Bible. Creation is an important and rich topic in biblical literature, but the goals of our thesis impose a limit on our examination of the literature. We will examine only two aspects of creation in the Wisdom texts analyzed below. The two aspects are: (1) how humans are *embedded* in the world that God has created; and (2) the clear and constant *demarcation* in the created world between the non-animate world (the three domains of earth, sea, sky) and the animate world. A major and constant indication of their demarcation is that the non-animate natural world is "eternal," characterized by endlessly recurring movement, whereas the animate world (individual life forms) is mortal, that is, birth is followed by death; each life form is endowed with a seed (זֶרַע) to continue the species, but not the individual. Each life form has a life span (the length of time for which a person or animal lives).

Furthermore, cosmogonies in the Bible and in the non-biblical ancient Near East are, to be sure, numerous, fascinating, and the object of extensive study, especially in the last few decades. Our examination of them, however, will be limited to the light they shed on *hebel* in Qoheleth. In the following pages, we will analyze several texts -Genesis 1; 2-3; Proverbs 3 and 8; Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon, and the non-biblical ancient Near East. We will begin with an analysis of a single text, Psalm 148, because it is so clear on the distinction between endlessly repeating nature and free and mortal human beings. We are aware that in citing only a sample of creation and Wisdom texts rather than every single allusion to creation may strike some readers as inadequate. One might object: Why not examine every biblical text that is concerned with the two aspects of human embeddedness and demarcation of animate and inanimate beings? In defense of our method, we have selected our texts because they are typical and representative of broad tendencies in the Bible.

II.1 PRELIMINARY REMARKS ABOUT "NATURE" AND HUMANS

II.1.1 CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

To understand the creation language in the Israelite wisdom tradition and the role of humans in creation requires that we first clarify some concepts that are basic to this issue and fundamental to our investigation. Especially important are the concepts of "nature" "creation" and "cosmos".

Primo the term "nature" is in the broadest sense equivalent to the natural world (תֵּבֵל). *The Oxford American Dictionary* draws the contrast between "nature" and "human", defining "nature" as "the phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape, and other features and products of the earth, as opposed to humans or human creations." Such a definition or understanding of "nature" excludes de facto humans

from nature. In fact, how humans are related to non-human nature is often framed in terms of a contrast between two basic views: the view that humans are apart from nature and the view that they are part of nature. While the first view shows human beings are somehow different or separate from the natural world, the second represents the belief that human beings belong to the natural world and cannot be set off from the natural systems with which they interact. In this view, nature includes human beings. It is, indeed, our contention that human beings as creatures are both apart from and a part of "nature." Thus, by "nature" we understand the physical and inhabitable world (תֵּבֵל) that is the inanimate beings.

Secundo, the term creation, as understood in this dissertation, is in reference to the personal act by which God created the universe and to the product of that process as well, that is the whole of created things, that is animate and inanimate, human and non-human. As such, the term creation is akin to the Hebrew conception of the world as totally.

Stadelmann observes, indeed, that the concept of "world" or "cosmos" as a whole is alien to the ancient Hebrews.[62] That is not to say that the idea of the unity of the world was unknown to the ancient Hebrews. In fact, as he points out, the idea of the "world" was conveyed by the term כל/ הכל or the expressions הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ. Though forming a totality, שָׁמַיִם and אֶרֶץ, two distinct entities, two different worlds (Ps 115:16), each having its constitutive elements. The harmony is given by the role and function performed by each one of them. Unlike modern cosmology which examines the origin, structure and evolution of the universe, the biblical worldview presents a static universe, a fixed order. This, indeed, is our underlying contention in using the terms cosmos, and cosmology. We do not mean the origin

[62] Luis I. J. Stadelmann, *The Hebrew Conception of the World. A Philological and Literary Study,* (Rome, PBI,1970), 1. 39-40.

of the world (שָׁמַיִם and אֶרֶץ), but the natural and fixed order in the world. It is much more about a tangible and experiential world that the wisdom writers are dealing with.

II.1.2 THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN-NATURE RELATIONSHIP

The wisdom sages or writers acknowledge no dichotomous separation between human being and "nature", such as astral bodies, water, air. They accept a fundamental unity of the natural and human/animal realms, each being an aspect of a larger unitary set, that is, the creations of the divine Creator. Richard J. Clifford highlights this unity by a reference to a passage from Proverbs:

> The modern dichotomous distinction between human beings and nature...was unknown in the ancient Near East. The purposeful activity of a colony of ants is as much an example of order as is the purposeful activity of human beings (see Prov 6:6-11).[63]

The wisdom books devote, in fact, considerable attention not only to creation, but also to the place and role of human beings within the physical environment. Human beings are so imbedded in the world that we might say that to understand the world is to understand human beings and vice versa. In other words, creation is designed to support and nurture human beings so that human beings cannot be fully understood unless one understands their relation to "nature," their natural environment.

Indeed, humans' *ethos* originates to a large extent in their relationship to their natural environment. This relationship between humans and nature, as Simkins observes, has

[63] Richard J. Clifford, "Introduction to Wisdom Literature," in *NIB*, 5:9.

been unfortunately neglected in earlier biblical interpretations. Earlier scholars interpreted the Bible from an exclusively history-oriented perspective,[64] claiming that

> the natural world did not play a significant role in the development of Israelite religion and culture and that the Israelites attributed no divine qualities or importance to nature (...) They did not deem the natural world to be a significant category of investigation.[65]

Along with Simkins and other scholars such as Mari Joerstad, Hilary Marlow, William P. Brown, Norman C. Habel, Marie Turner and Fretheim,[66] we stand against this earlier view and we posit the interaction, that is, the interconnectedness between the human world and the natural world. Humans and nature are interrelated in a way that the action of one affects the other.

The Bible, in fact, contains a number of texts dealing with the condition of nature, whether conducive or not to human life. Beginning with Genesis 1 and 2-3 the scribes give much attention to the creation of the natural world and human beings, as well as the function of each created element. Several psalms, prophetic and wisdom passages also extol

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[64] Ronald Simkins, *Creator and Creation: Nature in the Worldview of Ancient Israel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 1; Simkins, "Nature", in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 949-950.

[65] Simkins, *Creator and Creation*, 15.

[66] William P. Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos;* Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: a Relational Theology of Creation*; Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics* ; Mari Joerstad, *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics: Humans, Nonhumans, and the Living Landscape*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job: a Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1985), 57; Michael Welker, *Creation and Reality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999); Richard Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology*. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011). Marie Turner, *Ecclesiastes: Qoheleth's Eternal Earth* an Earth Bible Commentary, (New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2017).

the splendor and complexity of nature. For instance, the psalmist (Ps 148) calls on all creation to give God praise. As for Isaiah, he offers an eschatological hope of a new world order. We will argue that Qoheleth, for his part, presents in his opening poem a cosmology that grounds the sage's ethical teaching about God and humans' action in nature.

Likewise, in Sirach's teaching on creation (16:24-18:14), Yahweh creates the world and establishes the order, determining boundaries and arranging forever all their tasks that never disobey the divine word. In contrast, the created world includes human beings who are free and limited in their lifespan. Formed with a fixed number of days and with fear of the Lord and understanding, they are called to live obediently and worshipfully within the covenant (17:1-17). For Ben Sira, the nature and function of humans were fixed at creation (16:22-30; 17:1). As for the Wisdom of Solomon, which parallels Genesis and Exodus, it presents nature as intrinsically involved in the divine judgment that restores the original righteous order.

As can be seen, the natural world is so significant in humans' relationship to it and to the Creator that it deserves attention especially in any attempt to understand humans and their role in the cosmos. One cannot understand the natural world without understanding humans and vice-versa. To look ahead, one should, therefore, acknowledge and give credit to Qoheleth for opening and closing his book with cosmological poems on the world order and the fleetingness of human nature. While Qoh 1:2-11 introduces humanity to the context of its existence, that is, the world, Qoh 12:1-8 is mainly about the gradual exiting of humanity from the world to its eternal home (בֵּית עוֹלָמוֹ).

II.2 BASIC TYPES OF CREATION ACTIVITY IN THE BIBLE

II.2.1 PSALM 148: THE PRAISES OF CREATION

Psalm 148 has been described as Genesis 1 in poetic form because it invites all creation to give God praise in an order that mirrors the days of creation.[67] But it goes further than this. In fact, the content and structure of this Psalm is echoed in a number of other Old Testament texts such Dan 3, Job 28, and Sir 43 in which the works of creation are summoned to join in praising God. Behind the notion that the earth, the sky, the sea, the mountain, or the forest can burst into praise of the Creator, there exists a deep wisdom that creatures have a proper dignity of their own, independent of humanity. In the Genesis creation accounts, as we will show below, this dignity is granted to the works of creation specifically when it is presumed that they stand in their own individual relationship to God. Thanks, the united praise of God by all creation is found in Psalm 148.

> Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! ...Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded, and they were created. He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed (vv. 1-6).

The psalmist calls, indeed, all the heaven and its hosts to praise the Lord because he has established them by decree, and he maintains them (vv. 1-6). Each offers praise to God according to their nature. Similarly, he calls all that inhabit the earth, non-humans and humans, animate and inanimate to praise God's glorious name (7-14). The reasons they should all praise the Lord are expressed in the כִּי clauses of vv. 5-6 and v. 13.

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[67] Daniel J. Estes, "Creation Theology in Psalm 148," *BSac* 171 (2014): 31.37. See also Terence E. Fretheim, "Nature's Praise of God in the Psalms," *ExAud* 3 (1987): 26-27; Delbert R. Hillers, "A Study of Psalm 148," CBQ 40, 3 (1978): 328.

In vv. 5b-6 the reason given for the seven created beings, that is, the angels (מַלְאָכִים); the host (צְבָאוֹת), the sun (שֶׁמֶשׁ) the moon (יָרֵחַ); and the stars of light (כּוֹכְבֵי אוֹר), the heavens of heavens (שְׁמֵי הַשָּׁמָיִם) and the waters above the heavens (הַמַּיִם מֵעַל הַשָּׁמָיִם) to praise the Lord, is due to their specificity in the creation. Just as in Genesis 1, at God's command, they were created and established forever (וַיַּעֲמִידֵם לָעַד לְעוֹלָם).[68] In other words, they are to praise the Lord, because of the particular nature and place given to them within the created order.

If the call for humans to praise the Lord is understandable, there is, however, a concern about how non-human and inanimate creation praise the Lord. In our discussion of creation in Genesis, we will argue that to each element of creation, God has assigned a specific place and function. One might, accordingly, assert that it is by obeying the allotted task that creation, whether human or non-human, animate or inanimate, should praise the Creator. Thus, the rising and the setting of the sun, the blowing of wind from the south to the north and from the north to the south, as well as the flowing of the streams to the sea, as described in the opening poem of Qoheleth (Qoh 1:4-7), are not just cyclical and recurrent, or meaningless movements. They are performing the task assigned to them by the creator. In so doing, they are giving praise to the creator. In other words, they praise him in their very being and doing by existing and filling their assigned place. Allen rightly remarks indeed that

> just as a fine piece of craftsmanship brings glory to its craftsman, so the destiny of the created world is to glorify Yahweh by reflecting divine power. By fulfilling

[68] In the opening poem of Qoheleth, the expression עָמַד לְעוֹלָם used to characterize the eternal stability of the earth versus the passing of human generations. The Psalmist seems to argue likewise. Only the heavenly bodies are created eternal, while the earthly beings are not. Qoheleth, however, observes that human being is walking toward his house of eternity (הֹלֵךְ הָאָדָם אֶל־בֵּית עוֹלָמוֹ, 12:5), which is the earth from which he comes from (12:7). He thus affirms once again the eternal stability of the earth.

> their divinely allotted functions, the works of the celestial creation exist as eloquent witness to Yahweh's self-revelation through them.[69]

As we have been arguing, the praise described in Psalm 148 is not, therefore, limited to human words alone. The assumption that non-human creation could not 'really' praise God is based on the lack of human faculties in the non-human world. Unlike this view, Psalm 148 strongly asserts that inarticulateness does not disqualify one from praise. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, we find animals conforming to the will of God for their existence in ways not true of human beings (Isa.1:2; Jer.8:7). Accordingly, non-human creation may also be thought of as models of praise. The integration of the human and non-human in Psalm 148 may well reflect some of this understanding. Human beings should be praising as non-human creatures do. As Estes comments, the praise of God in Psalm 148 is "like a fugue, in which human voices combine with other created voices in an intricate cosmic counterpoint extolling Yahweh."[70]

In his essay on *Nature's Praise of God in the Psalms,* Fretheim concludes that the theme ought to engender a 'symbiosis in praise' in which every element in all of God's creation is called to praise together, and the response of one affects the response of the other.[71] No human history is independent of the history of nature, and this for both good and bad. Hence, our contention that cosmology and anthropology are intrinsically linked. That is to say, to understand human beings one should understand the world they are living in.

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[69] Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, WBC 21 (Nasville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 393.

[70] Estes, "Creation Theology in Psalm 148," 37.

[71] Fretheim, "Nature's Praise of God in the Psalms," 28. See also Idem*, God and World in the Old Testament: a Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 264.

II.2.2 THE COSMOLOGY OF GENESIS 1 (1-2:3) and 2-3 (2:4-3:24)

II.2.2.1 The Works of Creation

II.2.2.1.1 Creation in Genesis 1: from Chaos to Order

The reader is introduced to God's creative activity (Gen 1:1-2:25) by the description of the pre-creation:

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ׃
וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם
וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמָּיִם׃

These verses provide the reader with the setting of God's creative activity. In fact, the Priestly account begins with the description of the primeval state of the cosmos, characterized by a formless void (תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ), two primeval entities: darkness (חֹשֶׁךְ) and deep (תְהוֹם), and waters (הַמָּיִם). What the reader is not told is the mode and the nature of creation, which the author develops in the following verses.[72]

After describing the setting of creation, the author of Gen 1:1-2:4a turns his attention to God's creative act which consists in making (עָשָׂה), forming (יָצַר), building (בָּנָה) and separating (בדל) things, that is, in ordering and categorizing the primordial material into a world suitable for human habitation. According to the narrative, this work of creation which

[72] This rhetorical genre may have influenced Qoheleth in his opening statement. He begins, indeed, his book with a sarcastic and provocative statement:הֶבֶל הֲבָלִים אָמַר קֹהֶלֶת הֶבֶל הֲבָלִים הַכֹּל הָבֶל, thus calling the reader to attention and to inquiry. Qoheleth wants the reader, in fact, to be prompted and eager to know what he means by הבל. The meaning of הבל is laid out in the following verses.

took place in six days,[73] was done by the power of God's word.[74] Everything, through his powerful word alone was brought to existence.[75]

In order to offset the primordial darkness, God created light, and by the principle of distinction, he separated light and darkness, naming the one day, and the other night: וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים׀ לָאוֹר יוֹם וְלַחֹשֶׁךְ קָרָא לָיְלָה (Gen 1:5). According to Simkins, light and darkness are the *biotopoi*, that is, the environment of the heavenly luminaries (sun, moon and stars).[76]

Following the creation of light, and to respond to the primeval chaos, the watery abyss (תְּהוֹם), God made a celestial vault (רָקִיעַ) which he named heaven (שָׁמַיִם) to separate the waters above from the waters below. As a mode of creation, separating things (vv. 4.6.7) consists in the words of Clifford in putting "into their proper place the primordial elements of darkness and waters."[77] According to him "God does not annihilate darkness and sea, but masterfully incorporates them into the movement of the universe, darkness becoming

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[73] According to Anderson, the six days of creation in the Yahwist account fall in two major parts, that is, the environment and the occupants, each consisting of four acts of creation. Bernhard W. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives. Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994), 154.

[74] The concept of creation by word is not unique to Israel. The Egyptian myth of "the Creation by Atum" gives some indications of spoken word being fulfilled, but "the Memphis Theology" is quite explicit in reference to the word of Ptah and creation (*ANET*, 3-6).

[75] A number of references speaks of Yahweh intervention and creation by the word (Isa 55:11; 40:26; 44:24-28; 48:13; 50:2; Ezek 37:4; Ps 33:6.9; 104:7; 147:4.15-18; 148:3-5). As the breath of God's mouth goes out, the stars and created elements are brought into existence.

[76] Simkins, *Creator and Creation*, 197.

[77] Richard J. Clifford, "Genesis" in *The Paulist Biblical Commentary*, ed. José Enrique Aguilar Chiu et al. (New York: Paulist Press, 2018), 16.

part of the day-night sequence of time, and the cosmic waters dividing into upper and lower waters."[78]

On the third day of the creation, God makes dry land (יַבָּשָׁה) be gathered together into one place (מָקוֹם אֶחָד), the lower waters (הַמַּיִם מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם), thus, forming the seas (יַמִּים). The submerged dry land (יַבָּשָׁה) which became visible, God called earth (אֶרֶץ) which blooms with vegetation.

In essence, the first three days have mainly consisted in the creation of the three domains of earth, sky, and seas. What followed in the last three days, is the creation of the mobile occupants of the three domains, which, according to Clifford, "are classified by their locomotion in their sphere-walking or crawling on the earth, winging through the air of the sky, or swimming with fins in the waters of the sea."[79]

Worthy of notice is the dry land (יַבָּשָׁה / אֶרֶץ), created to be the natural habitat both of human and of non-human creatures equally, despite the preeminent place given to human beings by the Priestly writer. As a matter of fact, even though God's creative act is thought to reach its climax in the creation of *ʾādām* the narrator shows that animals and humans are created together on the sixth day; they belong together and share a common house.[80] They are to cohabitate and share same table, as vegetarians. Moreover, God blessed both of them and commanded them to be fruitful and to multiply (פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמִלְאוּ, vv. 22.28). Such a description of the relations of humankind with the nonhuman creatures tells of the

[78] Clifford, "Genesis," 16.

[79] Clifford, "Genesis", 15.

[80] In the flood narrative, humans and animals share the same house, the ark in which all living beings according to their species live together to escape the waters of chaos (see Gen 6-9).

harmony and goodness of and in creation. In God's eyes creation is good (טוֹב מְאֹד), that is, exactly what God intended.

We thus assert that the order and regularity of the cosmos, in which every creature, inanimate or animate, human or nonhuman, has its assigned place and function, were purposefully and strategically designed by God as they evoke aesthetic feelings of wonder and reverence. Along with Clifford we do think and affirm that the beauty of the universe lies fundamentally in its functional value. According to Clifford, the universe reveals "a God who desires to overcome inertia and emptiness and impart life, and a God who embraces diversity and installs permanent orders of being, desiring that different beings act in accord with their natures."[81]

In that same vein, and in the line of our investigation on the "nature poems" in Qoheleth, we argue that the elements of cosmos as designed in Genesis 1 are not static, but dynamic. They are marked by permanence / stability and movement. While the three domains (earth, sky and sea) are stable, fixed, permanent and eternal, their inhabitants are not.

> Day and night are in dynamic opposition, perpetually alternating; the waters of the sea surge and lap earth's beaches; sun, moon, and stars arc fixed in the sky, giving light and directing life; above the sky and below the earth lie unimaginably vast bodies of water; fish swarm and swim, birds fly through the air, land animals constantly move, humans range freely over the three domains, authorized by the creator to make it flourish. And over everything and with everything is a God who wanted it all to happen.[82]

[81] Clifford, "Genesis", 17.

[82] Clifford, "Genesis", 17.

All these movements in each of the three domains are important for the harmony in the universe which, in fact, stands as long as each element respects the order of and in the creation. For, the beauty of the earth lies fundamentally in its functional value. We may assert that the creation in Genesis 1 is a movement from emptiness to fullness, from lifeless to life, from inertia to dynamism, from chaos to order. Simkins comments, indeed, that

> the story intends to show that the Creator's purpose is to provide the earth, and its surrounding cosmic environment, as well-ordered and well-furnished habitat for living beings to appear and flourish. The Creator's activity is directed toward order, not chaos.[83]

This order is also noticeable in the second creation account, in more picturesque language.

II.2.2.1.2 Creation in Genesis 2-3

Like the first account the narrative begins with a description of the pre-world (*Urwelt*). But, unlike the Priestly account where the earth was created, in the Yahwist account, the earth stands as primeval. According to v. 5 the earth exists as dryland with no plants or herbs because there was not yet rain nor anyone (אָדָם) to till (עָבַד) the ground (אֲדָמָה , 2:5).

Yet, the earth has the potential for life. Indeed, life will originate from it. Out of the earth (מִן־הָאָרֶץ), a stream (אֵד) was welling up and watering all the surface of the ground

[83] Simkins, *Creator and Creation,* 154.

(פְּנֵי־הָאֲדָמָה, 2:6). Out of the ground (מִן־הָאֲדָמָה)[84] the Lord God formed (יָצַר)[85] human beings (אָדָם, 2:7), breathed in *ʾādām*'s nostrils the breath of life (נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים, 2:7),[86] made every tree to grow (וַיַּצְמַח, 2:9), formed (יָצַר) every beast of the field and every bird of the air, 2:19), and placed *ʾādām* in a garden (גַּן־בְּעֵדֶן), full of trees pleasing to the sight (נֶחְמָד לְמַרְאֶה) and good for food (וְטוֹב לְמַאֲכָל, 2:9). Observing further that no other creature was a suitable helper for *ʾādām*, God built (וַיִּבֶן) a woman (אִשָּׁה) from a rib taken from the man's ribs (מִן־הָאָדָם).

As ground-originated, *ʾādām* and animals are intimately related. Like him, animals are living creatures (נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה), made from the ground (מִן־הָאֲדָמָה, 2:7.19). They are all placed in the natural environment that the Lord has provided. It is worth noting that the cosmologist of the second creation account shows no interest in heavenly entities (the sun, moon, light...). He rather focuses on the place and role of human beings in nature, and his relationship with the Creator.

II.2.2.2 The Ethos of the Cosmos and Human' s Responsibility

Central to Genesis' notion of creation is the idea of order. This order is physical as well as moral which requires ethical behavior to maintain the harmonious working of

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[84] In Gen 1:26-27, the Priestly writer uses the words בָּרָא and עָשָׂה to describe the creation of humans. In Babylonian accounts of humankind's creation, the human is formed from clay mingled with the blood of Qingu or two Lamga gods (craftsmen gods). In Atrahasis I, 210, the human is created from the flesh and blood of a slain god which is mixed with clay (W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atrahasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1969), 21-22. Here in Genesis 2, human is fashioned from the ground; specifically, from עָפָר (dust) taken from הָאֲדָמָה.

[85] Unlike Genesis 1 where creation is made *ex nihilo* and by the power of God's word alone, the Yahwist account presents God as a "craftsman," a *yōṣer,* a potter or sculptor, using existent materials to fashion or to create others. The word יָצַר describes in fact the work of an artist. Like a potter shaping an earthen vessel from clay, God fashioned (וַיִּיצֶר) *ʾādām*, beasts and birds.

[86] The breathing of God's breath into human's nostrils is referred to in Job 27:3 "as long as my breath is in me and the spirit of God (רוּחַ אֱלוֹהַּ) is in my nostrils (בְּאַפִּי). According to Job, the רוּחַ אֱלוֹהַּ gives not only life (רוּחַ־אֵל עָשָׂתְנִי וְנִשְׁמַת שַׁדַּי תְּחַיֵּנִי, 33:4) but also understanding (נִשְׁמַת שַׁדַּי תְּבִינֵם, 32:8).

creation. The orderliness of the cosmos is conveyed by the role and function of each element of the cosmos. Thus, the earth is summoned to sprout grass (תַּדְשֵׁא הָאָרֶץ דֶּשֶׁא 1:11), bring forth (תּוֹצֵא) living creatures (נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה) of every kind (Gen 1:24-25). Likewise, the waters are commanded to produce swarms of living creatures (שֶׁרֶץ נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה 1:20). Like the earth and the waters, the luminaries are assigned a function that corresponds to their internal nature. Above all these, are the role and function of human beings in the world, due, one might say, to their specificity in the process of creation.

In the Priestly account, the creation of *ʾādām* is preceded by a special proclamation where God solemnly declares his intention to make *ʾādām:* נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם,[87] with no mention of the material used. But Genesis 1:26 mentions that *ʾādām* was made "in the image of God" and in his "likeness." Semantically, בְּצַלְמֵנוּ and כִּדְמוּתֵנוּ both convey the idea of something carved or shaped, like a statue.[88] How human beings are in the "image of God" is hard to appraise, given that the narrator did not say much, if anything, about the content of בְּצַלְמֵנוּ. We do, however, think and agree with Simkins that the expression צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים "must refer to some aspect of humans in which they are distinct from all other creatures."[89] For von Rad צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים is "closely connected to human dominion and rule over the earth"[90] even though this connection is not explicitly stated. Tigay, thus, goes on to contend that humans

[87] The use of the cohortative (נַעֲשֶׂה) indicates the creation of *ʾādām* might be understood as resulting from a dialogical act, an inner-divine communication or from deliberations of a divine assembly.

[88] BDB, s.v. "צֶלֶם", 6754; or *HALOT* s.v "צֶלֶם" 2:1028-1029; BDB, s.v "דְּמוּת", 1823; or *HALOT* s.v "דְּמוּת", 1:226.

[89] Simkins, *Creator and Creation,* 199.

[90] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary.* Revised edition OTL (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1972), 60.

are functionally like God, called to rule over the other creatures as God would do, that is, with justice.[91]

According to Simkins, the connection of "image of God" with dominion, is intended to underscore the capacity of *ʾādām* in exercising his power and his will in the cosmos. He writes, "humans are not simply objects of creation, subjected to the fixed orders of creation. Humans have some measure of control over creation like God."[92] The verbs used by the Priestly writer to depict this role of dominance assigned to *ʾādām* are כָּבַשׁ (subdue) and רָדָה (rule over), which are often used in reference to a king or a leader conquering and controlling enemy territories (כָּבַשׁ in Josh 18:1; רָדָה in 1 Kgs 5:4; 4:24).[93] However, one should not interpret the command to subdue the earth in the sense of an oppressive power, but rather in terms of stewardship.

Along this line, the Yahwist account suggests that human beings are commissioned to serve (לְעָבְדָהּ) and care (לְשָׁמְרָהּ) for the garden. The verb עבד means to serve and it implies respect and even reverence for the garden.[94] On the other hand, שׁמר, meaning

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[91] Jeffrey H. Tigay "The Image of God and the Flood: Some New Developments," in *Studies in Jewish ללמד וללמד Education and Judaica in Honor of Louis Newman*, ed. Alexander M. Shapiro and Burton I. Cohen (New York: Ktav, 1984), 174.

[92] Simkins, *Creator and Creation,* 201.

[93] Israel's kings were expected to care for the poor and the weak (Ps 72:12-14), and in Genesis 1 human beings were given the task of being God's royal deputies on earth; cf. Richard Bauckham, "Humans, Animals, and the Environment in Genesis 1-3," in *Genesis and Christian Theology,* ed. Nathan MacDonald, Mark W. Elliott and Grant Macaskill (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 179-83. Furthermore, in Ps 8 the Psalmist sings praises to God for having made humans like kings to rule over the earth: "Yet you have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas" (Ps 8:5-8).

[94] In the Babylonian myths, *Enuma Elish* (VI, 29-33), and *Atrahasis* (I, 1-4), human beings are made specifically to be servants or slaves of the gods. Humans are not created for their own purpose; they are in dependency on and subordinated to divinity. They are created to do the work of the gods, a work that is essential for the

to keep or care, is an act of protection. This implies that human beings are earth keepers (שֹׁמְרִים), that is, beings who care for and protect God's creation. As De la Tore puts it, "God sustains, and humans maintain."[95]

That the world, as described in Genesis, is an orderly, beautiful, and perfect world, and that life is enjoyable is often noted. The condition of remaining in the garden and continuing to enjoy its fruits is to respect the divine order. Thus, for the two trees planted in the garden, the tree of life (עֵץ הַחַיִּים)[96] and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (עֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וָרָע 2:9), it was strictly prohibited for *ʾādām* to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:16-17):

וַיְצַו יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים עַל־הָאָדָם לֵאמֹר
מִכֹּל עֵץ־הַגָּן אָכֹל תֹּאכֵל׃
וּמֵעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וָרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ
כִּי בְּיוֹם אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת׃

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continuing existence of the gods, and a work that they are tired of doing for themselves. The biblical narrative in Genesis gives no hint that the Creator is shuffling his load onto man. Work is intrinsic to human life. In Genesis 2, the service of humans is directed towards the earth.

[95] Miguel A De la Tore, *Genesis*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 2011), 48.

[96] Trees as a symbol of life are well known in the ANE and in the Bible. According to Clifford, the two trees in Gen 2:9 are "metaphors for the two qualities that in the ancient Near East chiefly distinguished heavenly from earthly beings immortality and super-wisdom...The tree of the knowledge of good and bad symbolizes this super-wisdom not meant for humans" (Clifford, "Genesis", 19). In the Gilgamesh epic, the hero found in a deep well a plant that would confer "youth in old age", that is rejuvenation. Genesis notes that this tree too will give life to those who eat its fruit (Gen 2:9;3:22.24). In its seven occurrences in the Hebrew Bible, the expression עֵץ הַחַיִּים occurs four times in Proverbs where wisdom is described as the "tree of life" (Prov 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:14). Elsewhere in the book of Job, the fate of the wicked is metaphorically illustrated by using the parable of the two plants (8:12-19), which, in fact, echoes one of the instructions of Amenemope: "as for the heated man of a temple, He is like a tree growing in the open. In the completion of a moment (comes) its loss of foliage, and its end is reached in the shipyards... but the truly silent man holds himself apart. He is like a tree growing in a garden. It flourishes and doubles its yield; it stands before its lord. Its fruit is sweet; its shade is pleasant; and its end is reached in the garden" (*ANET,* 422).

More than regarding God's prohibition as a test for the man, Clifford argues that "God's command was meant to safeguard the wisdom the couple already had by being in God's presence; they had no need of knowledge from another source."[97]

In 2:9 it is said that the garden contained trees good to eat (טוֹב לְמַאֲכָל). In 2:16-17, explicit permission is given to eat of them all (אָכֹל תֹּאכֵל) except the tree of knowledge. The restriction is forthright and firm: לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ. The motive clause appended to this prohibition (כִּי בְּיוֹם אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת) connects one's action or choice to its effects or consequences. Human beings are, thus, given a free will, the freedom of choice, which, in fact, is important for an ethical and meaningful life. The characterization of the prohibited fruit in 3:6 as טוֹב לְמַאֲכָל (good for food), תַּאֲוָה לָעֵינַיִם (delight for the eyes) and נֶחְמָד לְהַשְׂכִּיל (desirable for making one clever, wise, 3:6) on one hand, and the decision taken to eat of its fruits on the other hand, express the desire of *ʾādām* to be more than who he really is, a desire for greater satisfaction.

Qoheleth seems to be aware of this aspect of human nature with its consequences. It is therefore not surprising that in the opening poem, Qoheleth compares humans, mainly in their desire, to the unfilled sea. He, thus, warns the reader "the eye is not satisfied (תִּשְׂבַּע) with seeing, or the ear filled (לֹא־תִמָּלֵא) with hearing" (Qoh 1:8; see also 4:8; 5:9 for לֹא־תִשְׂבַּע). This insatiateness of seeing, hearing, having, or being leads to the oppression of the poor (Qoh 4:1-4), the corruption of justice (Qoh 8:11), to unhappy life (Qoh 5:12-13), and to death (12:1). Drawing from the consequences of the eating of the tree of

[97] Clifford, "Genesis", 19.

knowledge which brings unsatisfaction and death,[98] Qoheleth, through this warning in 1:5b, introduces the reader to the real world, and provides a key for a meaningful, wise and happy life, which consists in finding joy in one's situation, function in the world.

The eating from the tree has, indeed, broken the order in creation on the one hand, and on the other brought forth a new reality for human beings: their eyes are opened (וַתִּפָּקַחְנָה עֵינֵי שְׁנֵיהֶם), they realize that they are naked (עֵירֻמִּם), and their bodies are objects of shame (בּשֶׁת).[99] Hence, the need of covering themselves with fig leaves (3:7). They see the world as never before, they know something about both the good and the bad, about who they are and what their life means. Along with Habel, we argue that

> with eyes open to new realities, life is more than experiencing the good and innocent world of Eden. Life is now about knowing and experiencing both sides of reality: good and bad, pleasure and pain, life and death.[100]

The ground from which אָדָם is made is now cursed (אֲרוּרָה הָאֲדָמָה), and it will even be his final resting place (שׁוּבְךָ אֶל־הָאֲדָמָה). Death will be his fate:עָפָר אַתָּה וְאֶל־עָפָר תָּשׁוּב.[101] They now have a lifespan. They will die but live on in their children, that is through generations which for Qoheleth are passing (Qoh 1:4).

In the line of our investigation, it appears that the "nature" poems in the book of Qoheleth display key issues of life out of the garden and which are highlighted in Gen

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[98] In reference to this verse, the Wisdom of Solomon affirms that God creates humans being for immortality, that God did not make death. Death entered in the world through the envy of devil (Wis 2:23-24).

[99] The couple who was naked but not ashamed, is now ashamed as they realize their nakedness. Their sexuality which was is dormant like prepubescent children, is now awakened. Hence, they hurriedly cover themselves. (see Clifford, "Genesis", 19.)

[100] Norman C. Habel, *The Birth, the Curse and the Greening of Earth : An Ecological Reading of Genesis 1-11,* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), 58.

[101] Allusion to this verse is made Qoheleth in 3:20-21; 12:7.

3:19-20. The notion of death is metaphorically expressed in the opening poem by the use of the verb הלךְ, the passing of generation (Qoh 1:1), and the expression לָרִאשֹׁנִים וְגַם לָאַחֲרֹנִים (Qoh1:11), and prominently in the closing poem (12:1-7) where Qoheleth speaks explicitly about the going of *ʾādām* to his *bêt ʿôlām* (12:5), the return of the dust (*heʿāpār*) to the ground (*ʿal hā'āreṣ*), and the spirit (*rûaḥ*) to God (12:7), although this latter does not appear in Genesis 2-3. The notions of toil (עָמָל) and gain (יִתְרוֹן) are also worth mentioning.

Life outside the garden consists in strenuous farming (בַּעֲבוּרֶךְ בְּעִצָּבוֹן) until death (כֹּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ, 3:17). Instead of enjoying the fruits of the garden, *ʾādām* is now given the plants of the field (עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה) to eat. Clifford comments that "God's declaration to the man in verse 18, "you shall eat the plants of the field," implies expulsion from the Garden of Eden to another agricultural system-laborious and rain-dependent upland farming."[102]

According to Habel, it "seems to represent the means for humanity...to move from the idealized world of the primordial to the real world of good and bad, a world only grasped and experienced fully and truthfully through wisdom."[103] This wisdom, is, in fact, what human beings were lacking, and were desiring to have, that is, the ability to know the good to do and the evil to avoid. The knowledge of "good and evil" is probably a merism for wisdom. It offers insight (הַשְׂכִּיל).[104] For having eaten the fruit, they are on the way to some wisdom, they know something of the good and evil that God knows (Gen 3:22).

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[102] Clifford, "Genesis", 20.

[103] Habel, *The Birth, the Curse and the Greening of Earth,* 59.

[104]The word שָׂכַל occurs prominently in Proverbs, meaning "to have insight, understanding", but also "to be prudent" or "to act prudently" (Prov 1:3; 10:5.19; 14:35.15:24; 16:20.23; 17:2.8; 19:14; 21:11; 21:12; 21:16).

II.2.2.3 Conclusion on Creation in Genesis 1 and 2-3

God's activity in creation is not a single event that happened at the beginning of time, but it includes successive linear and cyclical events or movement of the natural phenomena such as the recurrent cycle of the sun, the moon, the life cycle of animals and humans.[105] The doctrine of creation, as shown above, affirms that every creature is assigned a place in God's plan in order that it may perform its appointed role in serving and glorifying the Creator. Hence, Vischer's contention that "nature is the order decreed by God in which each part is called to worship."[106]

Although all God's creatures are summoned to praise their Creator, human beings are the only earthly being in whom praise can be articulate. They are to exercise sovereignty with God's sovereignty so that all other creatures may be related to God through them and thus join in creation's symphony of praise the Creator. This relationship between God, human and non-human creation is not, however, unique to Genesis. As we will show below in the next subsection, the prophets and the psalmists share this worldview.

II.2.3 THE COSMOLOGICAL ESCHATOLOGY OF ISAIAH 35

Isaiah 35 can be viewed and treated as an eschatological prophecy which envisions and describes a new world order: the future of Judah as secure, prosperous, and joyful. This eschatology is expressed through cosmological imagery. We would, therefore,

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[105] Qoheleth shows, in fact, great concern for the human condition within the recurrent cycles of nature, mainly in the opening and closing poems.

[106] Wilhem Vischer, *The Witness of the Old Testament to Christ*, cited in Anderson, *From creation to new creation*, 11.

read Isa 35 as a cosmological eschatology.[107] Yet, in chapter 34, the prophet calls on the nations (גּוֹיִם), peoples (לְאֻמִּים), the earth (אֶרֶץ) and all that is in it, the world (תֵּבֵל) and all that lives it -all of nature- to hear and witness not only the chaos and disorder in creation, but mainly God's victory over chaos and the establishment of the new order in creation. It is this new creation that Isaiah 35 describes.

In this passage the whole created order appears to be reversed. It is the natural world, that is, the wilderness (מִדְבָּר), the dry land (צִיָּה) and desert (עֲרָבָה), which acts first and brings about the new world order. The outpouring of waters (מַיִם) in the wilderness and streams (נְחָלִים) in the desert not only brings renewal to the dry and thirsty ground, but also, is the source of exultation for the wilderness (מִדְבָּר), the dry land (צִיָּה), and for the desert (עֲרָבָה). Plants and land rejoice and sing (vv. 1-2). They lead the way. Humans then copy their actions only at the very end of the passage as they take up the singing and rejoicing (v. 10).

The restoration of non-human creation is followed by the restoration of human creation from physical disabilities: the blind (עִוְרִים), the deaf (חֵרְשִׁים), the lame (פִּסְחִים) and the mute (אִלְּמִים). Each one will be restored and given a new life.

As a result of this restoration the natural world is perfected. Not only will the eyes of the blind be opened (תִּפָּקַחְנָה), the ears of the deaf cleared (תִּפָּתַחְנָה), the lame leap up (יְדַלֵּג) and the tongue of the mute shout with joy (תָּרֹן), but non-human creation also rejoices for joy (v. 2). The reason given in verse 2b is the bestowal of glory (כָּבוֹד) and splendor (הָדָר) which will result in the revelation of the glory and splendor of YHWH (כְּבוֹד־יְהוָה הֲדַר אֱלֹהֵים).

[107] Similar to Isaiah cosmological eschatology is Qoheleth's closing poem (Qoh 12:1-8). As we will discuss in our third chapter, Qoheleth made use of cosmological imagery to speak of 'the end of the time', mainly the end of time for a human being in the world, characterized by the verbs of destruction and return.

The forests of Lebanon, Carmel, and Sharon are given "glory" and "majesty"- the very same "glory" and "majesty" of God (v. 3). Thus, the prophet attributes divine character to the natural world, that is to say, nature shares in the characteristics and identity of God; and the earth has its own autonomy.

Thus, we contend that the harmony created between wild and domestic animals, as well as with human beings, forms a paradigm for the created world that transcends the observable laws of nature. Marlow points out, in fact, that "this depiction of perfection is not intended to negate the natural biological processes of the world, but rather to paint a wide picture of the potentiality of YHWH's ideal reign."[108] This picture of the ideal reign uses poetic and hyperbolic nature language in order to depict the radical change Yahweh will initiate in all creation.

In describing the value of non-human creation, Marlow stresses the interconnectedness between humanity and the natural world. She writes: "The knowledge that human behavior impacts other parts of creation, and vice versa, and the presupposition that this is part of the moral order of the universe form a fundamental part of the prophetic message."[109] Isaiah's appeal to the natural world (Isa 1:2-3) and his portrayal of the earth as "mourning" (Isa 24:4-7; 33:9; see also Jer 4:28; 12:4; 23:10; Hos 4:3; Amos 1:2) demonstrate a prophetic worldview that perceives non-human creation as having a separate identity and an inherent positive value, capable of praising Yahweh. In 1:2-3 Isaiah calls on the heavens to hear and, on the earth, to listen.

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[108] Hilary Marlow and John Barton, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics: Re-Reading Amos, Hosea and First Isaiah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 241-242.

[109] Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics,* 263.

We conclude by saying that praise of God is not the prerogative of humans beings alone. At the beginning of this cosmo-eschatological oracle, the desert is personified as it rejoices in God. All of creation praises God in the form that God created it. In other words, both humans and the natural world praise God in their very being as God's creative desires. We, thus, agree with Simkins that "the creation is designed by the creator as a vehicle of praise and divine revelation."[110]

Moreover, the more one understands the world, the more one will live a meaningful and joyful life. This view is highly shared and emphasized by the wisdom sages and their teachings on the cosmos.

II.3 CREATION TEXTS IN WISDOM LITERATURE

The emphasis on creation in the wisdom corpus has long been recognized in scholarship. Von Rad had, indeed, claimed that biblical wisdom was, in essence, *die Selbstoffenbarung der Schöpfung* (the self-revelation of creation).[111] The sages believed, indeed, that the real arena for exercising wisdom is the sphere of the living. It is a tangible world that they sought to comprehend. According to Perdue

> Through [the] senses and the images they perceived, the sages came to imagine how to live and act so as to create a sphere of well-being in which they could exist. And at least, to a limited extent, the sages believed that through their observation of the world they could imagine the nature and character of God.[112]

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[110] Simkins, *Creator and Creation,* 152.

[111] Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel,* trans. James D. Martin (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1972), 144-176.

[112] Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom & Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), 210.

It is this combination of outward-looking experience, and the ensuing conceptions of how to live which explain the centrality of creation in the sages' writings. They discerned a natural world that was orderly and hence meaningful and instructive. However, how the subject perceives the world is critical to how he lives and acts in the world. It is no coincidence, then, that the wisdom corpus is filled with references to creation, ranging from vast cosmologies to concrete images drawn from the natural realm. Each wisdom book offers, in fact, its own evocative or provocative tableau of creation and understanding of the cosmos.

Furthermore, given that, as Brown contends, "every tradition in which creation is its context, the moral life of the community is a significant subtext, [that is] every model of the cosmos conveys an ethos as well as a mythos"[113], attention will be given to the ethical world of the sages.

II.3.1 THE BOOK OF PROVERBS AND ITS POLAR WORLDS

Proverbs, in various ways, present the world as created by God, and thus, as meaningful, orderly, and morally instructive. It instructs the reader to learn and become wise and righteous. To reach that goal, the learner is expected to go through the reshaping of his inner person. His desires, hopes, and disposition must be reconditioned to reflect the ideal. Proverbs calls, indeed, the simple ones (פְּתָאִים), the young (נַעַר), and the wise and discerning (חָכָם and נָבוֹן) to acknowledge that God's creative work is the foundation of all. According to Perdue "creation theology and its correlative affirmation, providence, were at the *centre* of the sages' understanding of God, the world, and humanity."[114]

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[113] William P. Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: MI, Eerdmans, 1999), 2.

[114] Perdue, *Wisdom & Creation*, 20.

II.3.1.1 Wisdom's role in Creation Prov 3:19-20

יְהוָ֤ה בְּחָכְמָ֨ה יָסַ֣ד־אָ֭רֶץ כּוֹנֵ֣ן שָׁמַ֑יִם בִּתְבוּנָֽה׃
בְּדַעְתּ֗וֹ תְּהוֹמ֥וֹת נִבְקָ֑עוּ וּ֝שְׁחָקִ֗ים יִרְעֲפ֥וּ־טָֽל׃

The creation poem in Proverbs 3:19-20 is depicted by four verbs which all speak of God originating the cosmos. The first two verbs (v. 19) (יָסַד and כון),[115] which present God as a builder (יֹסֵד) laying down a stable and secure foundation, point to the security of the cosmos. As Perdue suggests, "this image of the divine architect is a metaphor for portraying the skill and knowledge God uses to secure and order the cosmos and to support the sky with a roof constructed over the cosmic sea."[116]

As for the last two verbs, (בָּקַע and רעף), they both point to the nurturing of the earth by the secured water-related phenomena. In 3:20a, the תְּהוֹמוֹת, the primeval sea bursts open (נִבְקָעוּ) by divine knowledge (בְּדַעְתּוֹ), in the release of water from its depths (תְּהוֹמוֹת).[117] Thus, תְּהוֹמוֹת has to act according to God's knowledge (דַּעַת) by letting some water flow within

[115] The primary meaning of יָסַד is "to found, to fix firmly, establish, lay the foundation." It occurs in Proverbs only here. Other texts use יָסַד to refer to YHWH creating the universe (Ps 24:2; 78:69; 89:12; 104:5. Job, 38:4) or founding (laying the foundation of) the temple (1Kings 5:17; Ezra 3:2.6.10; Zech 4:9) or the city (Josh 6:26; 1Kings 16:34). As for the verb כון, which occurs twenty times in Proverbs, it means in its Polel (כּוֹנֵן)"establish." It is only here in Proverbs, but in other texts, that it refers to God establishing the world (Ps 24:2; 119:90) the heavenly bodies (8:4) or his sanctuary (Ex 15:17). The synonymous Hiphil occurs six times in Proverbs. In the book the passive Niphal "be established, prepared, preserved, enduring" is used elven times. On the basis of these two verbs, creation might be seen as an act of building, which in fact is a common motif connected with wisdom (9:1; 14:1; 24:30.

[116] Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History*, 51.

[117] Genesis 7:11 employs the verb בָּקַע alone to depict the beginning of a dreadful flood whereas Proverbs 3:20a softens בָּקַע with דַּעַת in order to highlight God's willingness to provide the earth's surface with orderly water. In both passages the use of *niphal* form נִבְקָעוּ is meant to highlight the principle of the intrinsic value of nature as תְּהוֹמוֹת act by themselves.

designed channels to the land. The term דַּעַת here stands for the principle that governs the flow of the waters.

The sage probably refers to Genesis 2:6 where the mist from the deeps burst open to fertilize the earth. Clifford notes indeed, that "the themes of wisdom and cosmic water fertilizing the earth are found in the Eridu cosmogonic tradition, though that tradition is concerned with canals and rivers rather than with rain-water."[118] Van Leeuwen does not argue otherwise when he reads Prov 3:19-20 through the lens of the metaphor of "house-building", and "house filling." "The language of filling refers first to the furnishings and inhabitants of a house, and second, to all that makes life in the house abundant and rich, including agriculture, fertility, food and drink, and the acquisition of material goods."[119]

Just as humans build houses and fill them with what is necessary for life, God forms the cosmos and fills it with what is needed to provide for and sustain all life. However, scholars disagree on the role wisdom plays in forming, establishing and filling the cosmos. The debate is about the meaning of בְּ in בְּחָכְמָה, whether it should be read into/with wisdom or by/through wisdom.[120] It supports our viewpoint to take it as an instrumental בְּ (through, by), mainly if one wants to understand 3:19-20 as describing the role of wisdom in the creation of the cosmos. God uses wisdom in creating and ordering the world. All of God's creatures are made בְּחָכְמָה.

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[118] Richard J. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible* (Washington, D.C: CBA, 1994), 180-181.

[119] Raymond C.V. Leeuwen "Cosmos, Temple, House : Building and Wisdom in Ancient Mesopotamia and Israel" in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel,* ed., Richard J. Clifford (Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill. 2007), 68.

[120] For von Rad, the preposition בְּ prefixed to בְּחָכְמָה must be read as implying something imparted to creation on creation (*Wisdom in Israel,* 441). Likewise, for Murphy, Proverbs 3:19 must be read that God established the earth into wisdom, not by wisdom.

In Proverbs 3:19-20 wisdom is installed in the structures of creation from their foundations. Wisdom is an essential element of the cosmos itself and obtaining her will enable the sage to understand the nature of the cosmos and to live well within it. As Clifford states, "the very wisdom by which Yahweh created the world is available to all who seek it. Wisdom thus mediates between the all wise Yahweh and the human seeker."[121]

By creation made by wisdom, one might, therefore, understand the intrinsic value of a creation designed to act according to an order established within it: "Le principe de la חכמה est que Dieu a organisé le monde selon un ordre qu'il faut découvrir et selon lequel il faut ensuite conformer sa vie."[122] Said otherwise, wisdom stands as the skill, the design and knowledge that God uses to create, to secure and order the universe. Subsequently, the stability of the cosmos is maintained by wisdom. Wisdom is the life-sustaining and ordering principle of the cosmos.[123]

These stimulating ideas, briefly encapsulated in 3:19-20, are further unfolded in Prov 8:22-31, where wisdom is personified and ascribed a place of eminence in God's work of creation.

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[121] Richard J. Clifford, *Creation Accounts,* 181; cf. Leo Perdue, *Wisdom Literature, A theological History*, 51.

[122] Thomas Römer, *Introduction à L'Ancien Testament* (Genève, Suisse: Labor et Fides, 2009), 579.

[123] Leo Perdue, *Wisdom & Creation*, 84.

II.3.1.2 The Creation Poem of Prov 8:22-31

22 יְהוָה קָנָנִי רֵאשִׁית דַּרְכּוֹ קֶדֶם מִפְעָלָיו מֵאָז׃

23 מֵעוֹלָם נְסַכְתִּי מֵרֹאשׁ מִקַּדְמֵי־אָרֶץ׃

24 בְּאֵין־תְּהֹמוֹת חוֹלָלְתִּי בְּאֵין מַעְיָנוֹת נִכְבַּדֵי־מָיִם׃

25 בְּטֶרֶם הָרִים הָטְבָּעוּ לִפְנֵי גְבָעוֹת חוֹלָלְתִּי׃

26 עַד־לֹא עָשָׂה אֶרֶץ וְחוּצוֹת וְרֹאשׁ עָפְרוֹת תֵּבֵל׃

27 בַּהֲכִינוֹ שָׁמַיִם שָׁם אָנִי בְּחוּקוֹ חוּג עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם׃

28 בְּאַמְצוֹ שְׁחָקִים מִמָּעַל בַּעֲזוֹז עִינוֹת תְּהוֹם׃

29 בְּשׂוּמוֹ לַיָּם| חֻקּוֹ וּמַיִם לֹא יַעַבְרוּ־פִיו בְּחוּקּוֹ מוֹסְדֵי אָרֶץ׃

30 וָאֶהְיֶה אֶצְלוֹ אָמוֹן וָאֶהְיֶה שַׁעֲשֻׁעִים יוֹם| יוֹם מְשַׂחֶקֶת לְפָנָיו בְּכָל־עֵת׃

31 מְשַׂחֶקֶת בְּתֵבֵל אַרְצוֹ וְשַׁעֲשֻׁעַי אֶת־בְּנֵי אָדָם׃ פ

22 The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago.
23 Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
24 When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water.
25 Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth
26 when he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first bits of soil.
27 When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
28 when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep,
29 when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
30 then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always,
31 rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.
(Pro 8:22-31 NRS)

Prov 8:22-31 marks the pinnacle of Lady Wisdom discourse in Proverbs. Formally, the poem divides into two main sections: vv. 22-26 and vv. 27-31, which describe respectively the origins of wisdom and her place in the cosmos. The first section (vv. 22-26)

depicts wisdom as the first creation of God's creative activity: יְהוָה קָנָנִי רֵאשִׁית דַּרְכּוֹ (v. 22).[124] Hence, the widespread use of words and phrases connoting the preeminence of wisdom, such as רֵאשִׁית, קֶדֶם, מֵאָז, מֵעוֹלָם, מֵרֹאשׁ, מִקַּדְמֵי־אָרֶץ.

In portraying wisdom as the first creature, the author highlights her knowledge of creation from the beginning. Described as a preexistent being which aligns herself with God (וָאֶהְיֶה אֶצְלוֹ), as his אָמוֹן, wisdom is formed and established "before the beginning of the earth" (מֵרֹאשׁ מִקַּדְמֵי־אָרֶץ v. 23) "when there were no depths" (בְּאֵין־תְּהֹמוֹת v. 24), "before the mountains had been shaped", "when [the Lord] established the heavens," "when he sets for the sea its limit" (בְּשׂוּמוֹ לַיָּם | חֻקּוֹ, v. 29). She is given legitimacy and authority on a cosmic level.

In light of what we have discussed concerning Prov 3:19-20, it appears that there is a movement, a shift in Prov 8:22-31 concerning the character of wisdom. In 3:19 wisdom is the instrument of God's creative activity (יְהוָה בְּחָכְמָה יָסַד־אָרֶץ כּוֹנֵן שָׁמַיִם בִּתְבוּנָה), whereas in 8:22 she is the object of God's activity (יְהוָה קָנָנִי רֵאשִׁית דַּרְכּוֹ). Wisdom's instrumentality in creation has thus changed to her personality in 8:22-31. Hence, the use of the first person ("I", "me"). According to Lenzi "the poem uses a series of infinitive constructs with prefixed preposition ("when he…), to present a positive, well ordered description of the

[124] The term קָנָנִי presents a problem of fundamental importance for the interpretation of Prov 8:22-33. The verb קָנָה with its cognates occurs frequently in the Old Testament. Apart from its occurrence in Prov 8:22, it appears at least 13 times in Proverbs, 12 of the 13 denote the desirability of acquiring wisdom, knowledge, skill (1:5; 4:5.7) and one 20:14 (Exod 21:2) which means to "purchase." In most cases it means "to acquire, purchase" or "to possess." In several texts, this verb means "to create" (Gen 14:19.22; Ps 139:13). The ancient translations were also divided concerning how קָנָנִי was to be understood, and two main schools of thought emerged. One group, which translated קָנָנִי as ἐκτήσατο, (from κτάομαι) "acquired" or "possessed", is represented by Aquila, Symmachus, Theodotion, and the Vulgate *possedit,* while another group, represented by the Septuagint ἔκτισέν, the Targum בראני, and the Peshitta prefer "created."

process of creation."[125] In fact, all of the verbs of creation in vv. 27-29 are infinitives with an attached pronoun. For instance, the first line opens בַּהֲכִינוֹ שָׁמַיִם (when establishing the heavens...) and the others follow suit (בְּחוּקוֹ, בְּאַמְּצוֹ, בַּעֲזוֹז, בְּשׂוּמוֹ, בְּחוּקוֹ).

Highlighting wisdom's priority in creation, Prov 8:22-31 sketches out the ancient Israelite connection of the universe in its four-dimensional structure: the earth (אֶרֶץ), the waters (מַיִם), the heavens (שָׁמַיִם) and the deep (תְּהוֹם). Like Prov 3:19-20, the description of the creation of the earth in 8:22-31 uses the same imagery of housebuilding, with terms like "sink" (טבע), "establish" (כון), "make firm" (אמץ), and "foundation" (מוֹסָד). The listing of the features of the cosmos begins with the waters of the deep (8:24a) and generally moves upward to the sky and the clouds (vv. 27-28) before descending again to the seashore and the foundations of the earth (v. 29). This presents creation as a coherent structure, not an unconnected assemblage of parts. It implies that there is a plan, a pattern, to it all.

For the sages of proverbs, the world is clearly and carefully ordered and secured. It is worth mentioning von Rad who views wisdom as significant in the ordering of creation. Fox summarizes von Rad's position on seeing wisdom "as the primeval order itself, the order-mystery (*Ordnungsgeheimnis*), or as the order-producing force (*Ordnungsmacht*) with which God informs the world."[126] Yet, he disagrees with the position of von Rad, arguing that the voice of primeval order is not heard in Proverbs 8.[127]

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[125] Alan Lenzi, "Proverbs 8:22-31: Three Perspectives on its Composition" *JBL* 125, no 4(2006): 698.

[126] Michael Fox, "Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9," *JBL* 116, no 4 (1997).

[127] If one understands the primeval order as it is described in Genesis, it is, in fact, difficult to accept that voice in Prov 8, since the creation account in Proverbs does not run for six days, with things being created progressively and connectedly. Another way to look at the primeval order would be not only the ancient conception of the cosmos in its fundamental structuring elements, but also the similarity between Proverbs 8:22-31 and Genesis 1. The creation poem in Prov 8: 22-31 uses many verbs to describe God's work of creation. The first verb worth mentioning is עָשָׂה, which indeed appears in Gen 1. Although the object is different, the agent

We would, however, not only argue for the presence of the primeval order in Proverbs 8:22-31, but also contend that wisdom is intimately connected to the world which is "made both secure and enthralling by God, a world of delight and discovery, a world of wonder."[128] This sense of order engenders the understanding of the self. That is, the sage communicates an ordered world within which the self is likewise positioned and oriented. More importantly, the created order is defined by limits (חֻקִּים): the sea is assigned its limits (בְּשׂוּמוֹ לַיָּם | חֻקּוֹ) and the earth's foundations are marked out: בְּחוּקוֹ מוֹסְדֵי אָרֶץ (8:29).

The key characteristic of the cosmos in Proverb is its orderliness. God not only created the world, but he also set boundaries to its individual elements by taming the initial chaos. It is this orderliness, as Frydrych argues, "that lies at the heart of the proverbial understanding and allows the sages to predict how a person's life is to unfold in the future on the basis of present actions."[129] Later in Proverbs, Wisdom makes an address to humans, inviting them to reflect on their life in the world.

By relating wisdom to creation, the sages assert the authority of wisdom and her prominent role in shaping the perceived world and guiding people's lives. The way to get the most out of life in this world is to understand how the world works and to understand its rhythms and patterns, which Qoheleth highlights in his opening and closing poems, as he

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of creation is the same, God (יְהוָה/ אֱלֹהִים). As a matter of fact, in Prov 8: 26, the direct object of עָשָׂה is אֶרֶץ, while in Gen 1, there are four created realities: רָקִיעַ (1: 7), שְׁנֵי הַמְּאֹרֹת הַגְּדֹלִים (Gen 1:16), חַיַּת הָאָרֶץ (Gen 1:25), and אָדָם (Gen 1:26).

[128] William P. Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder : Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible's Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 52.

[129] Tomáš Frydrych, *Living under the Sun: Examination of Proverbs and Qoheleth* (Leiden, England: Brill, 2002), 100.

describes the fixity of the world structure and the regularity and unvariedness of its movements.

The best way to do this is to become acquainted with the wisdom that was involved in the creation of the world. Through heeding her instruction, a human can live a prosperous life and so get the most out of life.

II.3.1.3 The Moral Order in Proverbs

The world of Proverbs, as the sages observe, is characteristically marked by a bipolarity and a binary opposition between wisdom and foolishness, righteousness and wickedness, dame wisdom and dame folly. According to Frydrych this polarity is at the heart of the Proverbs' worldview, and a vital part of the book's paradigmatic construction, "a consciously simplified picture of reality."[130] It is worth noting, once again, that the fundamental premise of the proverbial literature is the concept of orderliness in the world. Proverbs, in fact, depicts an ordered, predictable world in which the wise prosper and fools suffer. Yet, the book hints towards a subtle recognition of the limits of humans' understanding or knowledge of wisdom and the complexities of reality.

The sages of Proverbs are, in fact, aware that the picture of the world they paint is not entirely accurate. They point out, for instance, the inherent tendency of human beings toward folly and evil (Prov 22:15; 20:6), the insatiability of the human being in his desires (Prov 25:16; 27:7.20),[131] his anger (אַף), jealousy (קִנְאָה) 6:32-35; 27:4); the prosperity of the

[130] Frydrych, *Living under the Sun*, 51.

[131] This insatiability of the human being is described in Qoheleth through the metaphor of the sea that receives all the running streams but is not full; or the eyes that are not satisfied with seeing and the ear with hearing (Qoh 1:7a.8b). That the human appetite is limitless is also noticeable in Qoheleth's allusion to the lover of money: הֵב כֶּסֶף לֹא־יִשְׂבַּע כֶּסֶף וּמִי־אֹהֵב בָּהָמוֹן לֹא תְבוּאָה גַּם־זֶה הָבֶל׃ (The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain (Qoh 5:9).

wicked over the righteous, the exclusion and oppression of poor people (14:31; 22:22-23) and the perversion and corruption of justice (17:15.23; 18:5; 29:7). There is indeed a disparity between the proverbial perspective and the reality of the world. That is to say, the world in Proverbs is not as perfect as one might think. This disparity or contrast in the realm of life is also highlighted by Qoheleth in his "nature" poems and throughout the book, as we will later discuss. Suffice to mention the perpetual desire of human to know, or to see something new, and his inability to fulfill it, because of his fleeting nature.

For Proverbs, wisdom is the right of way of life, the tree of life (Prov 3:18; 11:30). She is in touch with God, the designer of life, that someone should actively seek in order to live life fully, as God designed it to be. One should, therefore, learn how everyday life works, in order to get the most out of it. For that purpose, one should, therefore, fear the Lord.

This fear of the Lord (יִרְאַת יְהוָה) is, in the world of Proverbs, an important key to recognize and differentiate the righteous from the wicked and the wise from the foolish. It is the source of blessing and life.[132] The concept of ethical order in Proverbs implies a correlation between fear of God and successful living. It is a correlation and not a simple equation between the two that Proverbs maintains. The equation of prosperity with fear of God is ruled out by the fact that the moral order is God's and not human beings'. Even the wisest is not aware of the full counsels of God or in possession of a complete knowledge of God's purposes (16:9; 20:24). This ethical order in Proverbs in which the righteous is protected, rescued from evil, rewarded and established in the land and the wicked punished

[132] A similar thought is found Sirach where Ben Sira posits at the beginning of his book, the necessity and benefit of the fear of the Lord (1:12-13).

(10:3.11.16.22; 11:3.5-6.8.21; 13:21) appears to be problematic in Job's and Qoheleth's worldviews.

II.3.2 THE JOBAN COSMOLOGY

II.3.2.1 Job's Cosmic Tour

Although not commonly associated with any model or doctrine of the creation account, in comparison to what can be found in Genesis or Proverbs, the book of Job is not without cosmological imagery. One need not look far to find it. At the outset of the book, the reader is introduced explicitly to two distinct worlds, the divine world (שָׁמַיִם) and the human world (אֶרֶץ) where the drama takes place (1:6-2:8). Cosmological images of light and darkness, gloom and deep, cloud, sea, night and underworld prevail throughout Job's first poetic discourse. Moreover, the author of Job believes and praises in many hymns God as the creator of the cosmos (9:3-13; 26:5-14; 36:24-37:24; 38:1-40:5; 40:6-42:6) and human beings (10:8-13).

In discussing cosmology in Job, it is worth acknowledging with Clifford that "the tone of the creation accounts differs according to who is speaking"[133] and even to who is reading. While Job sees creation as a "violent, careless manipulation of things and living beings (9:5-13; 10:8-13; 12:13-15),"[134] his friends view it as evidence of God's order and majesty, inspiring awe (25:1-6; 26:5-14; 36:24-37:24). God, on his side, defends the wisdom and justice of divine creation (38:1-40:5; 40:6-42:6) by moving away from an anthropological standpoint.

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[133] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 185.

[134] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 185.

From the perspective of the reader, Job's lament is often characterized as "an assault on creation,"[135] "a reversal of creation,"[136] or a de-creation. According to these views, the creation imagery or sequence of creation as encountered in Gen 1:1-2:4a is reversed in Job 3.[137] The divine command יְהִי אוֹר (let there be light) in Gen 1:3 is, thus, challenged by Job's command: יְהִי חֹשֶׁךְ (let there be darkness). Job's reversal of creation and his curses become a foil to God's speech from the whirlwind (סְעָרָה) in Job 38-41, where "God exhibits before Job the majestic events of Creation and challenges him to even begin to understand His world."[138]

YHWH, indeed, treats the same cosmic domains of earth, sea, heavens and underworld as found in Job's curse. Through the power of poetry, as Brown points out, "Job is taken on a cosmic tour, a roller coaster through the vast expanse of the universe in all its dimensions, beginning with the earth's foundations."[139] In Job 38:4-7, God's creative act is described in terms of the establishment (יָסַד) of the earth, its placement (שִׂים) and measurement (קָו). The foundations of the world are sunk (הָטְבָּעוּ), and its capstone (יָרָה) its cornerstones (אֶבֶן פִּנָּתָהּ). All these references to measurements, lines, pillars, bases and cornerstones are depictions of a world characterized by order, stability and security, which

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[135] Leo G. Perdue, "Job's Assault on Creation," *HAR*.10 (1986): 295-315.

[136] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 186,

[137] The author of Job 3 did have the creation account of Gen 1:1-2:4a in mind. In Gen 1:1-2:4a we read that the earth was empty, and void (תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ) and darkness (חֹשֶׁךְ) was upon the face of the deep (תְּהוֹם). But the spirit of God (רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים) moved upon the face of the "waters" (מַיִם). In this way the powers of death, here darkness and water, have already been "breathed upon" by the רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים, even before the creation of light (v. 3), and the separation of light and darkness (v. 4).

[138] Fred Gottlieb. "The Creation Theme in Genesis 1, Psalm 104 and Job 38-42," *JBQ*, 44.1 (2016): 33.

[139] Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder*, 112.

seems to contradict Job's own situation, unless one understands Job's sufferings as an integral part of that order.

In Job 38:22-38, God continues with creation-theme questions (38:4-21) which evoke images of light, darkness, snow, rain, and clouds and deeps. These questions invite Job into a space of wonder which God pushes further with images of earthly creatures in chapters 38 and 39. By means of rhetorical questions, God brings Job into the very wildness and beauty of the animal world (39:1.13.19.26). This section describes six pairs of beasts (lion and raven, hawk and vulture, ibis and cock, wild ass and wild ox, ostrich and lion, ibex and hind) who share similar feature and are providentially cared for by YHWH who provides them with the various things necessary for survival. This is indeed God's counter-response to Job's belief that God is an oppressive and careless creator (10:8-9).

Thus, the Lord's speeches impress on Job his unceasing care for the world in its entirety, as well as His involvement in the lives of all His creatures. According to Clifford "God's design does not operate exclusively for human beings or rational purpose. It includes the useful, the bizarre, even the playful. God creates for his inscrutable purposes."[140] Even Behemoth and Leviathan, two wild and mysterious creatures, are good in God's sight, and Job is invited to look at them.[141]

From the foregoing discussion, we conclude that each element of creation has its own role to play within the whole creation, each having its assigned task, but each pointing to the mysteries of origin. Like Proverbs, the sage of the book of Job positions and orients

[140] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 194.

[141] Behemoth is claimed as the first (רֵאשִׁית) of God's great acts (דַּרְכֵי־אֵל), thus assuming the preeminent status of wisdom in Prov 8:22, and first human beings (אָדָם) in Gen 1:26.

his readers by way of illustrating the wonder of creation, an orientation which is essential in knowing how to live. It is, however, worth noting that Job is a challenging character for the traditional moral order.

II.3.2.2 The Ethos of the Joban World

Similar to Proverbs, the book of Job displays two conflicting ethical worldviews. The bipolarity between the righteous and the wicked, and the doctrine of moral retribution in which one is rewarded or punished in strict conformity with the moral quality of one's deeds still prevails in Job. This principle of divine retribution, which is operative in some portions of the Hebrew Scripture,[142] and which lies at the core of ancient Near Eastern belief,[143] is the guiding principle of the ethical worldview of Job and mainly his friends. Job and his friends grew up in this ethical worldview.

Until the calamities came upon him, Job like his friends was convinced of the truth of the traditional dogma.[144] In other words, he is not completely outside the traditional moral order that connect deeds to effects. In fact, the narrative allows one to affirm the doctrine of retribution more strongly at the end. For Job again receives blessings commensurate with his piety. Job begins in a state of blessedness because he is pious (1:1-3)

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[142] Ex 32, Num 21:5-9; Deut 11:13-17; Deut 28:1.58-59; Hos 8:7; 10:12-13; Psalm 37; Prov 16:18; 12:21.28; 22:8. Likewise, Haman suffered for his misdeeds (Est.7); David, for his sin against Uriah (2 Sam 12:7-12); the adulterer in the Book of Proverbs gets his fee (Prov 6:26-35). Israel went to Babylon and suffered deportation for its sins. "Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die" (Ezek 18:4).

[143] Cf. "Man and his God: A Sumerian Variation of the 'Job' motif", *ANET*, 589.

[144] David J.A. Clines, "Deconstructing the Book of Job," in *The Bible as Rhetoric : Studies in Biblical Persuasion and Credibility*, ed. Martin Warner (London: Routledge, 1990), 69. See also David J.A. Clines "The Shape and Argument of the Book of Job", in Roy B. Zuck, *Sitting with Job, Selected Studies on the book of Job* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 131.

and ends up in a state of double blessedness because he demonstrates extraordinary piety in not cursing God despite the unwarranted suffering (42:12-17).

Yet, Job's situation and sufferings led him not only to question the worldview he was living in, that is, the belief in the deeds-consequences nexus, but also to launch on a quest for another moral order. As Clines argues, Job "has always thought suffering was ammunition against humans, not testimony for them."[145] The poetic core proves over and over again that the doctrine of retribution is wrong. In this core, Job argues against הַשָּׂטָן that it is possible to fear God for nothing (חִנָּם), and against his friends that the righteous can suffer undeservedly.[146]

The predictability that characterizes the proverbial world is, thus, countered by the unpredictable invitation of God, which in fact is an essential aspect of his rule over the world. Lacocque rightly argues that

> The universe is no closed system governed by immutable laws. In order to survive, the world and each of its elements are in need of the personal intervention of God. Retributive justice assumes by its own deceptive simplicity a universe that is itself simple. Even Job thought that he was living in a finished world, where good and evil are woven into the fabric of the cosmos. YHWH responds by describing the complexity of the world.[147]

Said otherwise, life is not all that simple, as the author of Proverbs thought. Things are not what they seem. Job has, indeed, learnt that the world is not under his control. His search for vindication before his three friends is limited by God's control of his life and the life of the

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[145] Clines, "Deconstructing the Book of Job," 69.

[146] In the Ancient Near East, there are five main compositions which illustrate the idea of the innocent sufferer: Man, and His God; Letters-prayers, The Pious Sufferer, *Iludlul Bel Nemeqi*, A sufferer's Salvation, Babylonian Theodicy, The Poem of Erra.

[147] Andre Lacocque, "Job and Religion at Its Best," in *BibInt* 4.2 (1996): 139.

world. What Job has learnt from his suffering is what Qoheleth knows.[148] In other words, Qoheleth has already learned that and tells people to adjust their search for wisdom because the world is under God's control, not their control.

Overall, Job, while teaching that the perplexities of life cannot be resolved from a human perspective alone, demonstrates that there is mystery and wonder in YHWH's world, and true wisdom must acknowledge and embrace that aspect of reality. Job's situation is a path for moral truths and wise sayings about the human condition, as the book is thought to offer the answer to the questions about the meaning of life, the problem of suffering and the moral order of the universe, of which order Job's experience is the reversal.

II.3.3 SIRACH AND THE WELL-ORDERED COSMOS

II.3.3.1 God's Created Works

Like Proverbs, Ben Sira depicts wisdom as a cosmological entity, having a cosmic and historical role, and seeking to dwell among human beings. In the opening poem, Ben Sira presents wisdom as first of all created things (προτέρα πάντων ἔκτισται, 1:4), thus echoing Prov 8:22-31. But unlike Proverbs where God's act of creation is mediated by wisdom (בְּחָכְמָה), in Ben Sira, the works of creation came about by the Lord's words (ἐν λόγοις κυρίου, Sir 42:15). Thus, in 24:3 the creation of wisdom is associated with the divine word since she emanates (ἐξῆλθον) from the mouth of the Most High (ἀπὸ στόματος ὑψίστου) to cover the

[148] In so speaking, we do not mean that Job was influenced by Qoheleth. It is a scholarly known that Job is anterior to Qoheleth, in terms of dating. Many scholars believe that it was written in the late biblical period, between the 6th and 4th centuries BC [For the various views on the date of the composition of the book, see Marvin H. Pope, *Job* AB (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1965), xx-xxxvii; Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary* (OTL) (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1985), 40-42], while Qoheleth, as we have already stated, is from the Hellenistic period (323-200 BCE).

earth (κατεκάλυψα γῆν). Still, by his word (ἐν λόγῳ αὐτοῦ), the waters stood in a heap (Sir 39:17) and the moon keeps its appointed place (Sir 43:10). The voice of his thunder (φωνὴ βροντῆς αὐτοῦ) rebukes the earth (Sir 43:17).

From the forgoing examples, we can argue that in Ben Sira, wisdom and the cosmos are created and governed by the means of God's word (ἐν λόγῳ αὐτοῦ). Upon all his creations and all humanity, YHWH poured out his wisdom: κύριος... ἐξέχεεν αὐτὴν ἐπὶ πάντα τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ (1:9). This pouring out (ἐκχέω), as Perdue argues, "points to the understanding that life-giving, divine wisdom supports and sustains an orderly cosmos."[149] We might argue saying that personified wisdom is the creative language that brings reality into existence. This, our contention, is highly expressed in Sir 16:24-17:14 which largely contains Ben Sira's instruction about the cosmos.

God's act of creation in Sir 16:24-17:14 begins in v. 26

ἐν κρίσει κυρίου τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ ἀπ᾽ ἀρχῆς καὶ ἀπὸ ποιήσεως αὐτῶν διέστειλεν μερίδας αὐτῶν	The works of the Lord have existed from the beginning by his creation, and when he made them, he determined their divisions

This verse, in fact, recalls Sir 15:14a: αὐτὸς ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἐποίησεν ἄνθρωπον (Himself in the beginning, created humankind). What differs in these two passages is that Sir 15:14 affirms that God created human beings from the beginning (ἐξ ἀρχῆς), while in Sir 16:26 it is God's works (τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ) that are under consideration.

[149] Perdue, *Wisdom & Creation*, 249.

For Sirach, τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ is used in reference not only to God's creative activity (דַּרְכּוֹ), by which he orders the world, but also to "each created element in the world."[150] Thus, these "works" include the heavens and the earth, along with the beings that comprise each sphere.

Ben Sira begins by contemplating the heavenly bodies of sun, moon, stars, rainbow. He then moves to the natural phenomena of wind, rivers, lightning, clouds, hail, thunder, snow, frost, plants and trees. What Ben Sira wants his reader to recognize is that the Lord creates his works from the beginning (ἀπ'ἀρχῆς), makes them (ἀπὸ ποιήσεως αὐτῶ) and orders them by assigning to them their proper tasks (διέστειλεν μερίδας αὐτῶν). This idea of ordering the different elements of the cosmos upon their tasks or areas of activities is reinforced by the use of the verb ἐκόσμησε (16:27; 42:21; 47:10). These tasks are permanents, never vary.

In Ben Sira's thought, God has purposely designed a well-ordered and stable cosmos. As in Genesis, the creation of the physical world is followed by the creation and role of humanity in the cosmos. Ben Sira speaks of humans as created ἐκ γῆς (Sir 17:1), thus, recalling the מִן־הָאֲדָמָה in Gen 2:7, and to which they eventually return (πάλιν ἀπέστρεψεν αὐτὸν εἰς αὐτήν (Sir 17:1).[151] Ben Sira is, here, affirming the temporariness, the transience of

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[150] Núria Calduch Benages, "God, Creator of All" (Sir 43:27-33), in *Ben Sira's God. Proceedings of the International Ben Sira Conference, Durham-Ushaw College 2001*, ed. Renate E. Wenzel (Berlin, NY: De Gruyter, 2002), 83.

[151] Ben Sira's presentation of mortality as a natural condition of all living beings and death as a return, echoes Qoheleth 1:4-7 and 12:1-7 where this condition is described by means of the verbs πορεύομαι (הלך), ἔρχομαι (בוא), ἐπιστρέφω (סבב, שוב). This notion of death as a return is expressed in Qoh 12:7: καὶ ἐπιστρέψῃ ὁ χοῦς ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν ὡς ἦν καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα ἐπιστρέψῃ πρὸς τὸν θεόν ὃς ἔδωκεν αὐτό. Both Ben Sira and Qoheleth are using the Genesis tradition, which in fact refers to death as the return of אָדָם to dust: עָפָר אַתָּה וְאֶל־עָפָר תָּשׁוּב (Gen 3:19). In the LXX אָדָם returns not to עָפָר (χοῦς) but to the earth: ἐξ ἧς ἐλήμφθης ὅτι γῆ εἶ καὶ εἰς γῆν ἀπελεύσῃ. We might assume that Ben Sira is using the LXX of Gen 3:19 to make his case.

human life and the cosmos: ἡμέρας ἀριθμοῦ καὶ καιρὸν ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς (Sir 17:2). While the works of the heavenly beings are for eternity:ἐκόσμησεν εἰς αἰῶνα τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ καὶ τὰς ἀρχὰς αὐτῶν εἰς γενεὰς αὐτῶν (He arranged his works for eternity, and their origins for generations (Sir 16:27a),[152] human beings are given a few numbers of days (ἡμέρας ἀριθμοῦ). Yet authority (κατακυριεύειν) over the earth, beasts and birds are given to them, thus, becoming somehow responsible for God's works (τὰ ἔργα κυρίου).

Moreover, God filled humans with knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), understanding (σύνεσις) and the fear of him; he showed them good and evil (ἀγαθὰ καὶ κακὰ), and the grandeur of his words (τὸ μεγαλεῖον τῶν ἔργων αὐτοῦ), for the praise of his holy name (ὄνομα ἁγιασμοῦ αὐτοῦ). We agree with Clifford, arguing that Ben Sira shows the "theocentric view that the world is wholly oriented toward the divine world."[153] Hence, wisdom for Ben Sira is "to know one's place in the universe that the gods (God) made for themselves (or Godself)."[154]

In sum, the cosmology of Ben Sira tends to explain how things were at the beginning and to understand the various functions assigned to them by the creator. Wénin is, thus, right in his claim that the creation activity in Ben Sira is an act of ordering the various created elements based upon their tasks or areas of activity.

> L'ordre du monde est assuré parce que chaque élément séparé par le créateur occupe sa place sans prendre celle de l'autre, conformément à la parole divine (16,28). Dès lors, si l'humain leur ressemble par sa maîtrise (Sir 17,2-3), sa fonction (vv. 4-10) et la loi reçue de Dieu touchant aux relations avec autrui,

[152] In Sir 17:2 the Greek reference to a 'time' (καιρὸν) -not found in the Syriac text-may be an addition in imitation of Qoh 3:1-2 G: "There is a time (καιρὸς) for every deed under heaven: a time (καιρὸς) to give birth and a time (καιρὸς) to die."

[153] Clifford, *The wisdom Literature*, 120.

[154] Clifford, *The Wisdom literature*, 120.

> c'est en tentant sa place propre qu'il contribuera à assurer le maintien de l'ordre cosmique.[155]

We are here dealing with a fixed, that is, an ordered world. The notion of cyclicality or impermanence versus stability or permanence which we have encountered in Proverbs, and which we will later discuss in Qoheleth are not absent in Ben Sira's cosmology. It is worth noting here, once again, the temporariness of human life (Sir 17:2). Only wisdom is created מֵעוֹלָם (πρὸ τοῦ αἰῶνος ἀπ᾽ ἀρχῆς ἔκτισέν με καὶ ἕως αἰῶνος οὐ μὴ ἐκλίπω, Sir 24:9; 42:21). Everything else will return either to earth or above (Sir 40:11 H^B): כל מארץ אל ארץ ישוב ואשר ממרום אל מרום (all that is from the earth returns to the earth and what is from above returns above).[156] In addition, one might add the function of the moon, which consists in fixing the seasons, dates and feasts (43:6-8).

Most important is the central role of cosmology in the divine revelation. In Ben Sira's thought, God has designed the cosmos in a way that one could look at it, discern and find the traces of the creator and the creator's order,[157] and thus, praise him. The created world in Ben Sira, we might say, is not only theocentric but also revelatory. The works of God are the manifestation of the creator, of his power, majesty and supremacy.

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[155] André Wénin, «De la création à l'alliance sinaîtique: La logique de Sir 16,26-17,14» in *Treasures of Wisdom: Studies in Ben Sira and the Book of Wisdom, Festschrift M. Gilbert,* BETL 143, ed. Nuria Calduch Benages (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1999),151.

[156] Bodleiam: MS.Heb.e.62 Ben Sira 40:9-40:26, B X recto in *The Book of Ben Sira in Hebrew : a text edition of all extant Hebrew manuscripts and a synopsis of all parallel Hebrew Ben Sira texts*. VT Supp 68, ed. Pancratius C. Beentjes (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2006), 159.

[157] Goering Greg Schmidt *Wisdom's Root Revealed : Ben Sira and the Election of Israel* (Leiden, Boston, MA: Brill, 2009), 81.

II.3.3.2 The Ethical World of Sirach

A key element to comprehend the ethical world in Ben Sira is "fear of the Lord" (φόβος κυρίου). According to Joseph Haspecker, φόβος κυρίου is the "Grundthema und wichtigstes Bildungsanliegen Sirachs in seiner pädagogischen Schrift."[158] Fear of the Lord is not only the beginning of wisdom (ἀρχὴ σοφίας), but it is also her fullness (πλησμονὴ σοφίας), her crown (στέφανος σοφίας) and her root (ῥίζα σοφίας, 1:14.16.18.20). For Ben Sira, indeed, only an appropriate outlook and conduct related to "fear of the Lord" can lead one to a blessed life. To prove that fear of the Lord is *der Grund* for a happy life, Ben Sira describes, at the very beginning of his book, the necessity and benefits of φόβος κυρίου.

> The fear of the Lord (φόβος κυρίου) is glory and exultation, and gladness and a crown of rejoicing. The fear of the Lord (φόβος κυρίου) delights the heart and gives gladness and joy and long life. Those who fear the Lord (τῷ φοβουμένῳ τὸν κύριον) will have a happy end; on the day of their death they will be blessed." (Sir 1:11-13).

Those who fear God enjoy length of days, riches, and good health (Sir. 1:12-13, 17-18). They receive God's strength and protection (Sir. 34:14-20). According to Michael Barré and Clifford, Ben Sira's emphasis on fear of the Lord appears not only in other Hebrew Bible texts but also generally in the ancient Near East. Clifford writes

> Fear of the lord was a venerable concept in the ancient Near East long before Sirach. It was part of a self-understanding by which one realized one's place in

[158] It is " the basic theme and the most important educational concern of Sirach in his pedagogical writing" in Joseph Haspecker, *Gottesfurcht bei Jesus Sirach*, AnBib 30 (Rome: PBI, 1967), 198.

> a world the gods had made exclusively for themselves, which led one to revere and recognize their dominion.[159]

Fearing God intimates not only personal piety and reverence for God (Sir. 35:1-13), but also faith's expression that the creator of heaven and earth is the one who through wisdom guides and directs the cosmos, human history and the life of the sage. We, thus, agree with Michael Barré to argue that "fear of Yahweh/God cannot be separated from the realm of the cult."[160] Rather than conveying "the notion of enervating terror," the "fear of God" "represents the basic and proper stance of mortals before the divine",[161] "the first step in the quest for a meaningful existence."[162] Succinctly put, fear of the Lord "is the fundamental attitude one needs to live wisely and thus enjoy all the good things of life."[163]

Consequently, by keeping the commandments and fearing the Lord one has prosperity, happiness, long life. And the failure to do so brings adversity, distress and early death. With knowledge, understanding and "fear of God" one should be able to separate good from evil, and thus make choices that not only please God, but also bring blessings and happiness in life, and an everlasting name, that is, immortality by memory.

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[159] Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature*, 127. Michael L. Barré had argued his 1981 article that "fear of God, which appears to be the prominent theme in the wisdom literature was a concept common to all areas of the ancient Near East. (Michael L. Barré, "Fear of God" and the World View of Wisdom," *BTB* 1 (1981): 43.

[160] Barré, "Fear of God," 42.

[161] Barré, "Fear of God," 42.

[162] Barré, "Fear of God," 41.

[163] Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature*, 121.

II.3.4 WISDOM OF SOLOMON

II.3.4.1 God's Design in /of the Cosmos

The Wisdom of Solomon begins and ends with the creation motif. In 1:14 the author strongly affirms that God's purpose in creation is that creatures should exist and continue existing: ἔκτισεν γὰρ εἰς τὸ εἶναι τὰ πάντα καὶ σωτήριοι αἱ γενέσεις τοῦ κόσμου ("For he created all things so that they might exist; the generations of the world are wholesome", 1:14). This divine purpose in designing the cosmos is reaffirmed in the last chapter of the book (19:6), in terms of refashioning the whole of creation (ὅλη γὰρ ἡ κτίσις ἐν ἰδίῳ γένει πάλιν, "For the whole creation in its nature was fashioned anew") for the protection of the children of Israel (ἵνα οἱ σοὶ παῖδες φυλαχθῶσιν ἀβλαβεῖς, "so that your children might be kept unharmed"). Creation is, thus, the all-embracing inclusio that frames the book.

Faithful to the wisdom tradition in approaching and understanding the cosmos, the book of Wisdom affirms the prominent role of σοφία, describing her as the artificer of all things (πάντων τεχνῖτις; 7:21; 8:6) and the associate (αἱρετὶς) of God's works. But, in contrast with Israel's previous wisdom literature, where wisdom is depicted explicitly as the first-made of God's creatures (Prov 8:22; Sir 24:9), there is no such assertion in the Wisdom of Solomon. Wisdom does not seem to be "created" or "made" by God.

In Wis 7:25-26, in fact, she is depicted as the breath of God (ἀτμὶς τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ δυνάμεως), the emanation of his glory (ἀπόρροια τῆς τοῦ παντοκράτορος δόξης), the reflection of his light (ἀπαύγασμα φωτὸς ἀϊδίου), and the image of God's goodness (εἰκὼν τῆς ἀγαθότητος αὐτοῦ). She is capable of doing and renewing all things (πάντα δύναται καὶ τὰ πάντα καινίζει), of passing into holy souls (εἰς ψυχὰς ὁσίας μεταβαίνουσα). Of particular interest, is the

description of her origin as the one being present with God in observing creation (9:9a) and as God's instrument in forming the cosmos (7:22; 8:6; 9:2).

Through the things that God has created, he has provided a means by which all rational creatures may gain from creation a corresponding perception (κτισμάτων ἀναλόγως) of the Creator (13:5). By observing the greatness (μέγεθος) and the beauty (καλλονή) of the cosmos one may come to the knowledge of God, the original source of beauty (τοῦ κάλλους γενεσιάρχης Wis 13:3). By observing the power of natural forces on the earth (fire, wind, and water), one may perceive the power of the one who formed them (κατασκευάσας αὐτὰ, 13:4). That creation manifests the power, and the majesty of the creator is not completely new. In Ben Sira, as noted above, the cosmos has a revelatory role. To this dual terminology "creation and revelation" that is characteristic of Ben Sira, Wisdom of Solomon adds a second one, "creation and salvation," which scholars often use to describe the Book of Wisdom.[164]

In Wisdom of Solomon, salvation appears as the refashioning of creation. It is, according to Kolarcik "God's effort to bring humanity to the point of realizing the original intentions at creation."[165] This refashioning of creation occurs by the created order "complying with his commands."

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[164] Cf John J. Collins, "Cosmos and Salvation: Jewish Wisdom and Apocalyptic in the Hellenistic Age." *HR* 17, no. 2 (1977):121-142; Michael Kolarcik, "Creation and Salvation in the Book of Wisdom." in *Creation in the Biblical Traditions* eds. Richard J. Clifford; John J. Collins (Washington, DC: CBAA,1992), 97-107; Dianne Bergant, *Israel's Wisdom Literature: A Liberation-Critical Reading* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997), 142-165.

[165] Kolarcik, "Creation and Salvation in the Book of Wisdom," 103.

Earlier in the book, the author shows how God's commanding power will arm (ὁπλοποιήσει) all creation to repel (ἄμυναν) his enemies, such that "the cosmos (ὁ κόσμος) will join with him to fight against his frenzied foes (ἐπὶ τοὺς παράφρονας):

> Shafts of lightning will fly with true aim and will leap to the target as from a well-drawn bow of clouds, and hailstones full of wrath will be hurled as from a catapult; the water of the sea will rage against them, and rivers will relentlessly overwhelm them; a mighty wind will rise against them, and like a tempest it will winnow them away. Lawlessness will lay waste the whole earth, and evil-doing will overturn the thrones of rulers (5:21-23 NRSV).

Likewise, the exodus event -God's punishment of Egypt by means of natural elements (water, frogs, flies, fire, pestilence, locusts, darkness, etc.) and God's deliverance of Israel by means of similar kinds of natural elements (water, manna, quail, fire, cloud, wind, etc.)- shows how nature acts as the agent of God's saving power.[166] The prime and most spectacular example of this refashioning of the created elements was God's making a dry path through the Reed Sea as an escape route for the Israelites (19:7-8). Thus, the Israelites are saved by the same means that punish the Egyptians, that is, the cosmos.[167]

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[166] Whereas in the original creation the land brought forth animals and the waters brought forth fish under God's command (Gen 1:20-21,24-25), in the plague against Egypt the earth brought forth insects and the waters brought forth frogs by God's command (19:10; cf. Exod 8:16-32). Whereas water normally quenches fire's power and fire consumes perishable things, in the plague against Egypt the hail did not melt and quench the flashing fire and, while the hail struck down both plants and animals, the flashing fire did not consume living creatures (19:20-21; cf. Exod 9:22-26).

[167] Leo G. Perdue, *The Sword and the Stylus: An Introduction to Wisdom in the Age of Empires* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 351.

II.3.4.2 Solomon's Ethic of Immortality

Like the previous wisdom books, Wisdom of Solomon deals with the contrast between the fates of the righteous and the wicked. This contrast is embedded in the corollary distinction between life and death, immortality and mortality.

In developing its view of the relationship between righteousness and life, Wisdom of Solomon significantly transforms the biblical wisdom tradition. In the Psalms, following the path of righteousness leads one to live long and prosper and avoids the destruction and dispersal that awaits the wicked, whose "way will perish" (Ps 1:6).

In Proverbs, similarly, the benefits of walking in righteousness according to the way of wisdom (2:6-11; 8:20) include, among others, "long life" (אֹרֶךְ יָמִים, 3:16-18) and years added to one's life (כִּי־בִי יִרְבּוּ יָמֶיךָ וְיוֹסִיפוּ לְךָ שְׁנוֹת חַיִּים, 9:10-11), for wisdom saves the one who hears her voice and follows her instructions from the death that lies at the end of the path of wickedness (2:12).

Later wisdom writers amplified this earlier tradition with the precept that deeds of righteousness save one from death, not only because they avoid the end of the wicked (Tob 14:10-11), but also because one's kindness toward the poor and needy atones for one's sins like a sacrifice offered to God (Tob 4:10-11; 12:8-10; Sir 3:14-15, 30; 35:1-9). Still, eventual death remains a final end for even the righteous (Sir 41:1-4).

Unlike Qoheleth who sees death as a helpful reminder to enjoy the present moment,[168] Wisdom of Solomon, regards death as a "problem," which is resolved by life after

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[168] In Qoheleth a premature death results not from righteousness but rather from one's overwicked deeds "Do not be too wicked, and do not be a fool; why should you die before your time (בְּלֹא עִתֶּךָ / ἐν οὐ καιρῷ σου)? (Qoh 7:17). He acknowledges, however, that there are righteous people who perish in their righteousness (בְּצִדְקוֹ), and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing (מַאֲרִיךְ בְּרָעָתוֹ Qoh 7:15).

death given by God to the righteous.[169] Dell, thus, rightly contends that "the author of Wisdom recognizes that things do not always go well with the righteous, but he assumes that it will be resolved in the end."[170]

Thus, immortality is a divine gift to human beings, a supernatural grace that completes created nature (5:16). It is according to Lagrange "une récompense gracieuse."[171] In contrast, the wicked will be punished. They disappear "like thistledown (χνοῦς) carried by the wind (ὑπὸ ἀνέμου), and like a light frost (πάχνη) driven away by a storm (ὑπὸ λαίλαπος); like smoke before the wind (καπνὸς ὑπὸ ἀνέμου) and like the remembrance of a guest who stays but a day (μνεία καταλύτου μονοημέρου)" (5:14). Nature itself lends its forces to the defeat of the wicked (5:20b-23).

To sum up, in Wisdom of Solomon, creation is regarded as giving rise to the natural world, and God has total mastery of the elements of the natural world and uses it to punish the wicked and reward the righteous. God, in fact, makes use of the elements of creation to show his glory and to save his people from the hands of the wicked. For God did not make (οὐκ ἐποίησεν, 1:13; 3:23-24) death, and he does not delight in the destruction (ἀπωλείᾳ) of the living (1:13).

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[169] The notion of death Wisdom of Solomon is alluding to is not mortality in general that is inherent to human nature. The understanding of death he seems to have in mind is the ultimate death signified by a total separation from God. On the day of final accounting, the righteous dead will have an afterlife of fellowship with God while there is no such thing for the ungodly. The author is very cautious in his distinction between what is mortal and what is immortal. While the body is mortal, the soul is immortal (ἀθάνατος). If the former seems evident, the latter is not. One should work for it.

[170] Katherine J. Dell, *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 205.

[171] Lagrange «Le livre de la Sagesse, Sa doctrine des fins dernières» in *God, Grace, and Righteousness in Wisdom of Solomon and Paul's Letter to the Romans : Texts in Conversation* ed. Jonathan A. Linebaugh (Leiden, Boston, MA: Brill, 2013), 39.

II.3.5 CONCLUSION ON CREATION IN WISDOM TRADITION

In the context of our inquiry of the creation language in the wisdom tradition, it has appeared that God, by his wisdom (בְּחָכְמָה) or his word (ἐν λόγῳ), has designed, formed, and ordered "the biblical three-tiered universe of heavens, the earth and the sea."[172] It is toward this understanding that, across the four texts (Proverbs, Job, Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon) in each their own way, the sages are oriented and can then conceive of how to live. It goes without saying that the wisdom of the sages is deeply grounded in creation-language.

We have also discovered that the notion of the moral order is widespread in the wisdom tradition. According to this order, just and unjust behaviors are thought to be consequently rewarded. Instances of the prosperity, the long life of the wicked/the fool without suffering, the short life of the righteous /wise show how limited and problematic is this moral order.

It is, furthermore, worth noting that this view of the cosmos was not unique to ancient Israel. It was the accepted view of reality throughout the ancient Near East. As Walton states

> The Israelites received no revelation to update or modify their 'scientific' understanding of the cosmos. They did not know that stars were suns; they did not know that the earth was spherical and moving through space; they did not know that the sun was much further away than the moon, or even further the birds flying in the air. They believed that the sky was material (not vaporous), solid enough to support the residence of deity as well as to hold back waters. In these ways, and many others, they thought about the cosmos in much the same way that anyone in the ancient world thought, and not at all like anyone thinks today.[173]

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[172] Richard J. Clifford, *Creation in the Biblical Traditions*, CBQMS 24 (Washington, DC: CBAA, 1992), 69.

[173] John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 16.

That is to say, the cosmological worldview of ancient Israel, its ideas and concepts, can be traced back to ancient Near Eastern cosmologies. One cannot, therefore, address biblical cosmology without any recognition of the ancient world influence. The sages of Proverbs, Job, Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon were subjected to the influence of the ancient Near Eastern sages, in their cosmologies. Hence, our next section on the Near Eastern cosmologies.

II.4 THE ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN COSMOLOGIES

Creation myths in Mesopotamia and Egypt express the idea of the creation and defense of an ordered cosmos emerging from a primordial chaos. Many connections can be made among the different mythic traditions in their attempts to make sense of the natural world. For example, the idea of water as the primordial source of life can be found in all of these traditions.

Moreover, water is then used by the gods to punish and purify in the Gilgamesh epic of Mesopotamia (2000-1600 B.C.E.), and even in the Hebrew story of Genesis. There are other connections among mythic motifs, including "stories about the struggles of the sun-god to maintain the order of day, and stories about the divine origin of the cycle of the seasons."[174] One should, however, be cautious when attempting a synthesis of ancient Near Eastern cosmologies, mainly because each tradition has its own integrity.

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[174] Andrew Fiala, "Creation Myths of the Ancient World," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* vol. A-J, eds. Bron Raymond Taylor, Jeffrey Kaplan, et als (London : Thoemmes Continuum, 2005), 431.

II.4.1 MESOPOTAMIAN COSMOLOGY: CREATION THROUGH CONFLICT

The approach to the physical world in ancient Mesopotamia was based on an assumption of the inherence of the divine in nature. To speak about nature (*tābalu*)[175] was to speak about the gods, the creators and rulers of the world. It is not, therefore, meaningless that many elements of the Mesopotamian cosmology are preserved and mostly found in "god lists, introductions to rituals and prayers, and myths."[176] Several tablets contain references to a time before the pantheon of the gods, when only the Earth and Heavens existed. Mesopotamians did not tell only one story about creation.

The most prominent and better-known texts in this tradition are the *epic of* Gilgamesh and the Enuma Elish. However different they are, these myths as Fiala argues,

> focused on various nature gods including: An or Anu, the sky-god; Enlil, the wind-god who originally separated sky from earth; and Ea or Enki, the creator god who came from out of the primordial waters to create life on land. This pantheon also included the sun-god, Shamash, and the mother-goddess, Ninhursaga.[177]

According to these mythological accounts, the creation event is depicted as a natural occurrence in which the primordial abyss, Apsu, was opened and the world created according to principles of natural order. A prominent theme in these early myths is the struggle of the gods of order against chaotic monsters who rise out of Apsu's abysmal depths.

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[175] HALOT, sv. " תֵּבֵל", II: 1682.

[176] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 15. See also Gerd Graßhoff, "Cosmology", in *Brill's New Pauly,* ed Hubert Cancik et als (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2011), Online English edition: https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.proxy.bc.edu/browse/brill-s-new-pauly ; doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1574-9347_bnp_e621140v

[177] Fiala, "Creation Myths of the Ancient World," 431.

The cosmogony of the *Enuma Elish* presents a creation story in which this struggle against such violent destructive forces predominates. In fact, the myth provides an account of the origin and the order of the universe as a whole, and the creation of humankind. It opens with a temporal reference, when nothing existed except for three uncreated elemental beings: the primordial god Apsu (the fresh water), his divine consort Tiamat (the sea), and his vizier and counselor Mummu (Maker).[178] The other gods arise from out of Tiamat who is impregnated by Apsu.

In the course of this story the noisy and active younger gods anger the static tranquility of Apsu and Tiamat. Apsu plotted to eradicate them. When the gods heard of the plot, one of them, Ea, killed Apsu. A cycle of violence arises which leads Marduk and the other gods in a final decisive battle against Tiamat. Marduk defeats Tiamat and splits her body, creating heaven and Earth.[179] In the sky, which he made from half of Tiamat's corpse, Marduk set the stars and the moon. With her other half, he formed the earth: from her eyes, he made the Tigris and Euphrates flow, while from her breasts, he formed the mountains.[180] All the gods then proclaimed the sovereignty of Marduk, who next proposed to create

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[178] *Enuma Elish*, I, 1-12 in *Babylonian Creation Myths,* ed. Wilfred G. Lambert (Winona Lake, IN: Einsenbraus, 2013), 51.

[179] *E.E*, IV, 137-146. While in Enuma Elish Marduk creates the world by splitting Tiamat, the primeval waters, in Genesis 1:6-8, God separates the waters by means of the sky during the second day of creation: "And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters. So, God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky."

[180] *E.E*, V, 55-62.

humankind to do labor for the gods so that the gods could rest.[181] Marduk ordains that human beings are to be created out of Qingu's blood. And so, it was.

What is the significance of these Mesopotamian myths to our topic? Among the answers is that human beings are a "minor and inconsequential portion of a much larger struggle within the natural world."[182] As Fiala aptly puts it "the primeval creation scene focuses on the coming of order out of nothing and the struggle of order against disorder. The creation of human beings comes later."[183] The Mesopotamian myths acknowledge, indeed, that the gods created the world for their own benefits, and that human beings are created to manage the world in the gods' interest, "to suffer and die as servants of the gods."[184] These gods are, for the most part, indifferent to human suffering. When they do intervene in human affairs, they do so for their own purposes and pleasure.

Also, worth noting in the Mesopotamian myths is the importance of water. Life is said to have come from water and silt. Furthermore, the Gilgamesh Epic emphasizes the destructive power of water. Like in Genesis 6, the gods destroyed humanity by means of the flood because human beings were noisy and disturbing to the ears of the gods. Gilgamesh himself struggled through and across waters to find the immortal one, Utnapishtim, who directed him to "the plant of life" that would rejuvenate him, and which could only be found under water.

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[181] *E.E*, VI, 5-8. Similar to *Enuma Elish* where creation culminates with the creation of humans, whose appearance provides for rest for the gods, in Genesis 1:26-2:3, humans are the final act of creation, after which God rests on the seventh day.

[182] Fiala, "Creation Myths of the Ancient World," 431.

[183] Fiala, "Creation Myths of the Ancient World," 431.

[184] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 199.

We thus agree with Fiala that "in the epic of Gilgamesh, water is [an] important element against which human beings must struggle."[185] This struggle does not promise a happy ending, however, as the waters themselves seem to be poised against human success. Human interaction with nature is thus antagonistic.

II.4.2 THE EGYPTIAN GODS AND THE WORLD THEY MADE

The Egyptian cosmos was conceived primarily as consisting of three realms: the earth; the sky above the earth; and the atmosphere between the earth and the sky. None of these realms was thought of as being simply physical; each one manifested an inner, divine presence. To describe the Egyptian cosmos is thus to describe a world of divine beings whose nature is expressed in their respective cosmological domains. Despite the variety of deities, the Egyptians conceived the origin of the world as singular. Only one god, whoever he might be, was responsible for the emergence of the universe.[186] Characteristic of ancient Egypt creation accounts is the description of creation as a deliberate work of a god with the intention to create.

Moreover, unlike the precarious and dangerous cosmos of the Mesopotamian accounts, the Egyptian creation stories hold out the hope for stability and immortality. The idea of the primordial "nothingness" was personified as Nun, waters which are inert and featureless.[187] These waters are not like angry Mesopotamian Tiamat.

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[185] Fiala, "Creation Myths of the Ancient World," 432.

[186] Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 104.

[187] Clifford distinguishes two ways of characterizing the world before creation, through negative and through affirmation (Clifford, *Creation Accounts*, 101-102).

The undifferentiated condition before the creation is characterized by primeval darkness and primeval flood. From these rise the primeval hill or the primeval cow which serves as solid ground for the autogenic male or female demiurge. The creator embodies the unity of the divine and of all existence. From his differentiation emerge deities, humans, sky, earth and all living things, either by the secretion of semen, spittle, tears, or by the utterance of a creative formula, or by fashioning.[188] Also worth noting in the Egyptian creation myths is the connection between the creation myth and the seasonal fluctuation of the Nile. As Felber points out, "Egyptian cosmogony, as a *creatio primordialis*, is not conclusive, but requires cyclical renewal in the struggle against the forces of chaos, manifested for instance in the daily rising of the sun out of the primeval waters, or the annual re-emergence of the land from the Nile flood."[189]

In other words, the cyclical floods of the river, the repetition of cycles and seasons showed a concrete example of creation on a yearly basis. For the Egyptians, "the cycle of time was stable, as represented by the movement of the sun across the sky and the regular cycle of the flooding Nile,"[190] which is echoed in the "nature" poem in Qoheleth as we will soon discuss. In *The Mind of Egypt* Jan Assmann states that

> The Egyptians distinguished between cyclical and noncyclical time, calling the former *neheh* and the latter *djet*. "*Neheh* or cyclical time is the never-ending recurrence of the same; it is generated by the movement of the heavenly bodies and hence determined by the sun. This kind of time is associated with the concept of 'becoming'. Cycles come and go, and what takes shape in the individual cycles disappears again in the hope of renewed becoming. The other

[188] Clifford, *Creation Account*, 106-107.

[189] Andreas Merkt, et als "World, creation of the", in *Brill's New Pauly,* https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.proxy.bc.edu/browse/brill-s-new-pauly. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1574-9347_bnp_e12210280.

[190] Fiala, "Creation Myths of the Ancient World," 432.

> kind of time, *djet*, is associated with the concept of stability, of remaining, lasting, being permanent; its sign is that of the earth... *Djet* is a scared dimension of everness, where that which has become ... is preserved in immutable permanence.[191]

Stability and permanence, fleetingness and movement in the cosmos were thus known to the Egyptians sages. As in Qoheleth (1:4), the Egyptians assumed the stability of the earth. Creation occurred in the appearance of land, of the sun, the cycles of the moon. This natural order was based upon divine order (*ma'at*). According to Fiala "this order required human support in the form of rituals and sacrifices because there were threats to order found in the coming of night, the waning of the moon, eclipses, and other natural disturbances to the rule of *Re*" [192] which are echoed in Qoheleth's closing poem with the cosmic chaos (darkening of the sun, the moon, the stars, the return of the clouds, 12:2). The cosmic struggle between light and darkness, seen on a daily basis in the progress of the sun, found its ultimate significance in the cycle of birth and death that permeates the natural world.

II.4.3 SUMMARY OF ANE COSMOLOGY

Study of the various pieces of evidence dealing with the ancient Near Eastern understanding of creation reveals common concepts that bring unity to otherwise diverse creation stories.

The first issue is the notion of creation. In the ANE, as already noted, creation involves bringing order and organization to the cosmos, thus, revealing the transition from

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[191] Jan Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt : History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*, 1st ed (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 18.

[192] Fiala, "Creation Myths of the Ancient World," 432.

primordial unity to the diversity of the world. The prominent role of the deities in the creation accounts leads to the understanding of creation not as "an account of the manufacturing of material things but a theological account that reflects the divine purpose."[193] In other words, the cosmic creation in the ancient world is not viewed primarily as a process by which things are brought into being but, as a process by which functions, roles, order, jurisdiction, organization, and stability are established. Simply said, creation is defined by the process of separation, distinction, and the determination of functions.[194]

Therefore, to create something means, not only bringing it into existence, but also giving it a function, a role within an ordered cosmos. The ancient writers are mainly dealing with a concrete and known world. This is the world of humans, animals, plants, birds, fish, but also of the sun, moon, and stars. It is the physical world that mirrors or replicates the macrocosm which is the world of the gods.

What we do argue here is that the creation accounts are not divine dictation, but rather they are drawn from and rooted in the observable world. The writers design their narrative not from heaven to earth, or invisible to visible, or immaterial to material, but the reverse. In so doing, the ancient writers intended not only to comprehend the functioning of the cosmos as a whole and its different phenomena, but also to give meaning to the elements of the cosmos, and mainly to the role of humans in the world.

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[193] John H.Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 29.

[194] Lambert devotes a section on "The organization of the Universe", starting with the organization of the Heavens, along with the role and function of the moons, the stars. Following the Heavenly bodies are the organization of the Earth, and the Pantheon. Finally, the organization of Babylon as the first City [(W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths* (Winona Lake, IN: Einsenbraus, 2013), 169-201].

II.5 THE FEATURES OF QOHELETH'S COSMOS

The cosmos, as we have seen so far, whether in the HB or in the ANE, is a result of divine activity, by means of the power of word, wisdom, or conflict among deities. These two worlds share the common views that the cosmos consists in three fundamental elements: earth, sky and sea, each one having its own constituents. As such, it is believed to be well ordered and perfect, everything having been assigned with a specific function. That is to say, the life of and in the cosmos is tied to the responsibility of each element of the cosmos to play its particular role, at the time, place and manner allotted to it.

In fact, in explaining the nature of things, the sages saw themselves as waking their audience up to facts that pertain to everyone commonly, such as living and dying, identity and change, the coming and passing of generations, the regularity and repetition of some cosmic elements. Qoheleth is not without concern for imagistic and cosmic language.

II.5.1 CREATION LANGUAGE IN QOHELETH

Qoheleth speaks of the order found in the predictable routines in and of the world, experienced in daily life, and which last beyond the daily life of each generation which comes (בוא) and goes (הלך, סבב, שוב) while the earth (אֶרֶץ) stands throughout eternity (לְעוֹלָם עֹמֶדֶת). One might be surprised by our contention that the wisdom of Qoheleth is deeply grounded in creation-language. In fact, his opening verses are not autobiographical, but cosmological, prompted by his leading question about toil (עָמָל) and gain (יִתְרוֹן): מַה־יִּתְרוֹן לָאָדָם בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ שֶׁיַּעֲמֹל תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ (1:3). Qoheleth seems to "build up" to this question by offering his observations on nature followed by the testimony of his personal quest for wisdom.

Not a creation account *per se* in the manner of Genesis and Proverbs, Qoheleth does, however, display a cosmological language and features throughout his book. The use of the four constitutive elements of the cosmos in antiquity: earth (אֶרֶץ) in Qoh 1:4;12:7, fire/sun (הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ) in 1:5;12:2, air (הָרוּחַ) in 1:6;12:7-8 and water (מַיִם/ הַנְּחָלִים) in 1:7, to which one might add clouds, rain, trees, (12:2.5), fauna (12:4-5), moon and stars (12:2), and dust (12:7). The role of God (אֱלֹהִים)[195] as creator is not lacking either.

II.5.2 THE GOD OF QOHELETH, A CREATOR AND CARING GOD

That God is the Creator (בּוֹרֵא, 12:1) or the maker (עֹשֶׂה) of everything (אֶת־הַכֹּל), is not questioned by Qoheleth. God made everything (יַעֲשֶׂה אֶת־הַכֹּל) beautiful (יָפֶה) in its time (בְּעִתּוֹ).[196] His created works include human beings (אָדָם) whom he made upright (יָשָׁר 7:29). He gave him life (8:15; 9:9) and a spirit (3:21; 12:7) and set eternity in his heart (הָעֹלָם נָתַן בְּלִבָּם, 3:11). In His sovereignty, God has planned the timing of all things (3:1-8), a timing which is beautiful (3:13), though incomprehensible (3:11; 8:17; 11:5) and unchangeable by humans (3:14; 7:13).

Furthermore, God is not only for Qoheleth a creator; but he is also a God who cares for his creatures, who is involved in different aspects of human life, such as birth, planting, healing, upbuilding, joy, searching, keeping, mending, speaking, loving, and

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[195] Elohim is one the most frequently occurring words in Qoheleth. Unlike Crenshaw and Fox who holds a negative function for God in Qoheleth (Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*,135-136), Sneed understands God as the primary orientation for Qoheleth and his audience (Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes,* 164-165). Nowhere, indeed, does Qoheleth use *hebel* to describe God or God's activities. Fox himself admits that God is not *hebel* (Fox, *A Time to Tear down and a Time to Build up*, 165). This demonstrates a certain positivity for the deity in Qoheleth. Although the very sacred name YHWH is never used by Qoheleth, the generic name Elohim, is used 40 times. This is a very active God.

[196] See Qoh 3:11; 11:5.

enjoying peace, and all their negative opposites (3:1-8). All of life is under divine appointment and timing. Still in his sovereignty and providence, God controls the rising and setting of the sun, the cyclic movements of the wind, the flowing of rivers, and the evaporation of water (Qoh 1:5-7). Ten times God is said to give (נָתַן, 1:13; 2:26; 3:10-11; 5:17-18; 6:2; 8:15; 9:9; 12:7) and ten times to make (עָשָׂה, 3:11.14; 7:14.29). Man's occupation (עִנְיָן) is given by God (1:13;3:10). God also gives him the opportunity to enjoy food and work (2:24; 3:13; 5:19-20; 9:7). He gives him wisdom, knowledge, happiness (2:26), wealth, possessions, and honor (5:19; 6:2). God's work, which humans cannot fully understand (11:6), includes both good and bad times (7:14). What He does has endurance (3:14) and cannot be altered (7:13). Though God cannot be fully understood, some motives for His actions are mentioned. These motives include seeking to get people to revere Him (3:14) and testing man to show him his finiteness (3:18). As Frydrych points out

> Qoheleth's God expects humans to fear him, and in fact took active steps to ensure that it would be so, by limiting human intellectual capacity and the resulting practical capabilities to interfere with his designs. Thus, the fear of God derives from the awareness of the divine superiority. It is the awareness and acceptance of the qualitative divide between God and the human race.[197]

Although Qoheleth never explicitly states that fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, he does make clear that not fearing God is an act of foolishness (Qoh 8:11-14; see also 3:14; 5:6; 8:12-13; 12:13). Qoheleth's problem is not that the fear of God is not the beginning of wisdom or characteristic of a wise person, but its implementation in real life. In fact, Qoheleth's experiences have taught him that in the real world there are righteous people who suffer and wicked who prosper. This tension is, according to Frydrych, "at the heart of

[197] Tomáš Frydrych, *Living under the Sun*, 110.

Qoheleth's world which does not subject itself to human rationality…The rationale for fearing God is not simply that it pays off, but that God is beyond human reach."[198]

II.5.3 THE WORLD OF THE LIVING

The world that interested Qoheleth in his cosmology is the world of human daily experiences, that is תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ. As we have already mentioned, Qoheleth never speaks explicitly of the origins of the cosmos in a manner similar to Genesis or Prov 8:22-31, but he implies that the world is created by God (3:11; 7:13; 12:1.7). There are however two pericopae in the book that have a special bearing on understanding Qoheleth's cosmology (1:2-11; 12:1-8). These will be discussed later in our next chapter.

At the present stage in our argument, it is worth noting that the world which Qoheleth observes is characterized by a tension between permanence and impermanence, stability and ceaseless recurrent cycles and paradoxes. The sun rises, sets, and rises again; the wind turns in circles; and the rivers remain full of running water even as they empty themselves continually into the sea, which never fills. Human beings also participate in these ongoing cosmic cycles, each generation replacing the previous one. There is, however, a decisive difference between the cyclic nature of human existence and the cyclicality of the natural phenomena. Whereas these latter are marked by endless repetitions of the same things, with a certain regularity, the human cycle is simply a change of generation, with repetitions of the same generation. We might thus argue that there is no regularity in the

[198] Frydrych, *Living under the Sun*, 111.

human cycle: a person comes, and he goes, he never returns. His movement is unidirectional, not cyclical. Made from dust, humans return to dust without coming back.

As a result, it can be stated that the world which Qoheleth observed is best described by its uniformity, regularity, orderly recurrence, cyclical and rhythmic routine. It is, according Frydrych, "unchanging and therefore, predictable."[199] This predictability is best explained in Qoh 3:1-9. According to Qoheleth everything has been preset in time and will occur at the appointed time (עֵת). The world of the living is not therefore only physical, it has a temporal and ethical aspect that one should consider in any attempt to understand Qoheleth's worldview and his thoughts. The temporal aspect of the world of the living stands mainly on the fact that this world is situated between two frames of eternity, that is, the stability of the earth (וְהָאָרֶץ לְעוֹלָם עֹמָדֶת) on one hand, and humanity's house of eternity (בֵּית עוֹלָמוֹ) on the other. According to Perdue, the temporal framework for Qoheleth is the movement from cosmos to history to death.[200]

As a whole, the book of Qoheleth appears as a reflection upon life in the world in order to search out its meaning. Within this quest, the creation motif holds a significant place: "life is to be celebrated as a 'good' creation of God."[201] In other words, Qoheleth's world is an enjoyable world despite all the disparities and disjointedness or gaps in life. Hence, his recommendation for enjoyment. One should be happy with one's activities (2:24-25; 3:22) and one should be able to eat and drink and be merry (8:15). Qoheleth fundamentally speaks about enjoying what one has, and what one has been given.

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[199] Frydrych, *Living under the Sun*, 118.

[200] Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 209.

[201] Robert K. Johnston, "Confessions of a Workaholic," in Zuck, *Reflecting with Solomon,* 141.

Overall, from Qoheleth's perspective, the world as God designed it is perfectly, orderly and beautifully enjoyable. The reader is introduced to that order and beauty in the opening poem through the movement of natural phenomena. That Qoheleth begins and ends with cosmology, is not, therefore, meaningless. We agree with Bundvad that "the ideas propounded in the poem on the world order and the human relationship to the temporal process are necessary because they prepare the ground for what is expounded in the bulk of the book."[202]

[202] Mette Bunvad, *Time in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 47.

Chapter III COMPARATIVE CRITICISM OF THE NATURE POEMS (Qoh 1:2-11 AND 12:1-8)

As shown in the previous chapter, humans are embedded in the world God has designed in an orderly fashion. In that well-ordered cosmos, each element (animate and inanimate; human and non-human) is required to fulfill the role and function assigned to it by the Creator, for the well-being of the creatures, including human beings.

This view of the cosmos, marked by animate and inanimate beings, permanence and cyclicality which Qoheleth might have been familiar with, is expressed in his opening and closing poems. While the idea of stability is stated in v. 4 וְהָאָרֶץ לְעוֹלָם עֹמָדֶת in v. 9b:וְאֵין כָּל־חָדָשׁ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ and in 12:7a as well: יָשֹׁב הֶעָפָר עַל־הָאָרֶץ, the cyclicality, which is in fact a form of stability in that the cycle repeats itself endlessly, is described by some verbs of movement (בוא, הלךְ, סבב, שוב).

It should be, however, noted that Qoh 1:2-11 and 12:1-8 diverge quite radically from each other in form, purpose and certain matters of content. The permanence and stability affirmed in 1:2-11 conflict with the impermanence and the dissolution of the great and wealthy house in 12:1-8. Yet, together, these poems have a structural function as a frame, and multiple lines of connection can be drawn between them in terms of language and content. Both poems describe the fixity of human nature, and the fleetingness of human experience in the world.

In approaching these poems, one ought to be clear about the distinctive differences between them and their similarities and mutually informing conceptions of the world, and human life in that world. It is our underlying contention that Qoh 1:2-11 and

12:1-8 deserve a more careful comparative study than has hitherto been given them, not because their acknowledged differences are deemed any less striking or significant but because their points of contact merit greater attention and more thorough evaluation than they have previously received. The results of the comparative analysis, indeed, suggest certain implications for the understanding of each that are not clear when they are studied in isolation. Hence, we contend that an in-depth study of the connections between these two literary units is worth considering.

In this chapter, we will conclude that the two poems (Qoh 1:2-11 and 12:1-8) are not later insertions, but rather, despite their dissonance, have a structural, literary and thematical function together as a frame, and should therefore go hand in hand, not only as an *inclusio* but also as mirror-texts. This investigation will be done in three main points. We will first treat the literary features of the nature poems, second the connections between them, and finally the notion of time and temporality displayed in these poems. The rationale behind these considerations is that the two poems not only are compositionally coherent units, but also, that they play a foundational role for the meaning of הֶבֶל and Qoheleth's quest for wisdom.

III.1 LITERARY FEATURES OF QOH 1:2-11; 12:1-8

III.1.1 REDACTION CRITICISM OF QOH 1:2-11; 12:1-8

The alleged contradictions in the book of Qoheleth have led scholars to question the integrity of the book as a whole. They suggest, indeed, that various redactional additions or insertions and glosses had been introduced into Qoheleth, and that they were in conflict with the original. While some scholars use the argument of "multivoiced or

polyphonic text[203] to speak of the redactional complexity of the book, others opt to argue for editorship rather than authorship.

In light of earlier scholars' attempts, mainly Bartholomew's,[204] Greenwood for instance identifies three voices in Qoheleth according their literary characteristics and functions.[205] According to Greenwood, Qoheleth the Preacher (Q_P) is the "true voice of wisdom," who primarily speaks in the second person imperative. The second voice(Q_S) is the voice of Qoheleth speaking as Solomon in the first person "I"-voice. The third voice (Q_{FN}) serves as the "Frame Narrator," and is found in the third person sections of 1:1-11; 12:8-11.

Ellermeier did not argue otherwise when he first saw the prologue and the epilogue as evidence not for authorship but rather for editorship. According to him, a redactor (QohR1) would have composed the actual book, adding 1:1; 1:2-3; 12:8 and 12:9-12. This editor is thought to have had before him fifty-six small, independent *meshalim* that he joined on the basis of "thematische Begriffe" and "Stichwörter." A second editor (QohR2) might have been responsible of 12:13-14 and some glossing.[206]

We do, however, argue that the identification of the different voices represented in Qoheleth does not deny the possibility of a single author. In fact, the shift from one personal pronoun to another, and the polyphony are literary strategies used by Qoheleth, who creates a dialogue with himself and his supposed audience, though there is no response from the dialogue partner. This literary strategy which is not unique to Qoheleth is according to Mary Mills a

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[203] Robert D. Holmstedt, "וְלִבִּי אֱנִי The Syntactic Encoding of the Collaborative Nature of Qohelet's Experiment," *JHS* 9 (2010): 1-27; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 74-79, where he summarized and responded to Michael Fox's analysis of the speaking voices in Ecclesiastes.

[204] Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 78-79.

[205] Kyle R. Greenwood, "Debating Wisdom: The Role of Voice in Ecclesiastes," *CBQ* 74 (2012): 479.

[206] Michael Fox "Frame-narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet." *HUCA,* 48 (1977): 89.

"narratival conversation".[207] It is noticeable in the poetic and novelistic literature where the author conveys different voices, shifting from one pronoun to another (see Jer 2:1-3:5). Constituted by opposing voices, the "narratival conversation," as Mills argues is

> an artistic tool which delivers a sophisticated stylistic, comparable with the tensions and ambiguities of daily life. This conversational mode becomes robustly polyphonic when the narrator takes on the profiles of other social actors on whose experience the book draws.[208]

It is, therefore, possible that the editor of a text is its author. Fox is thus right when he finds Ellermeier's view wanting, and this for four reasons. First, it is not at all clear whether one can distinguish originally independent units. Second, it is often not clear whether Ellermeier's "Begriffe" and "Stichwörter" join or are internal to the unit. Third, to the extent that there are connections, how does one know that these are editorial rather than from the author? Fourth, Qoheleth's words are presented to us as the search by one man.[209]

Beyond these considerations which cast doubt on the editorship of Qoheleth, Fox goes on to strongly argue that "the book of Qoheleth is to be taken as a whole, as a single, well- integrated composition, the product not of editorship but of authorship, which uses the interplay of voice as a deliberate literary device for rhetorical and artistic purposes."[210]

The argument that weighs heavily in favor of composition by a single author is, according to Fox, in Qoheleth's single search, whose goal is set forth clearly in 1:13a and whose presence shapes our perception of the whole book.[211]

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[207] Mary Mills, "Polyphonic Narration in Ecclesiastes and Jonah," in *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually* , 76.
[208] Mills, "Polyphonic Narration in Ecclesiastes and Jonah," 76-77.
[209] Fox "Frame-narrative and Composition," 88-90.
[210] Fox "Frame-narrative and Composition," 83.
[211] Fox "Frame-narrative and Composition," 90.

וְנָתַתִּי אֶת־לִבִּי לִדְרוֹשׁ וְלָתוּר בַּחָכְמָה עַל כָּל־אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמָיִם

> I applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven (1:13).

Likewise, Krüger argues that the person responsible for the entire book takes on the persona of "Qoheleth the preacher" to offer an analysis of human existence. Accordingly, the presence of many voices, or the alleged different authors or editors, are best explained by literary strategy.

> By appearing in the role of editor behind this protagonist, Qoheleth, the author creates distance between himself and "Qoheleth". In this distance he reinforces the words of "Qoheleth" by stylizing "Qoheleth" as a type of a critical wise man (9-10). At the same time, however, he also relativizes them by classifying them in the realm of wise words and writings and shows their possibilities and their limits (11-12).[212]

Similar to 1:1; 1:2-3; 12:8 and 12:9-12, Qoheleth's opening and closing poems (1:4-11 and 12:1-8) have also been subjected to scholars' criticism in their form (*Formgeschichte*), redaction (*Redaktionsgeschichte*), and even in terms of their source (*Quellengeschichte*).

Whereas Naoto Kamano[213] and Roland Murphy consider the initial poem to be an integral part of the book, Longman[214] and Koh argue for its later insertion. According

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[212] Krüger, *Qoheleth,* 215.

[213] Naoto Kamano, *Cosmology and Character: Qoheleth's Pedagogy from a Rhetorical-Critical Perspective* (Berlin, N.Y: W. De Gruyter, 2002), 11-12.

[214] According to Longman, the book of Qoheleth begins in 1:12 and ends in 12:7. He, thus, excludes the opening poem (1:1-11) and the epilogue (12:8-14) which he considers later additions to the book. The argument against authorship and originality of these sections is the use of the third person singular. This has been often taken as evidence of a second hand. See Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 21.

to Koh, "these poems could have been written by Qoheleth but at a different time and incorporated by a later editor."[215] Yet, he recognizes that not only is there no majority consensus view on the matter of their authorship, but also that arguments for and against the originality of the poems are inconclusive.

For these reasons we agree with Fox, Krüger, Kamano and Murphy in arguing mostly that the cosmological poems are not editorial but authorial. The ideas propounded in the opening poem on the world order and the human relationship to the temporal process are necessary because they prepare the ground for what is expounded in the whole book. Succinctly put, unlike what Longman argues,[216] Qoheleth does not begin in 1:12 with the royal experiments, but rather in 1:1. Hence, we argue that the framing poems, in part or in total, can be studied together, mainly if one intends a better comprehension and reading הֶבֶל in Qoheleth.

III.1.2 STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF QOH 1:2-11 AND 12:1-8

Scholars' opinions regarding the structure of the book fall between two poles: those who find no order whatsoever, and those who discern a carefully constructed structure. Along with the latter group of scholars, we contend that Qoheleth is a well-organized and systematic book in which the internal *topoi* are used to make a case for the thesis in 1:2. This thesis is validated at least in Qoheleth's mind by 12:8. There is a thematic coherence in the book.

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[215] Yee-Von Koh, *Royal Autobiography in the Book of Qoheleth* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006), 23.

[216] Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 22.

However, it is difficult to find a clear and logical structure in Qoheleth. According to Castelli and Jastrow,[217] there is a unity of theme and orientation, but the arguments are presented without much order. Loretz goes on in this vein to recognize the unity of style and theme in the book.[218] Consistent with these scholars, we would like to argue that Qoh 1:2-11 and 12:1-8 are compositionally coherent units and thus play a foundational role for the meaning of הֶבֶל and Qoheleth's quest.

III.1.2.1 LITERARY STRUCTURE OF QOH 1:2-11

The delineation of Qoh 1:4-11 has been subject to debate among scholars. The discussion and point of disagreement are mainly on 1:2-3. Do these two verses form a single unit, or are they connected to 1:4-11? There is indeed a critical tendency to separate vv. 2-3 from vv. 4, the beginning of a new pericope.

In the 1956 edition of the French Bible, La Bible de Jérusalem, Pautrel considers 1:4-11 as a closed and single unit, having nothing to do with vv 2-3.[219] Eighteen years later, in the 1973 edition of the same Bible, Pautrel revised his position by beginning the section in 1:2. Melanie Kohlmoos also argues for the beginning of the poems in verse 2 :

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[217] David Castelli, *Il Libro Del Cohelet, Volgarmente Detto Ecclesiaste*, *Tradotto Dal Testo Ebraico Con Introduzione Critica E Note* (Pisa, 1866), 67-68; Morris Jastrow, *A Gentle Cynic; Being a Translation of the Book of Koheleth, Commonly Known as Ecclesiastes, Its Origin, Growth, and Interpretation* (London, 1919; repr.,New York: Oriole Editions, 1972), 124. See also Schoors, *Ecclesiastes,* 10.

[218] Oswald Loretz, *Qohelet und der alte Orient: Untersuchungen zu Stil und theologischer Thematik des Buches Qohelet* (Freiburg: Herder, 1964), 197-198.

[219] See also Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 39. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes,* 62.

> Koh 1,2-11 bilden die Einleitung zum Buch Kohelet. Dieser Eroffnung entspricht der Abschluss 12,1-8, der ebenfalls aus einem Gedicht und einem Zitat Kohelets besteht. 12,8 ist mit nicht 1,2 identisch.[220]

Other scholars, such as Scott, and Renan and Schoors begin the section with 1:3. Given our concern in this study, we align with those who read 1:2-11 as forming a unit. This delineation is not based at all on thematic argument, but rather on rhetorical argument. The initial programmatic thesis and question in vv. 2-3 are unfolded with respect to the recurrent movement of the natural phenomena in 4-7, and to human activity and history vv. 8-11.

III.1.2.1.1 Literary Analysis of Qoh 1:2-3

Since our interest in this dissertation is to understand the meaning of הֶבֶל in Qoheleth through the cosmology of the opening and closing poems, its detailed treatment will be left for the following chapter. For the time being, we would like to simply note that the term poses serious problems for the translator and for the reader as well. For there is no single modern language equivalent that would fully capture its meanings; its precise significance has been widely debated. Our contention is that Qoheleth uses the word הֶבֶל with its original and basic meaning of "breath", as a symbol or metaphor that encapsulates the notion of the fleetingness, temporariness, and impermanence of life in the cosmos.

Following this provocative, but captivating *programmatische Ausgangsthese* in 1:2 (הֲבֵל הֲבָלִים הַכֹּל הָבֶל) is the *programmatische Frage:* מַה־יִּתְרוֹן לָאָדָם בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ שֶׁיַּעֲמֹל תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ. Qoheleth introduces three important and recurring concepts of his thought: יִתְרוֹן

[220] "Koh 1,2-11 are the introduction to the book Kohelet. This opening corresponds to the conclusion 12,1-8, which also consists of a poem and a quotation of Kohelet. 12,8 is identical with 1,2." Melanie Köhlmoos, *Kohelet: Der Prediger Salomo*, (Göttingen : Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 77.

(profit), עָמָל (labor/work) and תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ (under the sun). This question is repeated in some forms in 2:22; 3:9; 5:16.

III.1.2.1.1.1 The Term יִתְרוֹן

The term יִתְרוֹן "profit" has basically a commercial meaning which refers to a surplus or gain,[221] a payoff,[222] but it has a wider meaning in Qoheleth as it is used for wisdom. Dahood, in his 1952 article on *Canaanite-Phoenician Influence in Qoheleth*, observes that in Qoheleth

> The distinctly commercial character of so many of the key words and phrases is thoroughly consonant with what is known about the commercializing Phoenician culture. The repeated use of words denoting profit and loss, abundance and deficiency, shares and wages, ownership and wealth, patrimony and poverty, betrays a milieu very harmonizing with the mercantile character of Phoenicia and her colonies. It is true that a Wisdom writer of an entirely different background might from time to time employ the same vocabulary as Qoheleth, but the over-all picture delineated by Ecclesiastes suggests a distinctly commercial environment.[223]

To sustain this proposition, Dahood provides a list of twenty-nine prominent commercial terms which appear in the Book, among which he includes יִתְרוֹן and its opposite as well חֶסְרוֹן (deficit).[224] The Aramaic texts from Saqqara also evidence the commercial use of

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[221] In chapter 5 of his book, Ingram offers a very good, detailed analysis and survey of the use of יִתְרוֹן in the book of Qoheleth (Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes*, 130-149). Seow is very helpful in pointing out how Qoheleth employs a number of economic terms to make his theological point (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 22).

[222] Peter Enns, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 32-33.

[223] Mitchell J. Dahood, "Canaanite-Phoenician Influence in Qoheleth." *Biblica* 33, no. 2 (1952): 191-221.

[224] The term חֶסְרוֹן is a *hapax* in Biblical Hebrew. It means " what is lacking" or *HALOT* s.v "חֶסְרוֹן", 1:339; or BDB "חֶסְרוֹן", 341. It is an Aramaic loanword meaning "deficit." The related verb חָסַר means "to lack, to be in need of, to decrease"; the related noun חֹסֶר refers to "one in want of"; and the noun חֶסֶר means "poverty, want" (*HALOT* s.v. "חֶסֶר" 1:338; BDB s.v. "חֶסֶר", 341. It refers to what is absent (zero in terms of quantity) rather than what is deficient (poor in terms of quality). The LXX misunderstood the term and rendered it as ὑστέρημα

the term יִתְרוֹן. One of these reads: הוה יתרן כספא זי קים בשנת (this was the surplus of silver which stands in year 6).[225]

The risk in referring to these textual witnesses is restricting the meaning of יִתְרוֹן to it commercial aspects. The language of Qoheleth is however sometimes equivocal so that one should ask what Qoheleth has in mind when he uses a word like יִתְרוֹן and in different places. Does יִתְרוֹן denote only commercial yield or profit or does it have a metaphorical connotation, in the sense of the result of any human activity? From the other occurrences of the term יִתְרוֹן in Qoheleth it appears that the usage of יִתְרוֹן is not limited to economics.

When two things are compared, יִתְרוֹן refers to the advantage one thing might have over another. For example, in 2:13 Qoheleth affirms that wisdom has the advantage (יִתְרוֹן) over folly (2:13; 3:9; 5:8.15; 6:8.11; 7:12; 10:10.11). On the other hand, when it is used by itself, it alludes to any gain that allows one to get ahead in life or to a desired result produced by effort or labor. The expression בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ indicates, in fact, that "profit" has the broader meaning of a lasting result which in fact is the desire of the human being. This desire is however challenged or contradicted by the reality of life and the *hebelness* of things.

All in all, יִתְרוֹן is used in Qoheleth to evaluate the ultimate benefit or effects of human activities as is טוֹב ("good, worthwhile") as well (Qoh 2:1;2:3).

("deficiency"): "deficiency cannot be numbered. However, most English versions correctly understand it as referring to what is lacking in terms of quantity: "what is lacking" (RSV, NIV, NRSV). In general, the usage of the word points to shortage of something rather than its complete absence. Seow notes a financial use of the Aramaic חסרן to indicate the loss made on a deal or activity (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 23). Hence, חֶסְרוֹן is the antonym of יִתְרוֹן .

[225] *TAD*, C3.11.6

III.1.2.1.1.2 The Term עָמָל

The second major term worthy of consideration is עָמָל. This term, like the previous one, has a broad use.[226] It can refer specifically to labor, toil, or to any activity that requires effort (8:17) or to the product of any activity (2:18). The fact that no lasting profit (יִתְרוֹן), as in 1:3; 2:11.13; 3:9; 5:8.15; 7:12; 10:10-11, comes from one's labor or toil (1:3; 3:9), that work brings pain (2:17.23) and despair (2:20), have led some scholars to accuse Qoheleth of despising work.[227] Unlike this negative view of work attributed to Qoheleth's usage, we argue that עָמָל is meaningful and that Qoheleth values human work, seeing in it the ultimate source of joy which one should consider as his lot (חֶלְקוֹ) from all his toil מִכָּל־עֲמָלִי (Qoh 2:10).

In the book of Qoheleth, indeed, nine sections deal with labor and the question of humanity's ability to enjoy its fruits.[228] His purpose is to recontextualize and to recover the downgrading of human work often seen as a curse (Gen 3:9.13.22). In place of עִצָּבוֹן and זֵעָה, Qoheleth speaks of שִׂמְחָה (pleasure, enjoyment), which is not a curse but a gift from God (מִיַּד הָאֱלֹהִים הִיא; זֹה מַתַּת אֱלֹהִים הִיא). In other words, the *programmatische Frage* has resulted in the conclusion that profit (יִתְרוֹן) is and should be found not only in one's עָמָל but also in the ability to accept and enjoy to the fullest everything or moment in life as a gift from God (מַתַּת אֱלֹהִים) (Qoh 2:24-26; 3:12-13; 5:17-19; 9:7-10).

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[226] For more detailed in the of עָמָל in the Book of Qoheleth see Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes*, 150-168).

[227] Matthew Seufert, "The Presence of Genesis in Ecclesiastes," *WTJ* 78, (2016); Hinckley G. Mitchell, "'Work' in Ecclesiastes," *JBL* 32.2 (1913): 137-138. Elsa Tamez, *When the Horizons Close: Rereading Ecclesiastes* (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 5.

[228] These references include words associated with the semantic field of labor and its products (labor, wealth, oppression riches and property poverty) and with the semantic field of happiness (טוֹב "good" (2:1,24; 3:12,13; 6:3,6; 9:7; 11:7-9); מָתוֹק "sweet" (5:11; 11:7) and the phrase אכל ושתה "to eat and to drink" (2:24-26; 3:12,22; 5:17-19; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:7-12:1; חֵפֶץ "pleasure" (5:3; 8:3.6; 12:1.10).

Thus, the term יִתְרוֹן is fittingly and pragmatically connected to עָמָל. The desire to know, or the anxiety about the gain, the result, the outcome from whatever toil, is inherent to human nature. We might, thus, argue for the metaphorical use of יִתְרוֹן and עָמָל as they apply to human activities, and mainly in the socio-historical context of the Ptolemaic empire. Considering this environment, the answer would be that there is no clear profit or advantage to be had. The money did not go to the farmers; it went to the overlords in taxes.

III.1.2.1.1.3 The Expression תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ

The third key term in v. 3 is תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ (under the sun),[229] which appears nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible. Its use is, however, attested to in extrabiblical literature.

Unlike and against the argument that תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ is a Greek loanword, ὑφ'ἥλίῳ,[230] scholars have provided evidence that the idiom also occurs in ANE inscriptions, mainly in an Elamite inscription of the fifth century BC, the Phoenician inscription of Tabnit (sixth century) and his son Eshmunazar (fifth century) with a malediction that tomb robbers would have no offspring :

> But may the sacred gods deliver them to a mighty king who will rule them in order to exterminate them, the king or this (ordinary) man who will open what is over this resting-place or will lift up this coffin, and (also) the offspring of this king or of those (ordinary) men. They shall not have root below or fruit above or appearance among the living under the sun (*taht šamš)*.[231]

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[229] For more detailed in the use of תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ in the Book of Qoheleth see Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes*, 250-272).

[230] Ranston had used the occurrence of this expression in Greek literature to support his view on the Hellenistic influence in the composition of Qoheleth (Henry Ranston, *Ecclesiastes and the Early Greek Wisdom*, (London: Epworth, 1925), 42-43.

[231] *KAI* 14 lin 9-12 "Sondern die heiligen Götter sollen sie an einen mächtigen König ausliefern, der über sie herrscht, so daß er sie abschneidet, den König oder den Menschen, der diese Ruhestätte öffnet oder der

At the end of Tabnit, a similar curse is found in *KAI* 13, lin. 7-8, "may there be for you no descendants among the living under the sun or resting-place with the Raphaïm."[232] A similar curse is pronounced against anyone who would destroy the monument of the Elamite King Untashgal: "May his seed not prosper under the sun"[233]

The meaning of "under the sun", both in the ANE inscriptions and in Qoheleth is unquestionable. Along with parallel terms such as תַּחַת הַשָּׁמָיִם (1:13; 2:3; 3:1) and עַל־הָאָרֶץ (8:14.16; 11:2) the expression תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ is used in Qoheleth in reference to the world of the living in contradistinction to the world of God above (מַעְלָה, שָׁמַיִם) and the world of the dead below (שְׁאוֹל; מַטָּה אָרֶץ). Belcher rightly observes that תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ "is commonly used with the Hebrew concept *'asah* (stressing what is done or human deeds) and *'amal*, along with the verb *ra'ah*, indicating the world people experience while they are alive, the observable world of work and other human activity."[234]

Thus, the world that interested Qoheleth in his inquiry is the world of human daily experiences, that is תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ. In the words of Jennie Barbour, תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ and תַּחַת

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hochhebt diesen Sarg, und den Samen dieses Königs oder dieser Menschen: Weder sollen sie nach unten eine Wurzel besitzen noch Frucht nach oben noch Ansehen bein den Lebenden unter der Sonne." For the translation See also Jean Claude Haelewyck, "The Phoenician Inscription of Eshmunazar An Attempt at Vocalization" in Babelao 1, (2012), 90 cf. https://uclouvain.be/fr/instituts-recherche/incal/ciol/babelao-1-2012.html. Or John C. L Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 106.

[232] *KAI* 13, lin. 7-8 : « über mit öffnest und mich dennoch störst, (dann) soll dir keine Nachkommenschaft bei den Lebendigen unter der Sonne werden noch eine Ruhestätte bei den Totengeistern»; For the translation See Jean Claude Haelewyck, « L'inscription phénicienne de Tabnit (KAI 13) Essai de vocalisation » in *RANT* 8, (2011), 4.10: «Qu'il n'y ait pour toi ni descendance parmi les vivants sous le soleil ni lieu de repos avec les ombres »https://www.academia.edu/38976606/Linscription_ph%C3%A9nicienne_de_Tabnit_KAI_13_Essai_de_vocalisation. Or Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, 103.

[233] See Seow, *Ecclesiastes,* 105.

[234] Richard P. Belcher, *Ecclesiastes* (Darlington, UK: EP Books, 2014), 47.

הַשָּׁמַיִם are "the arena for seeing everything," and "a historical setting" of Qoheleth's observations.[235]

To sum up, Qoheleth purposefully introduces the reader to his book with these provocative verses (1:2-3), which in fact draw the audience's attention to human possibilities on earth. As Schwienhorst-Schönberger argues, the *programmatische Frage* in 1:3 is about the "profit of profit" (Gewinn des Gewinnes)[236] mainly when it is read in parallel with 2:11. In fact, the *programmatische Frage* does not question the existence of profit (יִתְרוֹן) but asks about the nature (מַה) of a profit of human effort which by itself is fleeting and ineffective.

We thus argue that Qoh 1:3 should be read and understood primarily from 1:2 which, indeed, creates a contrast between transience/ transitoriness (*Vergänglichkeit*) of things and the supposed duration of יִתְרוֹן . Succinctly put, behind the מַה־יִּתְרוֹן question lies that of the meaning of human life. It is this quest to find the significance of human existence that characterizes Qoheleth's search. To provide evidence of his initial thesis and to his programmatic question, Qoheleth looks first to the natural world (Qoh 1: 4-11). He uses psychological terms and metaphors to describe the natural world, to portray human behavior.

III.1.2.1.2 Literary Analysis of Qoh 1:4-11

The literary structure of this eight-verse poem differs from one scholar to another.[237] These structural divergences indicate something of the complexity of the poem

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[235] Jennie Barbour, *The Story of Qoheleth*, 44.

[236] "Ist das, was der Mensch bei all seiner Arbeit an Gewinn erzielt, auf's Ganze gesehen wirklich ein Gewinn?" Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 152.

[237] Murphy, *The Forms of the Old Testament Literature,* 133; Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions,* 164; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 112; Oswald Loretz, "Anfänge jüdischer Philosophie : nach Qohelet 1,1-11 und 3,1-15." *Ugarit-Forschungen* 23 (1991):231-232; Norbert Lohfink, "Die Wiederkehr des immer Gleichen : eine frühe Synthese zwischen griechischem und jüdischem Weltgefühl in Kohelet 1,4-11." *Archivio Di Filosofia* 53.1 (1985):129-130.

and even the whole of Qoheleth. But regarding the main topic, the division of the poem into two parts: 4-7 and 8-11 seems at first sight the most logical. There would be here two parallel texts, one cosmic, which describes the events that take place in the universe, and the other one anthropological, where reference is made to human life in the world. Hence the following structure.

A. The movement of the natural phenomena in the cosmos (1:4-7)

B. Thesis statement : The changing of generations : v. 4

C. Description of the cosmic movement: vv. 5-7

A' The activity of human beings in the world (1:8-11):

B'. Thesis statement (v. 8) «All words are wearied» : v. 8

C'. Description of human activity: vv. 9-11

III.1.2.1.2.1 Literary Analysis of Qoh 1:4-7

As a whole, verses 4-7 form a compact unit with an inclusion of the 14 verbs describing movement: הלך «go» (6 times), בוא «come« (2 times), סבב «go around« (4 times), and שוב «return« (2 times). Moreover, the participial structure continues through v. 4-7 and bonds these lines together.

As we continue the analysis, it appears that verse 4 displays literarily a captivating contrast. It starts with two verbs הלך and בוא that indicate a movement and ends with another verb עמד which in contrast to the previous indicates stability, fixity, permanence. This notion of permanence or duration is emphasized by the use of the term לְעוֹלָם (forever, everlastingly, for eternity, eternally, incessantly). These two categories of verbs, that is, the verbs of movement *versus* the verb of stability, have different subjects. While הלך and בוא

refer to human beings, via the collective term דוֹר (generation), the verb עמד is applied to ארץ (earth). We infer from the above analysis that דוֹר stands in contrast to ארץ.

As applied to דוֹר, the significance of the verbs הלך and בוא is beyond the movement "va et vient." Differently put, it is more than a roundtrip (aller-retour). These two verses are metaphors of death and birth. It is worth mentioning here the two French expressions that corroborate the metaphorical use of these verbs. To signify that someone is dead, the French would euphemistically say " il s'en est allé; il est parti." The expression "le bébé est venu" is also to announce the birth of a baby. This metaphorical use of הלך and בוא for death and birth is not unknown to the HB (Job 10:21; Ps 39:14; 2 Sam 12:23) nor to Qoheleth. This verb (הלך) occurs 30 times in Qoheleth and it is used 10 times in the sense of die (1:4; 3:20; 5:14.15; 6:4.6; 8:10; 9:10; 12:5). Most interesting for our analysis are the passages in which the verb הלך is associated with the verb בוא to speak of birth and death (5:14.15; 6:4). For instance, in 6:4 the two verbs are used to comment on the brief existence of a miscarriage (נֵפֶל)

For in transience it comes,	כִּי־בַהֶבֶל בָּא
and it goes into darkness;	וּבַחֹשֶׁךְ יֵלֵךְ
and in the darkness its name is covered	וּבַחֹשֶׁךְ שְׁמוֹ יְכֻסֶּה:

Likewise, in 5:14-15, in allusion to the death of the wealthy man :

As they came from their mother's womb, so they shall go again, naked as they came; they shall take nothing for their toil, which they may carry away with their hands.	כַּאֲשֶׁר יָצָא מִבֶּטֶן אִמּוֹ עָרוֹם יָשׁוּב לָלֶכֶת כְּשֶׁבָּא וּמֵאוּמָה לֹא־יִשָּׂא בַעֲמָלוֹ שֶׁיֹּלֵךְ בְּיָדוֹ:
This also is a grievous pain: just as they came, so shall they go; and what gain do they have from toiling for the wind?	וְגַם־זֹה רָעָה חוֹלָה כָּל־עֵמַת שֶׁבָּא כֵּן יֵלֵךְ וּמַה־יִּתְרוֹן לוֹ שֶׁיַּעֲמֹל לָרוּחַ:

That Qoheleth begins his book with such strong verbs is not meaningless. They are meant to describe life in the world, in terms of coming, entering and going/exiting, whether דּוֹר refers to the human generation or to things. They all express at different levels and according to their nature the process of entering and exiting the world, the only thing that remains לְעוֹלָם being the earth. This "eternal earth" is the necessary ground for the survival of the 'web of life'; the ground on which and from which, the creator interacts with and sustains creation, human and non-human. Seen as such, the *ʿolam* of the earth is for the benefit of its community. Turner is thus right when she argues that "without, earth, in Qoheleth's sense, there is no Earth community."[238]

The repetition of דּוֹר is a transient marker, as it refers to a different generation. Perry is thus right when he affirms that "the focus is on replacement and succession, so that the earth's endurance and productivity stand and are grounded, as it were, in the generations themselves."[239] This is, human beings need a stable, secure and trustworthy place that can hold their life and experiences. As Rose comments, «le mouvement permanent qui marque tous les aspects de la vie humaine trouve ainsi une carde stable ou ancrage…Par la stabilité de la terre, l'existence humaine gagne un caractère autre que celui, seul, d'éphémère ».[240]

Thus, v. 4 is based on the antithesis between the movement of human generations and the stability of the earth. The intention of this verse is to emphasize the

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[238] Turner, *Qoheleth's Eternal*, 10.

[239] Anthony T. Perry, *The Book of Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) and the Path to Joyous Living* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 73-74.

[240] Béatrice Martin Rose, *Rien de Nouveau: Nouvelles Approches du Livre de Qoheleth,* (Fribourg, Suisse: Editions Universitaires, 1999), 78.

uniformity of all events, but also as Schwienhorst-Schönberger argues, to state the transitoriness of human being:

> Die erste Strophe konstatiert die Vergänglichkeit des Menschen gerade auch im Hinblick auf die Einbindung in eine seine individuelle Existenz übergreifende Gemeinschaft. Davon unterscheidet sich die Erde in ihrer ewigen Dauer.[241]

The antithesis in v. 4 between human generations and the cosmos is developed in the following verses of the poem (vv. 5-7) prominently characterized by what Schwienhorst-Schönberger calls "assoziative Verbindung",[242] that is, the description of natural phenomena. The whole unit is formed of three pieces where the verses are concentrated on the elements of nature: the sun (v. 5-6a), the wind (v. 6b), the streams and the sea (v. 7). These verses are literarily dominated by a prominent use of participles. The cyclical and recurrent movement in the cosmos becomes apparent in theses verses.

In the MT, v. 5 begins with the perfect form וְזָרַח of the verb זרח (rise). While some scholars suspect and argue that וְזָרַח has been metathesized;[243] others like Seow argue for the correctness of וְזָרַח despite the dominance of participles in this verse. He writes:

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[241] "The first verse states the transitoriness of man, especially with regard to his integration into a community that encompasses his individual existence. The earth differs from this in its eternal duration" (Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 161).

[242] Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 159.

[243] Martin Rose assumes the argument of metathesis of ו and ז : « une forme participiale serait tout de même à préférer, car tout le contexte est dominé par des participes (cf. déjà le v. 4). Vu la similitude graphique de ו et de ז, il n'est pas difficile d'imaginer l'erreur d'un copiste qui aurait lu וזרח au lieu de זורח » (Martin Rose, *Rien De Nouveau,* 79.). See also, Di Fonzo, "l'errore dovuto facilmente a un copista che ha confuso, invertendole, le due lettere iniziali *waw* e *zajn*." In *Ecclesiastes* (Torino: Marietti, 1967), 127. The interchange between ו and ז leads to the suppression of the *waw* in favor of זורח. This view is in fact supported by Targum, and Peshitta, Jerome's Vorlage (BHQ 18, *Megilloth*, 65).

> We should not follow the commentators who, assuming a metathesis of letters, read *zwrḥ* (...) nor should one delete the *waw* and read *zrḥ* (...). We are to take *wĕzāraḥ* and *ûbā'* as perfect consecutive forms, an interpretation confirmed by the word order.[244]

However, Seow's translation of וְזָרַח is not in the perfect tense, as one might expect, but in the present tense: "the sun rises and the sun sets". He thus aligned himself with the proponents of the metathesis of ו and ז. This is, if the perfect must be kept in conformity to the MT, the participle seems preferable for the meaning of the verse in the context. The reading with the participle is suggested by the indicative present form ἀνατέλλει in LXX and *oritur* in Vulg.[245] Given the use and function of the participle which is to emphasize continual, durative and uninterrupted action, we favor the participial reading of זורח in order to mark the continual rising (זרח) and setting (בוא) of the sun.

According to some ancient cosmologies the sun, after it sets in the west, crosses by an underground way to reach the east again.[246] This knowledge uncovers circular motion in the movement of the sun. Furthermore, this fact could constitute an interesting antithetic parallel between the movement sun and the succession human generations. So, in Qoheleth's imagination, the sun is no longer the invincible god, but a creature that goes around in circles and whose daily races succeed as the generations do.

But the meaning of שׁוֹאֵף, used to describe the movement of the sun, is problematic and disputed. According to the *HALOT* and BDB,[247] the verb שָׁאַף can have a

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[244] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 106.

[245] The participle is also supported by Symmachus and the Syriac. BHQ 18, 65.

[246] Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World : Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 32.

[247] *HALOT,* s.v. "שׁאף," 2:1375 ; BDB "שׁאף," 983.

positive meaning of longing or desire and a negative connotation as well, carrying the meaning of a weary panting. Here in Qoheleth, שָׁאַף personifies the sun which not only eagerly moves towards its next appearance, but also pants with weariness, as it rushes to its destination (אֶל־מְקוֹמוֹ).

The Septuagint renders שׁוֹאֵף as ἕλκει, «drags, pulls», leaving out the object.[248] Aquila has εισπνει, «he inhales, breathes in», and Symmachus and Theodotion have ἐπαναστρέφει ("turn back", "returns") because the sun clearly turns around to its original place and it aspires to return there, from whence it had come earlier.[249] This interpretation of Symmachus and Theodotion is supported by the Peshitta and the Vulgate.[250] While Peshitta uses the term *tāʿeb* for שׁוֹאֵף which means "it returns," Jerome renders שׁוֹאֵף by *revertitur:* "oritur sol et occidit et ad locum suum revertitur ibique renascens." It is quite possible that the versions of the Peshitta and Vulgate try to harmonize v. 5 with the return of the wind and streams in v. 6 and 7.

Verse 6 describes the movement, and the blowing of the wind (רוּחַ) as it goes around and round. Like the previous verses, Qoh 1:6 is literarily marked, still, by the prominent use of verbs of movement: סבב (4 times), שׁוב (1 time), הלך (1time).

The root סָבַב is repeated three times in this verse to depict the wind's continual movement. The wind circles around (סוֹבֵב) round and round (סוֹבֵב סֹבֵב) its circuits (סְבִיבֹתָיו). This repetition is designed for a rhetorical purpose, which is to emphasize that the wind is

[248] The Septuagint uses the verb ἕλκω, for שׁאף, also in Jer 14:6 and Ps 119; 131.

[249] Jerome, *Commentaire De L'Ecclésiaste, traduit par* Gerard Fry (Paris: Migne, 2001), 73-74.

[250] BHQ 18, 65.

locked into a never-ending cycle. Grossberg rightly contends that "the author asserts, underlines and exemplifies the unceasing cyclical motion, a going-in-circles."[251]

The participle form is used three times to emphasize the completeness of the continual, uninterrupted and rotational action of the wind. Despite the fact that the wind is always changing direction; nothing really new ever happens. The constant shifting of the wind cannot hide the fact that this is nothing but a repeated cycle.

Unlike the sun which moves from east to west and returns to its place (אֶל-מְקוֹמוֹ), the wind is pictured as blowing from north (צָפוֹן) to south (דָּרוֹם) and back again. Its movement is circular, and cyclic, if one interprets the preposition עַל as "to" rather than "from." Against Hertzberg who sees similarity between the movement of the wind and that of the sun,[252] Dahood gives to עַל the meaning of "from," contending that the wind returns not to its "Ausgangspunkt" but rather to its "wo er drehte."[253]

In sum, the verb סבב indicates a movement in a precise direction which is to return back: "the wind returns to its circuits." This circular and permanent movement of the wind is supported by the LXX rendering of the verb סבב by κυκλόω (to encircle, surround, to move in a circle, whirl round, to go in a circle).

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[251] Daniel Grossberg, "Form and Content and Their Correspondence." *HS* 41.1 (2000): 50.

[252] « Der Schluß bildet eine unmittelbare Parallele zum vorigen Vers : der Wind kehrt wieder zu seinem Ausgangspunkt zurück » in Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *Der Prediger (Qohelet).* Kommentar Zum Alten Testament 4 (Leipzig: Deichert, 1932), 61.

[253] Dahood translates וְעַל־סְבִיבֹתָיו שָׁב הָרוּחַ as follows "dorthin wo er drehte kehrt wieder der Wind" in Mitchell Dahood, «The Phoenician Background of Qoheleth», *Bib* 47 (1966), 265. Likewise, for Whitley, the preposition עַל should be rendered by " from", given the widespread of this meaning in the Semitic languages: Phoenician, Moabite, Aramaic and Hebrew in, Charles Francis. *Koheleth : His Language and Thought* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1979), 9-10.

The last incessant movement in nature is described in 1:7 with the flowing of the streams into the sea.[254]

כָּל־הַנְּחָלִים הֹלְכִים אֶל־הַיָּם וְהַיָּם אֵינֶנּוּ מָלֵא
אֶל־מְקוֹם שֶׁהַנְּחָלִים הֹלְכִים שָׁם הֵם שָׁבִים לָלֶכֶת

All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams go, there they return to go.

This movement once again is expressed through the use of the verbs הלך (3 times) and שׁוב (*šûb*). Compared to the movement of the sun and the wind, the movement of the streams might be seen as a unidirectional movement, in the sense that there is no explicit return to the point of departure. If so, how can one explain *le jamais-vide* (*the never-emptiness*) of the streams (נְּחָלִים), which constantly flow into the sea without being empty (רֵיקִים); or *le jamais-plein* (*the never-fullness*) of the sea, which receives waters from all streams without being full (אֵינֶנּוּ מָלֵא)?[255] Worth noting are the terms אֶל־מְקוֹם and שׁוב. The term אֶל־מְקוֹם, as we have seen in v. 5, indicates that the streams have a particular assigned place where they should necessarily flow to. According to Gen 1:9-10, this *māqôm* is the sea (יָם).

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יִקָּווּ הַמַּיִם מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם אֶל־מָקוֹם
אֶחָד וְתֵרָאֶה הַיַּבָּשָׁה וַיְהִי־כֵן:

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים | לַיַּבָּשָׁה אֶרֶץ וּלְמִקְוֵה הַמַּיִם קָרָא
יַמִּים וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב:

Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear. And it was so.
God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

[254] Aristophanes' *Clouds* has often been pointed by Whybray as evidence of the Greek thought in Qoheleth (Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 42). In lines 1293-1294 of Aristophanes' *Clouds*, one reads indeed: "The sea does not rise, although the rivers flow incessantly into it."

[255] In his commentary on this verse, Ibn Ezra argues that "the sea is not full, because there is a vapor constantly rising form the sea to the sky, which forms the clouds,...and the vapor is converted into rain"

In other words, the *māqôm* is not just a simple place, but a *demeure* (residence).[256] It is according to Perry "the stable element of transience."[257] The movement of the streams into the sea is accordingly understood as a return to their *demeure* (אֶל־מְקוֹמָם וְשָׁבִים) (cf. Josh 4:18). The verb שָׁבִים in the expression שָׁם הֵם שָׁבִים לָלָכֶת emphasizes the continual, durative action of the waters. For Martin Rose, "les fleuves recommenceront toujours (שׁוב) à quitter leur demeure (מָקוֹם), pour reprendre leur chemin habituel (הלך)."[258] Thus, "never full" means "the sea never overflows," which means the rivers will always flow there.

In fact if the rivers do not flow back to where they originate, the sea would rise above its shore and the power of the chaotic water would destroy all land living creatures and birds (Gen 1:9-10; 6-9; Ps 104:5-9.10-13; Prov 8:29a; Job 38:8-11.16; Jer 5:22). Schwienhorst-Schönberger is thus right in his reading of Qoh 1:7 as "eine halb rational, halb mythisch gefasste Erklärung kosmischer Ordnung vor" (a half rational, half mythical explanation of cosmic order).[259]

To sum up, it is worth noting Qoheleth's choice and use of the four constitutive elements of the cosmos in antiquity: earth (אָרֶץ) in v. 4, fire/sun (הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ) in v. 5, air (הָרוּחַ) in v. 6, and water (הַנְּחָלִים / מַיִם) in v. 7). What might have been Qoheleth's purpose in alluding, for example, to the four fundamental elements of cosmology at the outset and the closing of

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[256] Rose, *Rien de Nouveau,* 86.

[257] Perry, *The Book of Ecclesiastes ,* 78-79.

[258] Rose, *Rien de Nouveau,* 87.

[259] Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet,* 165.

his book? The Greek philosopher Aristotle begins his treatise of natural phenomena by clearly stating:

> We have previously laid down that there is one element from which the natural bodies in circular motion are made up, and four other physical bodies produced by the primary qualities, the motion of these bodies being twofold, either away from or towards the centre. These four bodies are fire, air, water and earth: of them fire always rises to the top, earth always sinks to the bottom, while the other two bear to each other a mutual relation similar to that of fire and earth for air is the nearest of all to fire, water to earth. The whole terrestrial region, then, is composed of these four bodies, and it is the conditions which affect them which, we have said, are the subject of our inquiry.[260]

The four elements above mentioned imply permanence mainly "in the way of coming into existence [γένεσιν] or perishing [φθοράν] (for the universe is permanent)."[261] In so saying, Aristotle does not exclude the fleetingness of things, the change that happens in the world:

> The same parts of the earth are not always moist or dry, but they change according as rivers come into existence and dry up. And so, the relation of land to sea changes too and a place does not always remain land or sea throughout all time, but where there was dry land there comes to be sea, and where there is now sea, there one day comes to be dry land. But we must suppose these changes to follow some order and cycle.[262]

By beginning his book in a manner similar to that of Aristotle, with the elements that are the constituents of everything, Qoheleth is arguing for a world already set when human beings come in. The allusion to the cosmic elements in the creation poems is

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[260] Aristotle, *Meteorology* I. II, 339a lines 11-21. (trans. H. D. P. Lee (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962; https://archive.org/details/L397AristotleMeteorologica/page/n1.

[261] Aristotle, *Meteorology* I. XIV, 352b lines 16-18.

[262] Aristotle *Meteorology* I. XIV, 351b lines 19-24.

thus significant. Humans persistence in existence depends on all four. For, how long could one's life be and continue without the sun, the water, and the air to breathe?

III.1.2.1.2.2 Literary Analysis of Qoh 1:8-11

As shown above, Qoh 1:4-7 describe the events that take place in the non-animate universe. Here, in vv. 8-11, Qoheleth focuses on the "Kosmos-Mensch",[263] in other words, on the human experience in the world. In this second part of the poem, the relationship between the temporally unlimited movement of the cosmic elements and the temporally limited movement of human life comes closer into view in 1:8-11 in which Qoheleth makes prominent use of anthropological imagery of ears, eyes, desires, memory... Furthermore, unlike verses 4-7 that were pictured by verbs of motion, this current section distinguishes itself by its sensory verbs (דִּבֶּר, רָאָה, שָׁמַע) in v. 8 and the explicit use of הָיָה (7 times) in vv. 9-11. A last literary feature which is not too much stressed in the first section is the use of the negative form לֹא, אַיִן and the particle relative שֶׁ.[264]

Moving further in the analysis, v. 8 displays elements of contention among scholars.

All the words are full of weariness;	כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים יְגֵעִים
a man cannot utter it;	לֹא־יוּכַל אִישׁ לְדַבֵּר
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,	לֹא־תִשְׂבַּע עַיִן לִרְאוֹת
nor the ear filled with hearing.	וְלֹא־תִמָּלֵא אֹזֶן מִשְּׁמֹעַ׃

First of all, the expression כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים. This discussion is about the meaning of the Hebrew term דָּבָר whether it should be translated by "things, events, matter" or by "word".

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[263] Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 166.

[264] For details on the grammatical use of שֶׁ and אֲשֶׁר in Qoheleth see Robert D. Holmstedt's article, "The Grammar of שֶׁ and אֲשֶׁר in Qohelet" in *The Words of the Wise Are like Goads,* 283-307.

The exegetical tradition which understands כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים as "all things", might be traced back to the Vulg. which uses *res* for דָּבָר. Such a reading is based on the place of v. 8 in the overall structure of Qoh 1:4-11. For the proponents of this view, v. 8 is the conclusion of the preceding verses and therefore the expression כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים refers to the phenomena of nature mentioned in vv. 4-7,[265] and which weary Qoheleth. Yet, there is no indication of weariness or exhaustion in vv. 4-7.

There are, however, several reasons for reading כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים as "words."[266] The first evidence is the LXX which, following the rhetorical construction of the MT, translates כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים as *πάντες οἱ λόγοι*. We also assume that the noun דָּבָר in Qoheleth almost always means "word." Moreover, in the same disputed v. 8, the root of the word דבר is repeated in the infinitive construct form לְדַבֵּר, which indisputably has the meaning of "speaking."[267] When it is read as "words", כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים points ahead to לֹא־יוּכַל אִישׁ לְדַבֵּר and to the other human

[265] Martin Rose supports this view, arguing that it would be inappropriate to use «words» in the text. For him, כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים summarizes and generalizes the description of the movement in nature: «Pour ma part, j'estime que les arguments les plus convaincants se trouvent du côté de ceux qui proposent la traduction «choses»; on peut signaler, entre autre, qu'une évocation des «paroles» apparaitrait trop abruptement dans le texte, tandis qu'en optant pour le sens de «choses», l'expression כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים résumé et généralise parfaitement la description qui précède (le soleil, les vents, les fleuves) : l'auteur va élargir son regard sur tous les (autres) phénomènes du cosmos, sur tout ce qui existe» (Rose, *Rien de Nouveau,* 154-155); Lohfink also reads כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים as «things». According to him, כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים should be understood as an encompassing signifier of everything in the cosmos (Lohfink, *Qoheleth,* 41). See also Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 71; Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, "*Nicht im Menschen Gründet das Glück" (Koh 2,24) : Kohelet im Spannungsfeld Jüdischer Weisheit und Hellenistischer Philosophie*. (Freiburg: Herders Biblische Studien, 1994), 35-36.

[266] Krüger, *Qoheleth,* 47.51; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, lxxi; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 73.

[267] The consistency of the viewpoint of the adherents of כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים as "Things" is put to question here, where דבר is translated as "word, speaking": "All things are constantly restless, more than human can express" (Lohfink, *Qoheleth,* 19).

senses (eye-seeing; ear-hearing; and speaking). Krüger rightly asserts that the subject matter in v. 8 is human beings and their speaking and knowing.[268]

The verb used to express the fatigue of human words (יְגֵעִים) is in participle form as the verbs in the preceding verses. It is used not in the reflexive sense, but rather in the function of an adjective with a passive meaning "wearied", as suggested the Greek word ἔγκοποι in the LXX. In connection with יְגֵעִים, v. 8a would express, as Krüger argues, the weakness of human language:

> Because the words of human language cannot do justice to the complexity of experienced reality (...), no one can successfully speak. And because the human perception of reality can never be finally satisfied or filled, the empirical possibilities of human knowledge are limited.[269]

The imperfection of human words is matched by the insatiability of the ear and sight. Just as the never-ending flow of the streams does not fill the sea (אֵינֶנּוּ מָלֵא), so the eyes are never satisfied (לֹא־תִשְׂבַּע) by what they see (לִרְאוֹת), nor does any listening fill the ears (לֹא־תִמָּלֵא). Kamano compares "this of humanity and its organs of perception with the sea, and events and words surrounding humanity with the flowing rivers"[270] as Qoheleth's "smooth transition from a larger picture of the cosmos (cosmology) to a narrow picture of humanity by using several rhetorical techniques in 1:8 (anaphora, assonance, and wordplay on הַדְּבָרִים".[271]

Structurally, the following verses (vv. 9-11) are an explanation of v. 8. Specifically, vv. 9-11 explain the reason why human perception is like the unfilled sea. The

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[268] Krüger, *Qoheleth,* 51.

[269] Krüger, *Qoheleth,* 51.

[270] Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 53.

[271] Kamano, *Cosmology and character,* 53.

eyes and the ears are dissatisfied because there is nothing new (אֵין כָּל־חָדָשׁ) for them to experience under the sun. Words cannot express reality. Anything that exists has existed before (כְּבָר הָיָה לְעֹלָמִים). Qoheleth underscores this repetitiveness and permanence by showing no difference between the past (מַה־שֶּׁהָיָה, מַה־שֶּׁנַּעֲשָׂה) and the future (שֶׁיִּהְיֶה, שֶׁיֵּעָשֶׂה). "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done" (Qoh 1:9). The future form of the two verbs may have a frequentative present meaning. What Qoheleth is pointing out here is the inability of humans to change the course of events and history, just like the sun, the wind and the streams cannot change the direction of their movements. For, as one can read in Qoh 1:15, "what is crooked (מְעֻוָּת) cannot be made straight (לְתִקֹּן) and what is lacking (חֶסְרוֹן) cannot be counted (הִמָּנוֹת)." The same thought is continued in Qoh 7:13 where Qoheleth affirms rhetorically that nobody can make straight (תַּקִּן) what God has made crooked (עִוֵּת).

As if to make the difference between the rhythm of natural phenomena, the quality of human actions and God's works, Qoheleth appeals to the verbs הָיָה (7 times) and עָשָׂה (2 times) to which are appended the particle adverb of negation אַיִן and the particle relative שֶׁ. While the verb הָיָה is mainly used in the book to indicate natural phenomena, the verb עָשָׂה is used for human and divine actions. When dealing with God's work throughout the book, Qoheleth mostly uses the perfect *qal*, whereas in connection with human work, he employs the *niphal* form and sometimes the perfect.[272] Exception to the 'divine *qal* perfect rule' could be found in 8:17; 9:3 where הַמַּעֲשֶׂה אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה תַּחַת־הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ appears to be identified with the work of God (אֶת־כָּל־מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים). Yet, the verb is in the *niphal* form (נַעֲשָׂה). For this first time of the use of נַעֲשָׂה, Qoheleth is referring to the human beings and their place

[272] Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 52.

in the world. As in nature, so in human life, there is a constant movement within a prescribed circle, so that there is nothing new under the sun (אֵין כָּל־חָדָשׁ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ).

Far from putting forward a theory that history repeats itself exactly in endless circles, Qoheleth draws attention to the parallel between nature and human nature in order to point out limitations within which humans will do well to be content to live their life as an integral part of the whole world of God.[273] Some scholars have read the expression אֵין כָּל־חָדָשׁ in a negative way, asserting that Qoheleth is opposing the view that God is capable of creating something new, as expressed in Num 16:30, Isa 43:19, Jer 31:30.[274] There is, however, no evidence that Qoheleth had this in mind. Not only does Qoheleth not mention God in this passage, but also elsewhere he frequently emphasizes both the supreme power of God and humans' inability to foresee and understand divine intentions.

Qoheleth's main concern here is human beings with all their toiling, unfulfilled and unsatiated desires in a world marked both by permanence and by fleetingness. There is, indeed, nothing new in what is permanent. Because of temporariness or impermanence, one might take what was done before as something completely new. According to Qoheleth in v. 11 the reason why anyone would suggest anything new is forgetfulness, that is, a short memory of what was done before.

Literarily v. 11, which concludes the poem, is patterned by a radically negative statement: אֵין זִכְרוֹן and לֹא־יִהְיֶה לָהֶם זִכָּרוֹן . The opposition between the positive statement יֵשׁ in v. 10a and the negation אֵין in v. 11 is evident as it is between רִאשֹׁנִים and אַחֲרֹנִים in v. 11.

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[273] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 45.

[274] Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 60.83.

The repetition of the sequence רִאשֹׁנִים and אַחֲרֹנִים in verse 11 recalls the theme of דּוֹר, "generation" and הַדְּבָרִים, "words/things", but at the same time the repeated forms of the verb הָיָה recall the phenomena of the natural word. The question is open whether the reference of past and future is to persons or events. The key to the answer is in "remembrance": if people are forgotten, so are events. For the moment it is noteworthy that the negative particles occur in 1:8-11 seven times as well as seven times is used the verb הָיָה. The author seems to share the cyclical conception of time which is characteristic mainly of Egyptian thought as shown in chapter two.

This verse gives an interesting example of how carefully the LXX translation preserves the original text and avoids textual and contextual confusion. In his critical edition of the LXX of Qoheleth, Peter Gentry argues that the Greek translation is characterized by an extreme literalism (*extreme formale Entsprechung*),[275] in which the translator has carefully followed the order of the words in his source text, the MT.[276]

The Hebrew text has a repetition: שֶׁיִּהְיוּ לָאַחֲרֹנָה - לְאַחֲרֹנִים שֶׁיִּהְיוּ, which may have been confusing. In this case the Greek text replaces the last two words with τῶν γενησομένων

[275] " Die Septuaginta-Übersetzung von Ecclesiastes ist durch extreme formale Entsprechung charakterisiert, die so weit geht, dass sogar angenommen worden ist, es handele sich um das Werk des jüdischen Rezensenten Aquila." Gentry, *Ecclesiastes*, 86. See also Gentry, "The Distinctive Aims of the Göttingen Apparatus : Examples from Ecclesiastes-an Edition in Preparation." In *Die Göttinger Septuaginta : Ein Editorisches Jahrhundertprojekt*. Eds Reinhard Gregor Kratz, and Bernhard Neuschäfer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 73-105, particularly, 75.81-90; or "Special Problems in the Septuagint Text History of Ecclesiastes." In *XIII Congress of the IOSCS: Ljubljana, 2007,* ed Melvin K.H. Peter (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2008), 133-153, particularly, 134.

[276] "Der Übersetzer von Ecclesiastes war einem Übersetzungsansatz verpflichtet, der auf extremer formaler Entsprechung zwischen der Quell-und Zielsprache beruht... Der griechische Übersetzer von Ecclesiastes folgt nun aber den Regeln des hebraischem Ausgangstextes." Gentry, *Ecclesiastes*, 90-91. See also Gentry, Ecclesiast to the Reader" in *A New English Translation of the Septuagint : and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included Under That Title ed* Albert Pietersma, Benjamin G. Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 648-650.

εἰς τὴν ἐσχάτην 'who will be (born) at the last'. This eschatological is also illustrated in the Vulg. translation: *eos qui futuri sunt in novissimo,* which has the connotation of the end of days.

From the above discussion, we may conclude that the cosmos is first presented as its own self-contained, independent, and ordered entity; then it is related to humans and other creatures that will inhabit it. The parallelistic structure between the world of human beings and that of nature shows indeed that humans are of nature and must learn to cope with the fleetingness of natural phenomena for their well-being. Hence, the juxtaposition of אָדָם (v. 3) and שֶׁמֶשׁ (v. 5).

III.1.2.2 STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF QOH 12:1-8

III.1.2.2.1 The Literary Context of Qoh 12:1-8

Qoheleth 12:1-8 is recognized by most scholars as a subunit of 11:7-12:8,[277] the second subunit being 11:7-10. These two sections are linked by 12:1.[278] The series of imperative that characterize 11:7-10 continue in 12:1-8. Also, worth noting are the frequent repetitions of terms that bind together each section. Thus, Qoh 11:7-10 is characterized by the repeated words הַרְבֵּה, לִבְּ, יָמִים , יַלְדוּת , and הֶבֶל. Repetition is also characteristic of 12:1-8: three word pairs occur כֶּסֶף and זָהָב ; גֻּלַּת and כַּד ; מַבּוּעַ and בּוֹר. Temporal elements also tie

[277] There is however a divergence concerning the beginning of the unit. While some scholars believe and argue that the unit begins with verse 7 (Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature,* 109; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes,* 181-82; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes,* 114), others argue otherwise. For Schwienhorst-Schönberger, for instance, the final unit is divided into two unequal verses (11: 9-10) and 12:1-8. He thus sees the beginning of the unit in verse 9. (Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 525; Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 136).

[278] Rose, *Rien de Nouveau,* 479. Schönberger, *Kohelet,* 525.

these two sections: שָׁנִים and יָמִים in verse 8 are echoed in the expression בִּימֵי בְּחוּרֹתֶיךָ in 11:9 and 12:1; likewise שָׁנִים in 12:1 and בַּיּוֹם in 12:3.

Other ways of unifying the entire section are also possible. Thus, Ravasi points out how 11:7-8 is dominated by שִׂמְחָה (11:8-9), זָכַר (11:9; 12:1) and הֶבֶל at the end.[279] Qoh 12:1-8 begins with זָכַר and ends with הֶבֶל. The two sections are also thematically connected. While the first section (11: 7-10) deals with the 'joy of youth', Qoh 12:1-8 deals with 'old age'. Thus, as Roland Murphy points out, 12:1-8 flows naturally from the preceding unit. Furthermore, there is continuity of genre between the sections, since 11:7-10 and 12:1-8 are both instructions. These literary and thematic connections have led Schwienhorst-Schönberger to read Qoh 11:7-8 as a prior interpretation of the final poem (*vorauslaufende Interpretation des Schlussgedichtes*).[280]

Nevertheless, 12:1-8 as a sub-unit has its own integrity. The cohesiveness of this unit is literarily marked by the repetition of "before," עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא (12:1.2.6), which follows the initial imperative "remember" (זְכֹר) It is, therefore, our contention and for the purpose of this current study to take 12:1-8 as a literary unit. Most significantly, the meaning of this section is not tied to its immediate literary context, that is, 11:7-10, but rather to the opening poem as we intend to argue.

[279] Gianfranco Ravasi, *Qohelet*, second edition (Milano: Paoline, 1991), 229.

[280] Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 520. See also Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 137.

III.1.2.2.2 Literary structure and analysis

Qoh 12:1-8 has given rise to so many interpretations that it has been called "the most controversial portion of the book. In his *Commentarius in Ecclesiasten*[281] Jerome observed long ago that on this chapter there are almost as many opinions as there are people.

> In hoc capitulo diversa omnium explanatio fuit, et tot pene sententiae, quot homines. Unde quia longum est opinationes omnium recensere, et argumenta quibus sententias suas approbare voluerint, explicare, prope res unius voluminis est.[282]

The discussion ever since has been revolving mainly around the nature of the rhetoric, particularly in vv. 2-6. Seow observes that, if "there is substantial agreement on the unity of the passage, and even on its purpose...its poetic quality..., there is tremendous divergence and much confusion in the interpretation of the details."[283] The fundamental question one should ask is what Qoheleth is talking about or referring to, when using the celestial imagery of sun, light, moon, stars and clouds, or the nature imagery of almond tree, grasshoppers, silver cord, golden bowl, pitcher, cistern, wheel and fountain; or the social language of house keepers, strong men, grinders, the mourners.

Literature relating to these debates is extensive without a consensus. It is not, however, our goal in this section to discuss all the various interpretations of Qoh 12:1-8. For the time being, we will simply confine ourselves to mentioning some of these interpretations.

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[281] "Commentarius in Ecclesiasten", in *Stridonensis Hieronymi Presbyteri Opera,* # 484 (1162-1163).

[282] "In this chapter there were many explanations of all things and almost as many opinions as people themselves. It would take too long however to recount all the opinions of everyone and to explain their arguments in which they want to prove their opinions, the matter would require a volume to itself."

[283] Choon-Leong Seow, "Qohelet's Eschatological Poem." *JBL,* vol 118.2 (1999):209.

Thus, according to Sawyer Qoh 12:1-8 makes use of a well-known figure in biblical wisdom literature, that is, the house (בַּיִת), to represent "human achievements or success in terms of domestic security and contentment, and failure in terms of the collapse of the house."[284] Other interpretations identify the tenor of the metaphors in 12:1-7 as an allegory on old age,[285] the portrait of a funeral,[286] or the city lament,[287] an eschatological poem,[288] or simply as a metaphor for something.[289] Michael Fox did not hesitate to confess that "Qoh 12:1-8 is the most difficult passage of the most difficult book."[290]

Without discarding these approaches, we do think that a productive proposal would be to understand 12:1-8 cosmologically along with the first nature poem in 1:2-11. In fact, after the introductory statement of v. 1, Qoheleth proceeds in v. 2 to describe the cosmological chaos and the frailty of human nature in vv. 3-7.

The cosmological chaos is described by the darkening (תֶּחְשַׁךְ) of the sun, light, moon, and stars; the return (וְשָׁבוּ) of the clouds, which means there will be no more rain and the return of the dust to the earth, that is, there will be no more living creatures.

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[284] John F A. Sawyer, "The Ruined House in Ecclesiastes 12: A Reconstruction of the Original Parable", *JBL* 94 (1975):520.

[285] Seow, "Qoheleth's Eschatological Poem", *JBL* 118 (1999): 209-210.

[286] M. A. Anat, "The Lament on the Death of Man in the Scroll of Qoheleth," *Beth Miqra* 15 (1970):375-380. Michael Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1989), 285-289.

[287] Jennie Barbour, *The Story of Israel in the Book of Qohelet: Ecclesiastes as Cultural Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 138-167

[288] Seow, "Qoheleth's Eschatological Poem," 209-210.

[289] While Maurice Gilbert argues for the physiological condition of old age (Maurice Gilbert, « La description de la vieillesse en Qohelet xii 1-7 est-elle allégorique ? », in *Congress Volume Vienna 1980* ed. J.A. Emerton and IOSOT, VTsup 32 (Leiden: Brill 1981), 96-109); Sawyer understands the ruined house as a metaphor for failing human effort (John F. A. Sawyer, "The Ruined House in Ecclesiastes 12: A Reconstruction of the Original Parable," *JBL* 94 (1975):519-31).

[290] Michael Fox, "Aging and death in Qoheleth 12" *JSOT* 13.42 (1988), 55; Michael Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, 281; see also Zuck, *Reflecting with Solomon,* 381.

The frailty of human nature is depicted by the trembling of the guards of the house: שְׁיָזֲעוּ שֹׁמְרֵי הַבַּיִת; the bending of the strong men of the house: וְהִתְעַוְּתוּ אַנְשֵׁי הֶחָיִל; the decreased (וּבָטְלוּ) number of women grinding: הַטֹּחֲנוֹת; the lessening of sight (וְחָשְׁכוּ); the shutting (וְסָגְרוּ) of doors on the street; the low sound of the grinder (וְיִשַּׁחוּ); the departure (כִּי־הֹלֵךְ) to eternal home; the mourners on the street (וְסָבְבוּ); the return (שׁוּב) of the breath to its maker. Unlike 1:4-11 this section is prominently dominated by the vocabulary of demolition (שָׁבַר, רצץ ; יִרחַק); declining, diminishing, exiting, or return (שׁוּב).

Within six verses Qoheleth employs the temporal idiom עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא (before) three times (12:1-2, 6), linking back to the clause in 12:1a. This marker creates the idea of urgency but also stands as a literary structure device for 12:2-7. Hence the following structure: Categorical imperative: זְכֹר אֶת־בּוֹרְאֶיךָ (v. 1a)

- עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא The days of misery (יְמֵי הָרָעָה v. 1b)
- עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא The cosmological chaos (2-5)
- עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא The ruin of the house (6-7)

III.1.2.2.2.1 Categorical Imperative: זְכֹר אֶת־בּוֹרְאֶיךָ (v. 1a)

The way Qoheleth addresses his audience is very interesting:

וּזְכֹר אֶת־בּוֹרְאֶיךָ בִּימֵי בְחוּרֹתֶיךָ

Many scholars and commentators regard the reference of בּוֹרְאֶיךָ to the creator as unexpected and improbable in the context. Various emendations and alternatives readings have instead been proposed. One possibility has been to read בְּאֵרֶךָ (cistern) which in Prov

5:15 symbolizes one's wife,[291] or pit/grave (בּוֹרֶךָ), which refers to death and might fit the context of 12:1-8. Some wish to emend to בְּרוּאֶיךָ (your health, your well-being), or to בוֹרַיִךְ (your vigor).[292] However, no textual tradition supports these changes. The ancient versions such as LXX (*κτίσαντός σε*), Vulg. (*creatoris tui*) and Tg (ברייך) all agree in their reading of בּוֹרְאֶיךָ, as 'your creator'.

In addition to the textual witnesses, the fact that Qoh 11:7-12:8 is read as an isolated pericope in the book also renders the meaning of בּוֹרְאֶיךָ as "your creator", unlikely. But read as a part of the whole book, it is difficult to think that something other than "creator" is the appropriate and primary meaning of בּוֹרְאֶיךָ.[293]

As a matter of fact, the image of God as Creator is characteristic of Israelite wisdom literature, and thus, of Qoheleth. As we have shown in the first chapter, the God of Qoheleth is a Creator God who made everything (יַעֲשֶׂה אֶת־הַכֹּל) beautiful (יָפֶה) in its time (בְּעִתּוֹ). His created works include *ʾādām* whom he made upright (יָשָׁר 7:29), and to whom he gave life (יְמֵי חַיָּיו אֲשֶׁר־נָתַן־לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים , 8:15; 9:9) and a spirit (רוּחַ, 3:21; 12:7).

Furthermore, in the Hebrew Bible God is the object of Israel's remembering which consists in "recalling what he did in Israel's past, but also a calling to mind God's help, grace and loving kindness at the moment of prayer."[294] Qoheleth is, thus, right when he calls his addressee to remember God's good actions and favors. To think about one's "Creator"

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[291] James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*. OTL (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1987), 184-185.

[292] For a discussion on the unusual aspects of the word בּוֹרְאֶיךָ, see *Qoheleth Rabbah* 12. 1; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 351; Fox, *Contradictions,* 299-300; Robert D. Holmstedt, John A Cook and Phillip S. Marshall, *Qoheleth: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*. Baylor Handbook on the Hebrew Bible Series (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 294.

[293] Roland E Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*. WBC vol. 23A (Dallas, TX: Word Books), 117. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 163.

[294] Schoors, *Qoheleth,* 795.

would then mean initially and above all to be conscious of one's own "creatureliness" and thus also of one's transitoriness (12:7). Maurice Gilbert is thus right, when he reads וּזְכֹר אֶת־ בּוֹרְאֶיךָ as referring not to the past but mainly to the future, the days to come. Gilbert states:

> L'invitation à se souvenir, adressée ici au disciple, est surtout d'allure sapientielle : il s'agit de se mettre en tête un fait d'avenir, et non pas du passé.[295]

This "fait d'avenir" is the return of the dust to the earth (וְיָשֹׁב הֶעָפָר עַל־הָאָרֶץ), and the breath to God (הָרוּחַ תָּשׁוּב אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים) in Qoh 12 :7. Gilbert comments, indeed, that the expression זְכֹר אֶת־בּוֹרְאֶיךָ calls attention to the end in which the רוּחַ given in the beginning returns to the one who gave it :

> La rûaḥ a été donnée à la création. Ainsi, pour évoquer la mort, Qohelet se réfère à la création ; le cercle s'achève : la fin est liée au début. C'est pourquoi il ne faut pas s'étonner de voir en xii 1 une mention explicite du Créateur : se souvenir de lui ne signifie pas un retour au passe originel, mais une attention portée sur la fin ou la rûaḥ donnée aux origines, retourne à celui qui l'a donnée.[296]

In the above quote, Gilbert makes an important point that connects the closing poem (12:1-7) to the opening (1:2-11). With the return of the רוּחַ to its giver, that is, אֱלֹהִים , the circle is complete; the end is tied to the beginning. The going of a generation in 1:4 is tied to the return of רוּחַ.

All in all, the expression בּוֹרְאֶיךָ reminds the reader of his creatureliness and transitoriness. In other words, and as Schwienhorst-Schönberger argues, in the memory of his creator, the human encounters his mortality and his way back to his Creator.

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[295] Maurice Gilbert, « L*a* Description de la Vieillesse en Qohelet xii 1-7 est-elle allégorique ? » in Emerton, *Congress Volume, Vienna, 1980* , 100.

[296] Gilbert, « L*a* Description de la Vieillesse en Qohelet xii 1-7 est-elle allégorique ? », 100.

> Das Wort בוראיך ...dürfte gezielt gewählt worden sein im Hinblick auf das gleich klingende Wort בור (hör) in 12,6, das sowohl »Grube« als auch »Grab« bedeuten kann. Beim ersten Hören ist also noch gar nicht klar, ob es heißt »Denk an deinen Schöpfer!« oder: »Denk an dein Grab. In diesem subtilen Klangspiel kommt eine tief in der Heiligen Schrift verwurzelte Einsicht zur Geltung: Im Gedenken seines Schöpfers begegnet der Mensch seiner Sterblichkeit. Ebenso aber findet er auf diesem Weg zu seinem Schöpfer zurück.[297]

Thus, the primary and suitable meaning for בּוֹרְאֶיךָ, probably a plural of majesty, is the Creator. This meaning is made clear by the end of the poem where this Creator is recalled as God.[298]

III.1.2.2.2.2 עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא The Days of Misery (יְמֵי הָרָעָה v. 1b)

In contrast to the days of youth (יְמֵי בְּחוּרֹת), Qoheleth in the first temporal clause (12: 1b) warns his audience about the "days of misery" (יְמֵי הָרָעָה), and "unpleasant years" which are from literary point of view a synonymous parallel to יְמֵי הַחֹשֶׁךְ in 11:8. Such a parallelism has led scholars to regard the expression יְמֵי הָרָעָה in 12:1b as symbols of old age.[299] Yet, in chapter 7 Qoheleth uses the expression יוֹם רָעָה not in reference to old age or death, but in contrast to יוֹם טוֹבָה (day of prosperity, Qoh 7:14). If one sees יוֹם טוֹבָה as alluding to the prosperous days and years of the king as described in 1:12-2:26, the expression יְמֵי הָרָעָה in 12:1b could be regarded differently.

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[297] "The word בוראיך... may have been deliberately chosen with reference to the word בור in 12,6 which sounds the same and can mean both 'pit' and 'tomb'. So, at the first hearing it is not yet clear at all whether it means 'Remember your Creator' or 'Remember your tomb'. In this subtle play of sounds, an insight deeply rooted in the Holy Scriptures comes to the fore: in the memory of his Creator, man encounters his mortality. In the same way, however, on this path he finds his way back to his Creator" (Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet,* 532).

[298] Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 139.

[299] Murphy, *Ecclesiastes,* 118. The midrash Qoheleth Rabbah offers as historical terms for יְמֵי הָרָעָה reference to יְמֵי הַגְּלוּת (the days of exile), *Qoheleth Rabbah* 12. 1.

As a matter of fact, one might understand יְמֵי הָרָעָה as an address not only to the youth (יְמֵי בְחוּרֹת) but to the king in reference to the days of misery and suffering. We, thus, agree with Kamano and Seow that יְמֵי הָרָעָה in 12: 1b "should be understood more broadly than is usually considered: days of misery and suffering, including, but not limited to, old age."[300] These days are characterized not only by the impossibility of putting away unpleasantness, but also by the recognition of the transitoriness, or fleetingness of pleasure. Hence, this confession : אֵין־לִי בָהֶם חֵפֶץ (I have no pleasure in them).[301]

In the book of Qoheleth חֵפֶץ regularly denotes the 'business or facts' of life; and in every case it reflects the will of God (3:1, 17; 5:7; 8:6; 12:10).[302] In other occurrences (5:3; 12:1), חֵפֶץ has the meaning "delight." In his discussion of the modern translations of חֵפֶץ by "delight or pleasure" in 12:1b, Kamano points out the possibility of reading חֵפֶץ as "event, affair, business": "...I have no 'event, business' in them." According to him, "by means of the ambiguity with חֵפֶץ ("delight" or "event"), Qoheleth tries to connect 12:1 (the evil days" which prevent humanity from "delight") to 12:2-7 (particularly 12:7 which depicts human death, the time of no "event").[303]

In any case, whether חֵפֶץ is understood as "pleasure" or "event, business," what is important and at stake here is the fact that nothing of the pleasures, events or businesses

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[300] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 352; Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 229.

[301] There is discussion on the pronominal suffix בָהֶם whether it refers to the שָׁנִים (years) or to the יְמֵי בְחוּרֹתֶיךָ . Although different in gender, שָׁנִים (a feminine plural) and בָהֶם (a masculine plural) are according to Seow and Holdmstedt the correct reading and interpretation, since שָׁנִים is the closest antecedent. Hence, the following translation "I have no pleasure in them" (i.e., I have no pleasure during this period because I am too old). If, however, the suffix refers to יְמֵי בְחוּרֹתֶיךָ in 12: 1a, then one should translate the phrase as "I had no pleasure in them" (i.e., I did not have pleasure back then). This reading best fit our investigation, as an illustration of the *hebelness* of pleasure, that is it transitoriness, its fleetingness.

[302] *TDOT* IV, 100.

[303] Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 229.

one had in the days of his youth will remain. In the days of *rāʿāh*, one is left with empty hands (5:14-15). In other words, the יְמֵי הָרָעָה are a good reminder that human life and activity are fleeting. Thus, this temporariness of the human world is the focus of Qoheleth's call on youth to remember his creature and his creatureliness as well, but also to keep in mind that the יְמֵי טוֹבָה are not permanent; they will be succeeded by יְמֵי הָרָעָה which Qoheleth describes extensively in 2-7.

III.1.2.2.2.3 עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא The Cosmological Chaos (2-5)

The second עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא phrase brings us to the longest of the temporal passages setting the time frame for 'remembering'. It is literarily characterized by words that denote decline, diminution, enfeeblement, exit or return. Thematically it is marked by a cosmic chaos (v. 2), and a social disaster, that is the progressive decline of the strong house (3-5).

The cosmic chaos is described by the darkening of the luminaries of sky: (תֶּחְשַׁךְ) of the sun (שֶׁמֶשׁ), light (אוֹר), moon (יָרֵחַ), and stars (כּוֹכָבִים); the return of the clouds (עָבִים) after the rain.[304] Sun, moon, light and stars all appear in Gen 1:3-5.14-19, where light is called "day" (יוֹם Gen 1:4), the sun, greater light (הַמָּאוֹר הַגָּדֹל) and the moon, lesser light (הַמָּאוֹר הַקָּטֹן 1:16). According to Genesis 1 these four heavenly luminaries are in contradistinction to חֹשֶׁךְ (darkness). As we have shown in the second chapter, these heavenly bodies are assigned a specific place and function in the cosmos. They separate the day from the night, they mark seasons, days and years; they give light upon the earth, rule over the day and over the night, and they separate the light from the darkness (Gen 1:14-18). Unlike what

[304] In the prophetic literature the darkening of the sun, the moon and the stars is not a disaster of nature; it results from the divine will and action. In Ezek 32:7 and Am 8:9. God is said to cover the sky and darken the stars; to cover the sun with clouds, and to cause the moon to stop shining. The same imagery is also associated with the day of Lord (יוֹם־יְהוָה) and his judgment on the wicked (Isa 13:9-11). Schönberger, thus, goes on to find in Qoh 12:2 a metaphor of judgment (Gerichtsmetaphorik), Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 533.

one might expect, it is these heavenly luminaires (מְאוֹרִים) that are darkening (תֶּחְשַׁךְ) in the closing poem of Qoheleth. The cosmos is engulfed in darkness which Schwienhorst-Schönberger divides into outer (*äußere*) and inter (*innere*) house.

> Die sich verfinsternde Lebenswelt gliedert sich in 12,2-4 in eine äußere (v 2.3a) und eine innere (innerhalb des Hauses: v 3b-4b).[305]

Since the sun and the light are referred to the "day", and the moon and the stars to the "night", one might argue that, with the darkening of these elements, there is no more light, day or night. It is as if the whole cosmos is coming to an end or returning to its original state of תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם (Gen 1:2). Worth noting are the words "rain" and "clouds" in Qoh 12:2 which remind us of Qoh 11:3-4.

In light of these verses (11:3-4), the return of the clouds is according to Schwienhorst-Schönberger, the normal process: "Gewöhnlich reißt der Himmel nach einem schweren Regenguss wieder auf." This sky which usually opens to pour out rain, even after a heavy storm is now darkened in Qoh 12:2. Moreover there is no return of the clouds after they have emptied rain on earth. Scholars have seen in this return of the clouds an apocalyptic device; but one might also read it as precursory sign of drought (בַּצָּרָה), which is not without negative consequences on daily life, both for animate and inanimate, human and non-human creatures. Evidence of this fact is found in Jeremiah 14:1-6

> The word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah concerning the drought: Judah mourns, and her gates languish... Her nobles send their servants for water; they come to the cisterns, they find no water, they return with their vessels empty... because the ground is cracked. Because there has been no rain on the land the farmers are dismayed; they cover their heads. Even the doe in the field forsakes

[305] Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 536-537.

> her newborn fawn because there is no grass. The wild asses stand on the bare heights, they pant for air like jackals; their eyes fail because there is no herbage.

In other words, death is at the door. Hence, our contention is for a cosmic chaos which impacts human life and which Qoheleth describes in vv. 3-5. The connection between the cosmic chaos and verses 3-5 is literarily made by the temporal marker בַּיּוֹם שֶׁ ("on the day when", "at the time when"). In other words, the expression בַּיּוֹם שֶׁ elaborates on what happens when the day darkens,[306] which is the ruin of the strong house (12:3-5), thus, expressing the frailty and transitoriness of human nature.

As if he was looking for shelter from the cosmic chaos, the reader enters a house, which Schonberger describes as a large and stately house (*ein großes [und] stattliches Haus*),[307] guarded by the שֹׁמְרֵי הַבַּיִת (the keepers of the house) and the אַנְשֵׁי הֶחָיִל (the men of strength), and its operation is kept going by numerous women: the הַטֹּחֲנוֹת (women who grind) and the הָרֹאוֹת בָּאֲרֻבּוֹת (women who look through the windows), and the daughters of song (בְּנוֹת הַשִּׁיר). It is reminiscent of the great royal estate of 2:4-9. However, the house no longer withstands the storm coming from outside. Consequently, it is falling apart, leading the inhabitants to different reaction which Qoheleth describes in verse 3 as indicated in the following analytical structure:

v. 3a: בַּיּוֹם שֶׁיָּזֵעוּ שֹׁמְרֵי הַבַּיִת וְהִתְעַוְּתוּ אַנְשֵׁי הֶחָיִל
- v. 3aα: בַּיּוֹם שֶׁיָּזֵעוּ שֹׁמְרֵי הַבַּיִת
- v. 3aβ: וְהִתְעַוְּתוּ אַנְשֵׁי הֶחָיִל

v. 3b: וּבָטְלוּ הַטֹּחֲנוֹת כִּי מִעֵטוּ וְחָשְׁכוּ הָרֹאוֹת בָּאֲרֻבּוֹת
- v. 3bα: וּבָטְלוּ הַטֹּחֲנוֹת
- v. 3bβ: כִּי מִעֵטוּ

[306] Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, 301.

[307] Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 533.

- v. 3bβ': וְחָשְׁכוּ הָרֹאוֹת בָּאֲרֻבּוֹת

The שֹׁמְרֵי הַבַּיִת in v. 3aα refers to the guards or watchmen on duty outside.[308] Their function is to preserve, protect, and guard the house to ensure that everyone within the house is safe and secure. Sawyer takes שֹׁמְרֵי הַבַּיִת "as a more comprehensive term for servants in general, entrusted with some responsibility for looking after the house, maybe when the owner is away."[309]

It is, unfortunately, these men, the keepers and protectors of the house who, at the darkening of the cosmos, tremble (יָזֵעוּ). As a consequence of their trembling, "protection against a dreaded enemy decreases; vulnerability to attack increases and there is a subsequent increase in the potential for catastrophe or ultimate destruction to occur."[310] Their trust in stability and in their strength is, thus, deconstructed by the change that is happening. Likewise, for the second category of men: the אַנְשֵׁי הֶחָיִל in v. 3aβ.

In the Hebrew Bible, the term חָיִל has a great range of meaning. It is often used in reference to the "might, strength, power, valiant, army, host, forces, warriors." It also has an ethical and economic connotation, meaning "virtuous," "valor," "riches," "substance," "property," or "wealth."[311] Approximately eighty-five times חָיִל is used as an attribute of people. Thus, sometimes it refers to skillful, worthy men (Gen 47:6; Exod 18:21; 2 Kgs 2:16). In some places it may indicate social status (Ruth 2:1) or position (1 Chron 9:13). Focusing

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[308] According to the rabbinic interpretation which can be termed as physiological allegory, the trembling of the keepers of the house (שֹׁמְרֵי הַבַּיִת) and the bending of the strong men (אַנְשֵׁי הֶחָיִל) refer to ailing ribs, knees, legs, arms or hands. *Qoheleth Rabbah 12*, in *Rabbinic view of Qoheleth*, 157-158. See also *b. Šabb.* 151b.

[309] John F. A. Sawyer, "The Ruined House in Ecc 12:3-5." *JBL* 94, no. 4 (1975): 525.

[310] Barry C. Davis, "Ecclesiastes 12:1-8 -Death, an Impetus for Life." *BSac*, no. 148 (1991), 308. See also Zuck, *Reflecting with Solomon*, 357.

[311] BDB, 298-299; and Carl Philip Weber,"חָיִל", *TWOT* 1:271-272.

on the meaning of חַיִל as referring to wealth or social status, Fox argues that the אַנְשֵׁי הֶחָיִל are men of influence and position, in contrast to the servants or keepers of the house.[312]

In the book of Qoheleth the term occurs only twice (10:10; 12:3) with different meaning. While in 10:10, the concept of "army" or "wealth" hardly fit the context, in 12:3, חַיִל is best read as "army, wealth." Without discarding the allegorical reading of אַנְשֵׁי הֶחָיִל as "image for legs that grow weak at the old age,"[313] we think the literal meaning of אַנְשֵׁי הֶחָיִל as "warriors," "valiant" or "wealthy" men of the house, makes sense. After the trembling of the security guards, it is now the turn for the strong, valiant, and wealthy men to tremble and to bend over (הִתְעַוְּתוּ), still because of the cosmic chaos.

Literarily, the שֹׁמְרֵי הַבַּיִת and the אַנְשֵׁי הֶחָיִל run parallel in sense, as is suggested by the similarity of their verbs (זוע*,* 'tremble', and עות*,* 'bent'). 'Trembling' and 'being bent over' are expressed using imperfect verbal forms and their equivalent following the pattern of the preceding imperfect תֶּחְשַׁךְ, 'become dark' (v. 2a). Though the description here is of a situation not yet realized, it is meant to remind one's frailty or transitoriness. Succinctly put, there is time when they will no longer be able to perform their tasks.

The בַּיּוֹם שֶׁ theme runs through into v. 3cd, where we are offered the reaction of the two categories of women mentioned above (v. 3b), that is, the הַטֹּחֲנוֹת (3bα) and the הָרֹאוֹת בָּאֲרֻבּוֹת (v. 3bβ'). The הַטֹּחֲנוֹת is usually referred to the women who grind flour, the most tedious and essential task in the house. These "grinders" are according to Fox "primarily maidservants, the counterparts of the men who look after the house (שֹׁמְרֵי הַבַּיִת),"[314] whereas

[312] Fox, *Qohelet and his contradictions*, 301.

[313] *TDOT* V, 349.

[314] Fox, *A Time to Tear down*, 324; cf. Exod 11:5; Isa 47:2.

the הָרֹאוֹת בָּאֶֽרֻבוֹת are regarded as "the well-to-do-women, women of leisure, the counterpart of the powerful (rich) men."[315] The latter darken (חָשְׁכוּ) and the former cease (בָּטְלוּ). Verse 3c adds a motive clause which states that grinders have ceased "because they have become so few" (כִּי מִעֵטוּ). Although she acknowledges that the text does not provide a good reason for the cessation of the grinding, Nguyen Thi goes on to argue that the insufficient number of grinders might be due to aging.

> Le nombre des meunières a diminué peut-être parce que certaines d'entre elles sont âgées et qu'elles ne peuvent plus travailler.[316]

The problem with Nguyen Thi's proposal is her assumption that there are no successive generations in the house, which seems to have a fixed and limited number of people. As they get old, they stop working and there is nobody to take over. What one might expect is not the complete cessation of the work but rather harder working by the remainder, for the survival of the household. As Sawyer observes "the fewer there were, the harder they would have to work."[317]

In v. 3bβ', בָּאֶֽרֻבוֹת is the word for an aperture or opening, perhaps a window through which one looks out at the world (cf. Gen 7:11; Hos 13:3; Isa 60:8). The woman at the window motif is common in ancient Near Eastern art and in the Hebrew Bible as well. In

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[315] Fox, *A Time to Tear down*, 324. Cf. Judg 5:28; Prov 7:6.

[316] Agnes Canh Tuyen Nguyen Thi, "La destinée de l'homme chez Qohelet (Qo 1,4-11; 12,1-7)." *RB* 120.2 (2013): 233. Crenshaw, Fox and Seow have also attempted to grasp the meaning and the reason of כִּי מִעֵטוּ. Thus, Crenshaw wonders whether the members of the household become few and need little food (Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes,* 186). Fox claims they become few because the women joined the funeral (*Qohelet and His Contradictions,* 302-03). As for Seow, some had died suddenly (Seow, *Ecclesiastes,* 356).

[317] Sawyer, "The Ruined House in Ecc 12:3-5."526; Fox, *A Time to Tear down*, 324. According to the Talmudic interpretation, the grinders (הַטֹּחֲנוֹת) whose number has diminished represent the teeth which decay and fall out, the darkening of those looking through the lattice (הָרֹאוֹת בָּאֶֽרֻבוֹת) are connected to the aged's eyes which become dimmer (*b. Šabb.*152a).

the ancient works of art, the image is that of a female head encased in a window and peering through it to the outside. The most famous is the eighth century BCE Phoenician ivory relief of "Woman at the Window."[318] Invariably, the woman looking out of the window is linked to the cult of fertility, the temple prostitution, or may sometimes stand for the goddess of fertility herself. She exhibits the essence of her femininity, her sexual availability and her fecundity.[319]

The biblical tales that narrate a woman looking through the window are prominently found in Judges 5:28-30 where Sisera's mother worries about her son; in 2 Samuel 6:12-23, where Michal looks out of the window and sees David leaping and dancing before the Ark of the Covenant, despises him and is then cursed with barrenness; in 2 Kings 9: 30-34, where Jezebel looks through the window, sees Jehu, compares him to Zimri and is then thrown out of the window to a violent death. Finally, according to Prov 7:6, personified Wisdom observes through a window how the strange woman ensnares a simple youth.

Although these different passages use a different verb שׁקף *versus* רָאָה in Qoheleth, they both attest to the presence of activity of looking out of the window in the Hebrew Bible. In all these cases it is women who look out the window, with a severe penalty for their actions. The penalty for such action in Qoheleth is the darkening, probably of their eyes. The verb חָשַׁךְ speaks of darkness having fallen; therefore, nothing can be seen. Here again, Qoheleth uses terms which serve to indicate that certain basic human functions or activities will cease "on that day."

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[318] Carla Gottlieb, *The Window in Art : from the Window of God to the Vanity of Man : a Survey of Window Symbolism in Western Painting* (New York: Abaris Books, 1981), 34.

[319] Nehama Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window : Biblical Tales of Oppression and Escape* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 14.

The above analysis shows that every single person associated with the house, male and female, servants and masters, was involved in its downfall. With the ruin of the wealthy owner, the sound of grinding is heard no more (v. 4a). As result of the fading sound of the grinders, the doors on the street are shut (וְסֻגְּרוּ). This is literarily featured by the infinitive construct שְׁפַל with the preposition בְּ to express a temporal sense. The root שָׁפֵל, 'become low, abased', may be seen as part of the deterioration theme. The implication is that the moment of decline has come. What declines here is the "sound of grinders" (קוֹל הַטַּחֲנָה) and the falling of the daughters of song (כָּל־בְּנוֹת הַשִּׁיר)[320] which, in fact, contrast the continuing sounds of the birds (קוֹל הַצִּפּוֹר). This contrast is marked on the one hand by שָׁפֵל and קום, and, on the other hand, by קום and שׂחח.

Furthermore, at this point in v. 4 Qoheleth moves from primarily perfect consecutive verb forms (v. 4a) to imperfect with *waw* conjunction (v. 4b). Sawyer argues that this grammatical shift hints at a new emphasis that nature is now the focus of attention. Fading sounds of human activity are replaced by the incessant sounds of nature.[321]

Following is the last reference of the שֶׁ בַּיּוֹם theme in verse 5, here connected to the previous by גַּם.

[320] Fox has suggested that the 'daughters of song' are professional mourners, related to the funeral context, while Crenshaw views them as possibly dancers or entertainers. It is obvious that there can be no agreement as to the verse's meaning.

[321] Sawyer, "The Ruined House in Ecc 12:3-5," 526.

v. 5a : גַּם מִגָּבֹהַּ יִרָּאוּ וְחַתְחִתִּים בַּדָּרֶךְ וְיָנֵאץ הַשָּׁקֵד וְיִסְתַּבֵּל הֶחָגָב וְתָפֵר הָאֶבְיוֹנָה

- v. 5aα : גַּם מִגָּבֹהַּ יִרָּאוּ וְחַתְחִתִּים בַּדָּרֶךְ
- v. 5 aβ: וְיָנֵאץ הַשָּׁקֵד
- v. 5aγ : וְיִסְתַּבֵּל הֶחָגָב
- v. 5aδ :וְתָפֵר הָאֶבְיוֹנָה

v. 5b: כִּי־הֹלֵךְ הָאָדָם אֶל־בֵּית עוֹלָמוֹ וְסָבְבוּ בַשּׁוּק הַסֹּפְדִים

- v. 5bα : כִּי־הֹלֵךְ הָאָדָם אֶל־בֵּית עוֹלָמוֹ
- v. 5bβ : :וְסָבְבוּ בַשּׁוּק הַסֹּפְדִים

If thematically this verse is characterized by fear and terrors, it displays some literary complexities. First and foremost is the verb יִרָּאוּ for which there are four different readings. The Vulgate rendering, *timebunt,* along with the Syriac, supports the MT reading of יִרָּאוּ as defective for יִרְאוּ in reference to the root יָרֵא "to fear, to be afraid." Assuming that the verbal root of יִרָּאוּ is רָאָה (to see), the LXX reads ὄψονται; so, do the SyrH, and Symmachus. To a lesser degree, Tg has תהא דחיל (is terrible). Kamano who follows the LXX and connects the clause to the "birds" in v. 4d suggests that "while they are flying above the sky, they see terror coming on the way."[322] The literary context requires, however, the meaning "be afraid".

Verse 5 depicts, indeed, the fear of a group of people. The subject is either "the daughters of song" (בְּנוֹת הַשִּׁיר)[323] or all of the groups mentioned in 12:3-4. Following the latter interpretation, those afraid are the old or dying whose loss of strength and vigor was thematized in the previous verses. Interpreters often understand מִגָּבֹהַּ יִרָּאוּ וְחַתְחִתִּים בַּדָּרֶךְ as a literal description of the emotional state of people of old age who are afraid of heights. Zimmermann states, "He is likewise afraid of an uphill climb because he becomes short of

[322] Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 232.

[323] Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 305.

breath and his heart pounds, and a declivity in the road gives him apprehension."[324] Similarly Crenshaw affirms that "the old person is terrified of high places and afraid of dangers along the path."[325]

We do, however, wonder how this interpretation does justice to the comprehensiveness of the fear described or to the contrast between humanity and nature which is established in 12:5. The contrast is indeed displayed through three images from the sphere of nature (v. 5aβ-5aδ), each speaking about a changed status. The first image to be mentioned is drawn from the field/vegetation (v. 5aβ), that is, the blossoming of the almond tree (יָנֵּאץ הַשָּׁקֵד).[326] It is an ideal symbol for the reawakening of nature (*Erwachende Natur*) after the house is deserted.[327] Nature but not humans is reborn in the spring. This thought is expressed in Job 14:7-10:

> For there is hope for a tree, if it is cut down, that it will sprout again, and that its shoots will not cease. Though its root grows old in the earth, and its stump die in the ground, yet at the scent of water it will bud and put forth branches like a young plant. But mortals die, and are laid low; humans expire, and where are they?

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[324] Frank Zimmermann, *The Inner World of Qohelet* (New York: Ktav, 1973), 20-21. See also Sandberg, *Rabbinic Views of Qohelet*, 158.

[325] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 187.

[326] The Hiphil verb יָנֵּאץ as it is in the MT is from the root נצץ "to shine; to sparkle; to blossom" (*HALOT,* 1: 717 s.v. "נצץ", 717; BDB, s.v. "נָצַץ", 665. Some critics argue that the root is rather נאץ to "despise" or "spurn" (Gilbert, «La Description de la Vieillesse en Qohelet xii 1-7 est-elle allégorique ?», 105; Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 232). The reading of the versions (LXX, Syro-Hexaplar, Syriac, and Vulgate) is of a strong argument for נצץ in its Hiphil form (see Song 6:11; 7:13). As Holmstedt rightly argues, there are two lexical entries for נצץ , one of which appears to mean "sparkle" while the other means "to blossom" in the Hiphil (see HALOT, 1:717). It is only this last verb that makes any contextual sense, which is supported by the LXX's ἀνθήσῃ. How the consonant text came to include the א is unclear" (Holmstedt, *Qoheleth*, 299). GKC takes the verb נצץ ("to blossom") as a geminate verb (II = III) that, in this case, is written with a *matres lectionis* (plene spelling) rather than the normal spelling of וינץ (GKC 204.73 g).

[327] Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 534.

The second image is drawn from the fauna (v. 5aγ) which is the grasshopper or locust (הֶחָגָב). Grown fat (יִסְתַּבֵּל),[328] it drags itself onto the stage. According to some scholars, the noun חָגָב refers not to an insect, but to an unknown plant or the carob tree.[329] We do, nevertheless, think that חָגָב refers to an insect. As a matter of fact, besides Qoh 12:5 the word חָגָב occurs five other times in the Hebrew Bible (Lev 11:22; Num 13:33; 2Chr 7:13; Ezr 2:46; Isa 40:22) where it has the meaning "locust", "grasshopper", but not a plant or a tree. The חֲגָבִים are known for their destructive capacity; they are a threat to plants, and bring scarcity wherever they go.[330] Yet, they are easily frightened away when there are enough people about. If, however, there is no one left to look after the plants or the garden, and the land is abandoned, the locusts are free to settle and eat their fill in peace, just as in the case here in Qoh 12:3-5, where the house is deserted. Thus, although it would be convenient to have three tree plants in 12:5 instead of insects between two plants,[331] we do favor the interpretation of חָגָב as "locust." This view is supported by the LXX (ἀκρίς) and the Vulg. (*lucusta*).

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[328] The hithpael יִסְתַּבֵּל (from the root סבל) appears only here in Qoheleth and its meaning is uncertain and debated. A first view which interpret יִסְתַּבֵּל as connoting "fatness" is supported by the versions (LXX, παχυνθῇ; Vulg. *Inpinguabitur*, and Tg יתנפחון) and by Ps 144:14. Others understand the verb as "to become a burden', or "bear its burden" (Gen 49:15), or even to "drags oneself" referring to a painful movement (Gordis, *The wisdom of Ecclesiastes*, 335). The probable meaning is that the grasshopper loaded itself with food, that is, it grew fat.

[329] Seow, *Ecclesiastes,* 362; Fox, *A Rereading of Ecclesiastes,* 328.

[330] Bundvad, *Time in the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 69.

[331] Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 232.

The last image from nature (5aδ), is the "caperberry" (אֶבְיוֹנָה)[332] which "bursts forth, breaks out" (תָּפֵר).[333] According to Bundvad, "the bursting caperberry reflects a vitality of nature that cannot be contained: it bursts with ripeness."[334] Yet again, the image also has destructive connotations. Because the bursting berry perishes it may also be an image of youthful vitality cut short. The possibility of understanding the images as metaphors of plenty as well as of scarcity and death makes it credible that they are used in a similar way to the natural metaphors in the first of Qoheleth's poems. They depict the temporal situation of humanity by extension, but also form a contrast to it, and which the concluding motive clause highlights in v. 5b.

The motive clause introduced by כִּי in v. 5b comprises two elements. The first (v. 5bα) pictures a human's progress towards an "eternal home" (בֵּית עוֹלָמוֹ). The nature of the

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[332] The noun אֶבְיוֹנָה is a *hapax legomenon*, occurring only here in the Hebrew Bible. It is, however known and attested to in the Mishnah and Talmud, where it refers to the fruit of the caper bush: רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא אוֹמֵר, אֵין מִתְעַשֵּׂר אֶלָּא אֶבְיוֹנוֹת, מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהֵן פֶּרִי: (Mish *Massrot*, 4:6; *Ber.* 36:1,26). The LXX translates the word as κάππαρις (cf. Vulg., *Capparis;* Syr *kpr*). It refers to the *Capparis spinosa* fruit which was eaten as an aphrodisiac in the ancient Near East (*HALOT* s.v."אֶבְיוֹנָה", 1:5; BDB, s.v. "אֶבְיוֹנָה", 2-3. There are two options for the interpretation of this figure: (1) At the onset of old age, the sexual virility that marked one's youth is nothing more than a distant memory, and even aphrodisiacs fail to stimulate sexual desire to allow for sexual intercourse. (2) The onset of old age is like the shriveling up of the caper berry fruit; the once virile youth has passed his prime just like a shriveled caper berry can no longer provide a sexual stimulant.

[333] The MT vocalizes consonantal ותפר as וְתָפֵר (conjunction + Hiphil imperfect 3rd person feminine singular from פָּרַר, "to burst"). However, an alternate vocalization tradition of וְתֻפַּר (conjunction + Hophal imperfect 3rd person feminine singular "to be broken down") is reflected in the LXX which reads καὶ διασκεδασθῇ (is scattered) and Symmachus καὶ διαλυθῇ ("is broken up") which is followed by the Syriac. On the other hand, Aquila's καὶ καρπεύσει ("are enjoyed," of fruits) reflects וְתִפְרֶה (Qal imperfect 3rd person feminine singular from פָּרָה, "to bear fruit"); this does not reflect an alternate reading but a translator's error in word division between וְתָפֵר הָאֶבְיוֹנָה ("the caper berry bursts") and וְתִפְרֶה אֶבְיוֹנָה ("the caper berry bears fruit") (see, Krüger, Qoheleth, 191; Holmstedt, *Qoheleth*, 300. Schoors favors the reading offered by MT and rejects the emendation וְתָפֵר to וְתִפְרֶה which he qualifies unwarranted and superfluous, because it is absent from LXX and from Vulg. which reads, *dissipabitur* (Schoors, *Ecclesiastes,* 810).

[334] Bundvad, *Time in the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 69.

participle הֹלֵךְ is that it describes an on-going action; thus, humankind's progress is always towards that final goal, the grave (Qoh 6:6; 9:3). We may, accordingly, say that בֵּית עוֹלָמוֹ is the *terminus ad quem* of the going of an individual, a home for successive generations of a family. What was not clearly stated at the beginning of the book in terms of the destination of the passing of generation is here revealed: *ʾādām* goes to בֵּית עוֹלָם. What was said at the beginning of the book is confirmed: *ʾādām* comes and goes, but the earth stand (לְעוֹלָם).

This contrast between permanence and impermanence, temporariness and stability are expressed in the metaphor of the two houses in Qoh 12:3-5, that is, on the one hand, the earthly house guarded by the שֹׁמְרֵי הַבַּיִת and the אַנְשֵׁי הֶחָיִל and which are the property of the king, and, on the other hand the house of eternity, which can be described as "no man's land", for everybody goes there. As a matter of principle, *ʾādām* must leave the earthly house, in which all life is extinguished to בֵּית עוֹלָם (12:5), founded in God (*in Gott begründet liegt*)[335] and where life never perishes. Said it otherwise, it is movement from an instable and impermanent place to a stable and permanent one. Herein lies Schwienhorst-Schönberger's viewpoint of death in Qoheleth as cessation (*Abbruch*) and transition (*Übergang*).[336]

The second feature (v. 5bβ) speaks of the company of mourners (הַסֹּפְדִים) walking about in the streets (בַּשּׁוּק) of the city. The return to a perfect consecutive form (וְסָבְבוּ) links back to the verbs of vv. 3-4a, as well as indicating an imperfect equivalent. The sense is

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[335] Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 531.

[336] "Der Tod ist Abbruch und Übergang zugleich. Ganz überraschend kam diese Aussage nicht. Bereits in 3,11 wurde gesagt, Gott habe dem Mensch Ewigkeit (עילם) ins Herz gegeben. So wird der Mensch am Ende das, was er von Gott, seinem Ursprung her, im Innersten seines Herzens (לב) ist. Er kehrt dorthin zurück (12,7), woher er kam (1,3)" (Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 535; 539).

that mourners are a frequent and common sight in the streets; they are reminders that death has once more visited the house.

As a whole v. 5 underlines the conflict between the temporal conditions of humanity and nature. It explicitly sets up the individual's going to his grave as happening simultaneously with the revival of nature. Ironically, 12:5 is the only place in Qoheleth where the human being is given a part in something permanent. As Bundvad comments, "while the earth and the world order created by God last, and the natural elements within the world have a continuous, repetitive mode of existence, there is no permanence for humanity under the sun. They are only included in the עולם when dying."[337]

As the mourners move through the street -turning as the wind did unceasingly in 1:6-, the poem takes up again images from the sphere of house and village. The activity that ceased in 12:3-4 now restarts, but with an irony: the movement of the mourning procession is designed to mark not only the final termination of activity of the one who is no longer, but also the beginning of that of the mourners. When an individual dies and goes to his eternal home (v. 5bα), the activities of professional mourners increase (v. 5bβ). Here, again, lies another irony. While an individual die, and even before he is dead, the s*oph*^{e}*dîm* go around in front of the dying one's house seeking occupation to engage in the practice of mourning (Jer 9:16-20; Amos 5:16). Yet, we assert and conclude that the tragedy of this man's death constitutes merely one more professional routine for the hired mourners; the fleetingness of life is climaxed by death.

[337] Bundvad, *Time in the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 71.

III.1.2.2.2.4 עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא The Ruin of the House (6-7)

At the outset of the literary analysis of 12:1-8, we have mentioned that the section is literarily characterized by a prominent temporal marker: עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא, reiterated three times (12:2.5.6). So far, we have dealt with the first two occurrences of the expression and the sections it introduces. Here, in verses 6-7, appears the third use of עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא, and thus, the last unit of 12:1-8.

Verses 6-7 are literarily marked by verbs connoting destruction in v. 6: יִרחַק , וְתָרֻץ (2x), and וְתִשָּׁבֵר whose subjects are three word pairs כֶּסֶף and זָהָב ; גֻּלַּת and כַּד ; מַבּוּעַ and בּוֹר, arranged in pairs because of their similarity.[338] As for verse 7, it is prominently marked by the verb of return שׁוּב (v. 7a.b), which brings to completion the movement of human beings and thus the destruction of the great and wealthy house.

The destruction of costly, precious and essential vessels described in v. 6 tells us that we are here dealing with "un noble palacio, un Castillo,"[339] a royal house. As we have noticed earlier, these objects are חֶבֶל הַכֶּסֶף (the silver cord), גֻּלַּת הַזָּהָב (the golden bowl), כַּד (the pitcher), הַגַּלְגַּל (the wheel). Commentators have variously discussed the meaning of גֻּלָּה. Besides Qoh 12:6, the Hebrew lexeme גֻּלָּה occurs in other passages with different meanings. Thus, in 1 Kgs 7:7.41-42, גֻּלָּה is used in reference to the bowl-shaped lower part of a capital while in Josh 15:19 it refers to springs.[340] The most probable connection is found in Zech 4:2-3 where the גֻּלָּה is placed on a golden lampstand (מנוֹרַת זָהָב). Hence, according to Seow, גֻּלָּה might refer to the oil container of a lampstand.[341] As such it was used not only in a cultic

[338] Gilbert, « La description de la vieillesse en Qohelet xii 1-7 est-elle allégorique ? », 106.

[339] Ravasi, *Qohelet,* 237.

[340] Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 816.

[341] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 366. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 536.

context but also in a domestic context, that is, in a private home.[342] It is this golden bowl suspended with a silver cord that will be smashed in the royal palace. Consequently, there will be no more light in the house. We may, thus, assert that the shattering of גֻּלַּת הַזָּהָב brings to its completion the reign of darkness started in 12:2a with the darkening of the sun, the moon and the stars, as Schwienhorst-Schönberger comments:

> Die in v. 2 einsetzende Verdunklung, zunächst außerhalb des Hauses (Unweiter), dann ab v. 3b auch innerhalb des Hauses, wird ebendort mit v. 6a zu einer endgültigen.[343]

In short, the obscurity that characterized outside the house is now inside it. The days of darkness (יְמֵי הַחֹשֶׁךְ) of which Qoh 11:8 had reminded us to remember, have finally arrived with 12:6a. As we have shown in our second chapter, the contrast between light and darkness is common in the HB. In some instances, they are used as metaphors for life versus death, wisdom versus folly, good life versus bad life. Earlier in the book, mainly in chapter 2:13-14, Qoheleth compares wisdom to light, and foolishness to darkness. In Qoheleth 11:7-8 the expression רָאָה אֶת־הַשָּׁמֶשׁ (to see the sun) highly speaks of life in the world (6:5; 7:11; Job 3:16). Qoheleth 12:6a accordingly interprets death as the extinction of light. The silver cord that breaks may also remind us of the thread of life that is cut off (Isa 38:12; Job 7:6). The precious lamp that breaks, describes the darkening inside the house (*innerhalb des Hauses*, v. 6a), the shattered bowl and the broken wheel (v. 6b) the fading of life outside the house (*außerhalb des Hauses*, v. 6b).[344]

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[342] Cf. Robert Houston Smith, "The Household Lamps of Palestine in Old Testament Times." *BA* 27, no. 1 (1964), 2-31.

[343] Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 536.

[344] Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 536.

Following the extinction of light (*Erlöschen des Lichtes*) due to the destruction of the bowl, Qoheleth goes on to highlight the deceleration or cessation of another important and essential element to human life, that is, water. Though there are fountains (מַבּוּעַ) and cisterns (בּוֹר) in the palace, they will no longer be possible to draw water because the vessels (כַּד and גַּלְגַּל) are lying in pieces respectively beside the fountain (עַל־הַמַּבּוּעַ) and the cistern (אֶל־הַבּוֹר). According to Krüger the destruction of human utensils (v. 6) forms a contrast to the flourishing of nonhuman nature (v. 5aβγδ).[345] Moreover, the lack of water in the house described in this verse echoes the return of the clouds with rain in v. 2b, as we have argued earlier.

We thus agree with Rose in stating that v. 6 highlights two fundamental elements, necessary for human life: light and water. Rose says:

> Même si l'homme recourt à l'or et l'argent, même s'il perfectionne des techniques pour se procurer l'eau, tous ses dispositifs restent fragiles et deviendront, un jour, inutilisables. Ces détériorations deviennent métaphore de la mort ; par ses propres moyens, l'homme s'éteindra.[346]

One might infer from the above statement and compared to Qoh 12:1-5 where the emphasis is on human frailty, that Qoh 12:6 underscores the precarity of things which according to Rose will become one day "inutilisables" (not useful). In a way, the fragility of things and their destruction are somehow expressions of human frailty and temporariness which is highly expressed in verse 7 structured as follows:

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[345] Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 203.

[346]Rose, *Rien de Nouveau*, 490. See also Nguyen Thi, « Qoheleth et la destinée de l'homme », 236.

v. 7a: וְיָשָׁב הֶעָפָר עַל־הָאָרֶץ כְּשֶׁהָיָה

- v. 7aα: וְיָשָׁב הֶעָפָר עַל־הָאָרֶץ
- v. 7aβ: כְּשֶׁהָיָה

v. 7b: וְהָרוּחַ תָּשׁוּב אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר נְתָנָהּ

- v. 7bα: וְהָרוּחַ תָּשׁוּב אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים
- v. 7bβ : אֲשֶׁר נְתָנָהּ

The end of human life is described in terms that allude to Genesis 2:7; 3:19. In Chapter two, we have seen that *ʾādām* is ground-originated: out of the ground (מִן־הָאֲדָמָה) the Lord God formed (יָצַר) him, breathed in his nostrils the breath of life (נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים, 2:7). Through these two divine acts, *ʾādām* becomes a living being (נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה, 2:7.19). Similarly, the death of *ʾādām* in Qoh 12:7 takes place in a double process: the return of the dust (הֶעָפָר) as it was to the earth and, unlike Genesis, the return of the breath (וְהָרוּחַ) to God "who gave it."

There is a debate concerning the meaning of this statement. Some understand 12:7 to state that there is a continued life after death, a consciousness in the presence of God.[347] Thus, death is not the end because the spirit does not perish with the body. Krüger and many other scholars think that death is the end.[348] According to them, Qoheleth does not affirm life after death but only that God is the source of life. Fox even argues that 12:7 is more pessimistic than 3:21. "The earlier verse ate least grants that the spirit's ascent to God would redeem humanity from absurdity, whereas the present verse assumes that the spirit does ascend and yet sees no escape from death's obliterating power."[349]

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[347] Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*, 122. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes,* 151. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes,* 352.

[348] Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 203; Murphy notes that the return of the spirit" is a picture of dissolution, not immortality (*Ecclesiastes*, 120). For Longamn, what is portrayed is "a return to a prelife situation" (*Ecclesiastes*, 273); Fox, *A Time to Tear down and a Time to Build up*, 331-332.

[349] Fox, *A Time to Tear down and a Time to Build up,* 332.

It is difficult to argue for life after death in this one single statement of Qoheleth. The focus of 3:21 is whether there is any distinction between the manner of death and the destiny of human beings and animals in death. Qoheleth 12:7 provides an answer to this question by stating the return of human's רוּחַ to God. Rose observes that עָפָר does not express the whole of human beings; it is only a part of what constitutes them.[350] The "dé-composition" (separation) takes place in death, along with two divergent movements of return (שׁוּב), which are literarily framed by the preposition עַל (under, on) and אֶל (up to). In other words, in death the dust returns upon earth (עַל־הָאָרֶץ cf. Gen 3:19) and the spirit of life (רוּחַ) to God (אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים), the owner and giver of life.

Here again and lastly, Qoheleth is reminding his audience and readers of their creatureliness and temporariness. It is this transitoriness and ephemerality of human beings that are underscored in verse 8: הֲבֵל הֲבָלִים הַכֹּל הָבֶל that is, "fleeting, fleeting. Everything is fleeting."

III.2 CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE FRAMING POEMS

As we have mentioned in the introduction, the two poems display distinctive differences and similarities, and mutually informing conceptions of the world and the human life in that world as well, which we now consider. Furthermore, given that time and temporality are singled out in the framing poems as the basic condition for human life, we will in a third subsection show not only how the natural world and human existence are

[350] Rose, *Rien de Nouveau*, 491.

sketched in temporal terms, but also how time and temporality are expressions of the transitoriness, or fleetingness of life under the sun.

III.2.1 LINGUISTIC AND THEMATIC SIMILARITIES

Qoheleth 1:4-11 and 12:1-7 can be read as mirror-texts. Multiple lines of connection can be drawn between them in terms of language and content. In *Zwischen Tod und Lebensglück,* Zimmer shows the imagistic, linguistic and thematic connections between 1:2-11 and 12:1-7.[351] Having listed eleven lexical affinities (*lexematische Berührungen*),[352] Zimmer suggests that the "nature" poems are connected both in terms of content (*inhaltlich*) and in terms of their imagery (*Bilder*) which combines the sphere of nature (*Bilder aus der [außer-menschlichen] Natur*) with that of humanity (*mit Bildern aus dem Leben der Menschen*).[353]

The natural phenomena from 1:5-7 recur in the final poem: הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, הָרוּחַ, הַנְּחָלִים and יָם. Qoh 12:2 mentions the sun (הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ) along with other sources of light (הָאוֹר, הַיָּרֵחַ , הַכּוֹכָבִים). The word רוּחַ which is alluded to in the image of storm (הֶעָבִים, 12:2) occurs prominently in 12:7: וְהָרוּחַ תָּשׁוּב אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים. The terms used for the waters in the first poem, הַנְּחָלִים and יָם do not recur explicitly but reference to them can be found in the mention of

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[351] Tilmann Zimmer, *Zwischen Tod und Lebensglück : eine Untersuchung zur Anthropologie Kohelets* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999), 137-139.

[352] Zimmer, *Zwischen Tod und Lebensglück,* 137. If one includes the immediate context of the poems, so that the passages compared are 1:3-11 and 11:7-12:7, Zimmer counts seventeen points of contact.

[353] Zimmer, *Zwischen Tod und Lebensglück,* 138. This emphatic use of imagery that brings together humankind and nature perplexes Zimmer: he considers the connection between nature and human beings to be of only little importance in the book; so Zimmer, *Zwischen Tod,* 138: 'Berührt Kohelet hier bewusst die Verbindung Mensch-Natur, die sonst nur eine sehr untergeordnete Rolle spielt?'

rain (הַגֶּשֶׁם) in 12:2 and sources of water (מַבּוּעַ and בּוֹר) in 12:6b "and the pitcher is broken at the fountain (מַבּוּעַ), and the wheel broken at the cistern (בּוֹר)."

Related to the natural phenomena is the use of the same verbs of movement to describe temporal existence (הָלַךְ, סבב, שׁוּב, בּוֹא) either in terms of continuation and cyclicality or in terms of transience and linearity. Bundvad, however, observes a shift in the use of these verbs in the final poem. For instance, סבב (12:5) and שׁוּב (12:7) are used now about human existence instead of referring to the movement of the cosmic elements. Transferred to the realm of humanity the verbs connote finality and death in the last poem rather than describing continuous existence as they were meant to in the opening poem.[354]

Also, worth noting are the temporal markers in both poems (עוֹלָם, היה and זכר), although one can observe a tension between their use in the first and the final poems. "Whereas the generations were ephemeral and interchangeable in 1:4, and the earth remained לעולם, individual human beings now get their עוֹלָם."[355] In other words, for the human beings, עוֹלָם does not consist of any kind of permanent existence.

It, nevertheless, should be noted that Qoh 1:2-11 and 12:1-8 diverge quite radically from each other in form, purpose and certain matters of content. The permanence and stability affirmed in 1:2-11 are conflicting with the impermanence and the dissolution of the great and wealthy house in 12:1-8.

[354] Bundvad, *Time in the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 63.

[355] Bundvad, *Time in the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 64.

III.2.2 CONTRASTING APPROACH OF THE FRAMING POEM

In the literary analysis section, discussed above, we have pointed out some inner contrasts in each nature poem. The most prominent is the tension between a nature which continually renews itself and the human beings who do not; a tension between the cyclical, regular and recurrent movement of natural phenomena and the linear or unidirectional movement of humans; between permanence/stability and impermanence/ fleetingness.

Far from being a simple "redite" (retelling) of the previous analysis we would contrast Qoh 1:2-11 and 12:1-8, to highlight some majors issues. In fact, Qoheleth 12:1-7 conversely reaffirms and displays the cosmic phenomena and the human sphere of 1:4-11. Unlike the first nature poem which speaks of entering (בוא) into the life of human beings under the sun, Qoh 12:1-7 is mainly about the gradual exiting (הלךְ, סבב, שׁוב) of humanity from the world to its eternal home (בֵּית עוֹלָמוֹ). The first contrast worth mentioning concerns the terms birth and death. The notion of death in these two poems will be discussed at length below.

For now, suffice it to say that the Hebrew terms for birth (יָלַד / מוֹלֶדֶת) and death (מָוֶת) do not occur *in se* in the "nature" poems. Yet, if that is granted, the reality of birth (coming to life), and death (exiting the world) are not absent from them. Indeed, birth and death are literarily expressed *via* the verbs בוא and הלךְ mainly stressed in the opening poem: דּוֹר הֹלֵךְ וְדוֹר בָּא וְהָאָרֶץ לְעוֹלָם עֹמֶדֶת (1:4a).

The Hebrew בָּא refers to a generation coming into existence in 1:4 and הלךְ to its exiting while the earth remains as ever (לְעוֹלָם). It is quite striking that Qoheleth uses the verb בָּא to refer to the setting of the sun in 1:5. Ironically, the sun "sets / goes down" (בָּא) as

a generation "comes"(בָּא). One might thus argue that Qoheleth is comparing the birth of humans as being the same as the sunshine. Still, as a human generation goes, the wind blows and the rivers flow. The wind goes (הוֹלֵךְ) to the south and turns (וְסוֹבֵב) to the north, around and around. All the rivers flow (הֹלְכִים) continuously to the sea without causing the sea to overflow.

These regularities, recurrences and cyclicities that characterize the movement of the natural phenomena in 1:4-11 are out of place in the final poem. If they do have a place, it is through opposition or irony. Contrary to the opening poem there is no thought of generations coming and going while the earth remains לְעוֹלָם (1:4). Rather, humanity goes to בֵּית עוֹלָם, ("house of eternity"). As Seow observes, this "house of eternity" is, as the inscription from Tell Deir 'Alla has it, the place where the one who goes (הלך) will not rise again.[356] This land of no return is the netherworld, a land of perpetual darkness, from which one cannot turn back. It is a "non-retour" movement. As such this movement is also applied to the sun, the moon, and the clouds in the final poem.

In fact, in Qoheleth 1:5 the sun rises and sets, only to rise again. The sun shines (זָרַח) and, even if it sets at the end of the day, it will rise to shine again. But never does a human being. The final poem even describes these natural elements as having changed in their function. In Qoh 12:2, indeed, the sun darkens along with the light of day, even the moon and the stars. Zimmer comments that the light of the sun (*das Licht der Sonne*) is not only good for the eyes (11:7), but it is mainly one of the *sine qua non* conditions of life (*der notwendigen Bedingungen des Lebens*).[357] As he argues, unlike darkness, light is an image of

[356] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 381.

[357] Zimmer, *Zwischen Tod und Lebensglück,* 138.

a happy and successful life (*ein Bild glücklichen und erfolgreichen Lebens*). Zimmer goes on to understand the movement of the sun and the light that is tied to it as something desirable (*Wünschenswertes*) and passing (*Vergehendes*). Thus, because the light of the sun is indispensable to humans, the extinction of the light as it is now described in 12:2.6 is an expression of the process of dying or death. As such it stands for the being (*Sein*) and passing (*Vergehen*) of the individual.

Furthermore, the verb סבב formerly used to describe the movement of the wind turning around and around in 1:5 is now ironically applied to that of the mourners (הַסֹּפְדִים) as going around the streets (סָבְבוּ בַשּׁוּק) in a funeral procession (12:5c). Thus, in 12:5 סבב no longer refers to cyclical activities, but to the final mourning ritual for אָדָם on his way to his בֵּית עוֹלָמוֹ (12:5c). The individual is going (הלך) to a place without returning.

We might even go further in the contrasting analysis of the two poems by arguing that the uncertainty of human sensing underlined in 1:8 is alluded in 12:3-4. The sensing now slows down and becomes laborious. And whereas a seeming correspondence was established between the continuously moving phenomena and human sensing in 1:5-7 and 1:8, the contrast between nature's cyclical renewal and humanity's linearly limited existence is now emphasized especially in the final poem and prominently in 12:5-7.

III.3 TIME AND TEMPORALITY IN THE FRAMING POEMS

One might think unfitting to speak of time and temporality in the opening and the closing poem of Qoheleth, arguing that the section that prominently deals with time in the book is chapter 3. Indeed, Qoheleth used two explicit terms to speak of time. The first

word, זְמָן derives from the Aramaic זמנא. Meaning "season", it is ordinarily used of predetermined or appointed time.[358] The second which is the most common biblical term for time is עֵת (31 of 40 occurrences in Qoheleth are in chapter 3). According to BDB the noun עֵת ("point in time") has a basic two-fold range of meanings: (1) "time of an event" and (2) "time for an event".[359]

Unlike זְמָן which seems to refer to a fixed and predetermined time, עֵת highlights the suitability, the appropriateness of time for an event.[360] For instance, Qoheleth speaks of every matter (חֵפֶץ) having "a time and judgment" (עֵת וּמִשְׁפָּט, 8:6), and which human beings do not know or cannot control (Qoh 9:11-12).

It is in fact this comprehension of time as "the appointed, proper, suitable, appropriate or usual time" that is displayed in the opening and closing poems, although the two prominent temporal terms do not occur in them. We thus argue that the two poems not only should be connected to chapter 3 but also, they are the strongest statements of periodicity or temporality. In Qoh 3:1-9, indeed, all creation is subject to birth and death. Humans beings, animals, plant life, all have their origins and all face mortality. In keeping with Qoheleth's cosmology in the opening poem, the cycles of life are endlessly repeated. Qoheleth sets the scene with his opening verse: לַכֹּל זְמָן וְעֵת לְכָל־חֵפֶץ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמָיִם (3:1), which recalls the opening poem (1:2-11) and foreshadows the closing one (12:1-8).

As shown earlier in the literary analysis, the two poems also contain temporal markers (עוֹלָם "eternity", היה "was/ it happened", זכר "remember", עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא "before", בַּיּוֹם

[358] *HALOT* s.v. "זְמָן", 1: 273; BDB s.v. "זְמָן", 273.

[359] BDB s.v. "עֵת", 773.

[360] *HALOT* s.v. "עֵת", 1:900; BDB 773.

שֶׁ, "the in the day which/when", בְּ "when"). In addition to these devices, we might think of the movements in nature as indicative for "time and temporality", since events happen and repeat according to the time designed by God, and for a certain period of time, because of their temporariness. We may conclude saying that time in Qoheleth is the unifying factor, ensuring that all activities have their place. Though they are noted by humans, but they are incompletely understood, and humans cannot determine their specifics.

III.3.1 THE TEMPORAL USE OF עוֹלָם

The Hebrew word עוֹלָם (22 times as עֹלָם in BHS, cf. Ps. 45:7.18) occurs almost 440 times in the HB, plus 20 times in the Aramaic parts of the HB (as *'alam* or *'alma'*). In the book of Qoheleth the word עוֹלָם occurs seven times:

(1:4) וְהָאָרֶץ לְעוֹלָם עֹמָדֶת׃
(1:10) כְּבָר הָיָה לְעֹלָמִים[361]
(2:16) כִּי אֵין זִכְרוֹן לֶחָכָם עִם־הַכְּסִיל לְעוֹלָם
(3:11) גַּם אֶת־הָעֹלָם נָתַן בְּלִבָּם
(3:14) כָּל־אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה הָאֱלֹהִים הוּא יִהְיֶה לְעוֹלָם
(9:6) וְחֶלְקָ אֵין־לָהֶם עוֹד לְעוֹלָם
(12:5) כִּי־הֹלֵךְ הָאָדָם אֶל־בֵּית עוֹלָמוֹ

As one can notice, the substantive עוֹלָם is preceded in five occurrences by לְ (1:4.10; 2:16; 3:14; 9:6). According to Jenni the preposition לְ "up to, toward" used temporally produces the more static meaning "forever", "ever", "always."[362] We might infer that verbal and nominal clauses use לְעוֹלָם to indicate a constant status and the qualitative significance of durability, finality, inalterability. Accordingly, in the above-mentioned occurrences (1:4.10;

[361] The expression לְעֹלָמִים is to be viewed as an intensive plural rather than as a succession of ages.
[362] Jenni "עוֹלָם " in *TLOT* 2, 856.

2:16; 3:14; 9:6), לְעוֹלָם indicates long temporal duration. Such duration is also meant by הָעֹלָם in 3:11: גַּם אֶת־הָעֹלָם נָתַן בְּלִבָּם מִבְּלִי.

This verse (3:11) has, in fact, been labelled as one of the most difficult to interpret in the book.[363] The key problem lies in the understanding of the הָעֹלָם which God has put in humans' hearts (בְּלִבָּם). What was Qoheleth's intended meaning of הָעֹלָם in this verse and in its immediate contexts is debated. Scholars have suggested different interpretive options which fall into three main approaches: the metonymy, revocalization and emendation.[364]

For the proponents of the first approach עוֹלָם has a temporal connotation, meaning "eternity". For support, this approach looks to the word עֹלָם as the defectively written form of עוֹלָם ("duration; eternity"), the recurrence of עוֹלָם ("eternity") in Qoh 3:14, the temporal qualification of the statement in the parallel clause ("from beginning to end"), and the ordinary meaning of the noun as "eternity."[365] Seow comments

> The noun does not refer to what one would call "timing," "a sense of time,"... It means simply "eternity"- that which transcends time. It refers to a sense of that which is timeless and, as such, stands in contrast to *ʿitto* "its time."[366]

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[363] Martin Shields, *The End of Wisdom: a Reappraisal of the Historical and Canonical Function of Ecclesiastes*, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 139. Peter Machinist offers a comprehensive view of the use of מִקְרֶה in his article*:* "Fate, *miqreh* and Reason: Some Reflections on Qoheleth and Biblical Thought," in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots,* eds. Ziony Zevit et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 171-172; Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 118.

[364] Brian Gault, "A Reexamination of Eternity in Ecclesiastes 3:11", *BSac* 165 (2008): 42-56.

[365] *HALOT* s.v. "עוֹלָם", 1:798-799.

[366] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 163.

Contrasting the term עוֹלָם with עֵת Jenni and Murphy suggest the meaning of "sense of duration," [367] while Krüger understands as "distant time":

> In view of the use of עוֹלָם in the preceding context (cf. 1:4, 10; 2: 16; then also 3:14; 9:6; 12:5), the term may refer here to a concept or idea of a 'distant time' that extends far beyond the life of an individual human being in the direction of either the past or the future or both.[368]

Rejecting עֹלָם as defectively written עוֹלָם ("eternity") along with its temporal use, scholars of the second view suggest revocalizing הָעֹלָם. According to them, עֹלָם is the segholate noun עלם that means "darkness" or "ignorance; obscurity; secrecy".[369] The related noun תַּעֲלֻמָה means "hidden thing; secret, what has been hidden" or "what is unknown"[370], "secrets" and the related verb עָלַם means "to hide; to conceal."[371]

This view looks to the Ugaritic term *ġlm* "to be dark" "darkness", to the Akkadian verb *ṣalāmu* (to be [become] black, blackish, dark"[372] as well as to Qoheleth 12:14 which uses the word in its *niphal* form, meaning "to be hidden" (see Job 28:21; 42:3). Jastrow also attests the use of this term in postbiblical Hebrew, meaning "secret, forgetfulness."[373] Thus, the verse would mean that God has "obscured" man's knowledge so that he cannot discover certain features of God's program. This approach is adopted by Crenshaw

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[367] Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 34.

[368] Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 87.

[369] *HALOT* s.v. " עלם", 1: 834-835.

[370] *HALOT* s.v. "תַּעֲלֻמָה", 2:1769

[371] BDB s.v. "עָלַם", 761; *HALOT* , 1:834-835.

[372] *HALOT,* 2:835.

[373] Jastrow s.v. "עֹלָם I", 1084.

(darkness), and Whybray who use the word "ignorance"[374], by Moffatt who uses the word "mystery."

Finally, the third view -the emendation theory- is represented in modern scholarship by Michael Fox who argues that the MT reading is corrupt and eminently out of place. He states, "the *'olam* in man's heart is a theologically fertile notion, but it is probably a mistake."[375] Appealing to metathesis, Fox proposes to read הֶעָמָל (the toil) for הָעֹלָם which would mean that this עָמָל is in the heart and should be understood as mental labor.[376] In support for his view, Fox appeals to 8:17 where Qoheleth uses a similar wording including יַעֲמֹל.[377]

> He has made everything suitable for its time; he has also place toil (עמלה) in their heart, without one being able to find out (לֹא־יִמְצָא הָאָדָם) what God has done from the beginning to the end (3:11). Then I saw that no one can find out (לֹא יוּכַל הָאָדָם לִמְצוֹא) what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking (יַעֲמֹל הָאָדָם), they will not find it out (8:17).

There is, however, no textual evidence supporting such an emendation of reading of הָעֹלָם to הֶעָמָל. It is simply a conjectural emendation.

Contra these two latter proposals we argue for the temporal use of עוֹלָם in this verse which one should interpret within the context of the other occurrences of עֹלָם in Qoheleth. The juxtaposition of עוֹלָם with expressions of temporality and transience in the "nature" poem (1:4-11) and mainly in the "time" poem (3:1-15) indicates that it more likely refers to some dimension of time than to 'darkness', 'hiddenness', 'world' or 'ignorance' as

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[374] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 73-74.

[375] Fox, *Time to Tear down*, 211.

[376] Fox, *Ecclesiastes,* 23.

[377] Fox, *Time to Tear down*, 211.

various commentators have suggested. Instead, עוֹלָם expresses the fact that some things do endure in a world marred by transience. In 1:4 עוֹלָם denotes the enduring earth in contrast to constantly changing nature. In 2:16; 9:6 and 12:5, עוֹלָם refers to the period following one's death without any indication that it will end.

Thus, read in light of the "nature" poems and the "time" poem, the term עוֹלָם might allude to the desire for permanence, lasting pleasure, or eternity that is in every human's heart (Gen 3: 1-23). This perspective enables human beings to recognize that the different times both in nature and in their own lives continuously become part of an order established by the creator who has both ordered the times (v. 11a) and implanted a sense of perpetuity in human hearts/minds (v. 11ba). Unfortunately, this desire is in contrast with the temporal and fleeting nature of human beings with his limited life span and the fleetingness of things in the world. Thereupon, that God's work cannot be fully comprehended (v. 11b) is in part because it lasts unlike human work or achievement which is temporary (הֶבֶל), and which cannot even alter the divine work (v. 14).

III.3.2 TIME AND NATURAL EVENTS

The framing poems in Qoheleth 1:2-11 and 12:1-8 describe human existence and cosmic realities in temporal terms and establish in an explicit manner Qoheleth's basic conception of time. Qoheleth is exploring in the "nature" poems the temporal structure of the world order and the condition of humans within it.

The beginning of Qoheleth shows indeed an acute interest in the world order, in which the author seeks to integrate the life experience of humankind. The fourth verse, דּוֹר הֹלֵךְ וְדוֹר בָּא וְהָאָרֶץ לְעוֹלָם עֹמָדֶת contrasts temporariness and permanence. In so doing,

Qoheleth sketches two types of temporal existence: "a harmonious relationship between the brief life of individual human beings and the wider-embracing human continuity which persists as one generation is replaced by another."[378] The description of the generations following each other ceaselessly could indicate both the cyclicality and the linearity of their movement in time. Likewise, the movement of the sun, wind and streams.

Qoheleth 1:5-7 connect the notion of permanence to more dynamic ideas of continuity and repetition. While the issue in 1:4 could simply be one of continuity versus brevity, 1:5-7 introduces the idea of a cyclical movement. The elements are neither transitory nor immobile. Their movement is one of repetition and thus of cyclicality. Sun, wind, and water are all metaphors for time. In these verses their immediate function is to exemplify the repetitious movements of nature through time. They are part of a pattern which neither changes substantially nor ends.

The depiction of the sun's movement over the sky in 1:5 provides a nice transition from the contrast in 1:4 between the temporary and the permanent: the sun's movement from daybreak to nightfall has a seeming linearity, and functions well as an image for the human being's travel from cradle to grave. At the same time, the repetitious character of the sun's movement recalls the continuous movement of generations onto and away from an earth which ever remains. Even the wind which roams unpredictably does so according to a certain design. Sun and wind will become key motifs in the book. They are used to describe

[378] Bundvad, *Time in the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 49.

human existence in its totality; they denote the limits of this existence as well as sketch through their metaphorical use, basic conditions and characteristics of human life.[379]

In Qoheleth 1:7 the sea is presented as a limitless reservoir for the waters from the rivers. As a metaphor for time passing, the rivers' constant streams of running water work well, and allow, perhaps, the poem to return once more to the contrast established in verse 1:4 between the immovable cosmos and the constantly changing generations. A dimension of impotence which may have lurked in the poem throughout becomes apparent in the rivers' inability to fill up the sea.[380]

Cyclical time is strongly underlined in 1:5-7. Even Qoheleth's language presses this point, making extensive use of participles from verbs of movement-which are repeated far beyond what would be necessary.[381] For instance, the language of 1:5 facilitates the depiction of cyclical time by presenting סבב with the verb הלך. The use of linguistic repetition becomes even more apparent in 1:6 which reuses the verb הלך and repeats its key word, סבב, three times.[382] In 1:7 הלך the first part of the verse underlines the cyclical character of the world's time together with שוב in the last.

In the following verse of the first poem, Qoheleth establishes a structural parallel with the three natural phenomena explored in 1:5-7 by emphasizing three human ways of sensing-speaking, hearing, and seeing. Human experience, too, remains unfulfilled

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[379] The image of wind is present both in the references to הבל and רוח. It is an image which will be examined further in the excursus, section 3.4, at the close of this chapter.

[380] Especially, perhaps, in 1:5, using the verb שאף which can also connote frustrated effort.

[381] Christianson emphasizes Qoheleth's use of verbs of movement throughout the book and integrates this language feature into his reading the book as a narrative (Christianson, *A Time to Tell,* 221-223).

[382] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes,* 64. Apart from its basic meaning "to turn around", סבב can also mean "to change"; if the poem plays upon this nuance of meaning, one cannot help but appreciate the irony.

and in constant motion. However, another part of Qoheleth's strategy in 1:8-11 is to demonstrate that the temporal situation of the phenomena cannot simply be transferred to the human realm. Qoheleth shows that there is only a seeming equivalence between the temporal realm of the natural phenomena and that of human life.

According to Qoheleth, humanity's unfulfilled existence cannot be explained simply by extending the depiction of cosmic time into the human realm. Elements of transience and brevity are strongly present in this, and the following three verses emphasize, also, that there is a conflict between human existence and the cosmic, temporal setup. Because of humanity's brief lifespan which limits their cognitive abilities and isolates them in the present, the things which confront them are neither satisfactory nor reliable. The setup of the metaphors in 1:7 and 1:8 offers a particularly clear demonstration of the way that Qoheleth uses the enduring phenomena and their repetitious existence to describe a human life which is differently governed by time.

Thus, the metaphors in 1:5-7 address the human situation not only by extension but also by establishing a contrast between the continuous motions of sun, water, and wind and the individual human being.[383] This double function of the metaphors demonstrates well the situation of humanity: we are caught up in the cycles of movement as are the phenomena, but unlike them we do not endure as individuals. Our inability to recognize and understand what meets our eyes and ears is due to our temporality, the little

[383] In *Coping with Transience,* 25-26, 56, Fredericks's reading of the poem places the phenomena of the world in much greater harmony with the human mode of existence. He argues that cyclicality governs the reality of both humankind and world. Although the natural phenomena are more long-lived than individual human beings, the potential longevity of both takes the form of repetition.

time we are given and what can be accomplished in it. This temporal situation of humans in the cosmic time order is highly expressed in the final poem.

Qoheleth 12:1-8 reaffirms that the presentation of the world as a coherent, temporal whole characterized by repetitions, continuity, and cyclicality in 1:4-11 does not correspond to the temporal reality as it is experienced by humanity. The difference between the human perception of the time-order and its reality in the world is underlined here as the images of sun and water are depictions of the human experience of time. While the time of the cosmos is characterized by the continuity and cyclicality of the phenomena, the time of human beings is more linear.

In both the initial and the final poems, time, understood broadly, is singled out as the basic condition for human life. The natural world is sketched in temporal terms as is also human existence both when viewed from the perspective of the individual and when discussed under the broader heading of collective humanity. Qoheleth investigates the cyclical elements of temporal existence through ideas of repetition and returning. The final poem offers the death of the individual as the only human return, the only type of human cyclicality as it were. This creates a connection with the first poem which in its opening line described the movement of the generations across the face of the constant earth.

III.3.3 QOHELETH'S RHETORIC OF DEATH

III.3.3.1 The Brevity of Human Existence

The opening and the closing poems (1:2-11 and 12:1-8) lay out Qoheleth's view on death. These two poems, indeed, highlight the shortness of life and present death as the ending of human beings. To highlight the theme of death Qoheleth refers to the verbs בוא

and הלךְ. The term הלךְ refers to "death" (3:20; 5:14-15; 6:6, 9; 7:2; 9:10; 12:5),[384] and the term בוא refers to "birth" (5:14-15; 6:4). Alison Lo accordingly argues that the words הלךְ and בוא "reveal the stark reality of human transitoriness"[385] versus the permanence of the nature.

As shown earlier, the sun goes and comes again and again (1:5). Likewise, the wind and the streams but not human beings whose movement is linear. They go without coming back. Hence, we contend that Qoheleth uses the words הלךְ and בוא in Qoh 1:4-7 to underline the impermanence, and brevity of human life in contrast to the permanence, the recurrence in natural phenomena.

We may conclude saying that Qoheleth's approach to the problem of death stands not only in the use of terms that metaphorically denote death, but prominently in the notion of הֶבֶל understood as "temporary", "fleeting" or "brief."[386] Qoheleth is, indeed, interested in what we can call the *pan-hebelness*, that is, in the fact that everything (הַכֹּל) under the sun, including life itself is temporary.[387] By using the word הֶבֶל Qoheleth is picturing the fleetingness of human existence. For life is short and passing like a breath. We, thus, argue that death in Qoheleth is the natural ending of human being, which is, to speak like the contemporary philosopher Martin Heidegger, a "Sein zum Ende" (a being toward death).[388] This reality is unescapable; it is a way to be, a path that we all must take over as

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[384] F.J. Helfmeyer,"הלךְ," *TDOT* 3:388-403; *HALOT* s.v. "הלךְ", 1:246-248; Eugene H. Merrill, "הלךְ,"*NIDOTTE,* "הלךְ," 1:1032-35.

[385] Alison Lo, "Death in Qohelet," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 31 (2008), 87. For Seow likewise Qoheleth is not talking about the continuity of generations, but death and birth. According to him, Qoheleth often uses הלךְ to speak of "death" (3:20; 5:14-15 [15-16]; 6:6, 9; 7:2; 9:10; 12:5) and בוא to signify "birth" (5:14-15 [15-16]; 6:4) in the Book of Qoheleth (Seow, *Ecclesiastes,* 106).

[386] Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, 22-26.

[387] Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 23.

[388] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1st. English edition by John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (London: SCM Press, 1962), 289.

soon as it is, and which Heidegger neatly expresses as follows: "as soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die."[389]

III.3.3.2 Death as Natural End: same Fate for all

Metaphorically expressed via the terms הלךְ and בוא and the movement of the natural phenomena, the notion of death is strongly stated in Qoh 2:14-16:

הֶחָכָם עֵינָיו בְּרֹאשׁוֹ וְהַכְּסִיל בַּחֹשֶׁךְ הוֹלֵךְ וְיָדַעְתִּי גַם־אָנִי שֶׁ**מִּקְרֶה** אֶחָד יִקְרֶה אֶת־כֻּלָּם׃
וְאָמַרְתִּי אֲנִי בְּלִבִּי כְּ**מִקְרֶה** הַכְּסִיל גַּם־א�ֲנִי יִקְרֵנִי וְלָמָּה חָכַמְתִּי אֲנִי אָז יוֹתֵר וְדִבַּרְתִּי בְלִבִּי שֶׁגַּם־זֶה הָבֶל׃
כִּי אֵין זִכְרוֹן לֶחָכָם עִם־הַכְּסִיל לְעוֹלָם בְּשֶׁכְּבָר הַיָּמִים הַבָּאִים הַכֹּל נִשְׁכָּח וְאֵיךְ **יָמוּת** הֶחָכָם עִם־הַכְּסִיל׃

It might be too soon to make a judgment on the use of הֶבֶל in Qoheleth, given that this term will be in our scrutiny in the last chapter. For the time being, we may say that Qoheleth's concern here is the unfairness of death which abolishes any difference between the wise and the fool, since the same fate (מִקְרֶה אֶחָד) befalls them equally (יִקְרֶה אֶת־כֻּלָּם, 2:14).[390]

The word מִקְרֶה denotes "what happens to someone not through their own will or actions and without any known instigator."[391] Concretely, it means "chance, accident", not in the sense that it would exclude divine determination.[392] M.S Seale in his article on "Chance" informs us that the idea of chance in the sense of something wholly fortuitous was utterly foreign to the Hebrew creed. Throughout the whole course of Israel's history, to the Hebrew

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[389] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 289.

[390] Peter Machinist offers a comprehensive view of the use of מִקְרֶה in his article*:* "Fate, *miqreh* and Reason: Some Reflections on Qoheleth and Biblical Thought," in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots,* eds. Ziony Zevit et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 165-175.

[391] *HALOT* s.v. "מִקְרֶה", 1: 629

[392] Machinist, "Fate, *miqreh* and Reason," 169.

mind, law, not chance, he argues, ruled the universe, and that law was not something blindly mechanical, but the expression of the personal God.[393] Seale seems to argue for a positive connotation of מִקְרֶה, relating everything to the divine will. Thus, behind the idea of מִקְרֶה, lies that of the divine presence, acting as the plan and time manager. Kees Bolle points up this mysterious idea of מִקְרֶה

> [T]he term fate denotes the idea that everything in human lives, in society, and in the world itself takes place according to a set, immutable pattern . . . in whatever variation, language, or shade of meaning it occurs, [fate] always retains a basic element of mystery. Fate may be in the hands of some powerful, superhuman being; it may be superior to the gods; it may be accessible to some select individuals. But, quite differently from the case of philosophical determinism, vis-à-vis fate, not only is a certain knowledge possible but also a certain "negotiation" with or even an aversion of fate's decrees.[394]

The foregoing statement posits that there is an unequivocal relation between מִקְרֶה and God's plan. Drawing evidence from the Hebrew Bible (Ruth 2:3; 1 Sam 6:9; 20:26; Deut 23:11) Peter Machinist shows how "the lives, at least of humans, move according to preset patterns [which] are set and controlled by a superhuman force or forces."[395] According to Machinist, מִקְרֶה is characterized by its unexpectedness, its uncontrollability, and its incomprehensibility. It cannot be foreseen. Yet it has a time of occurrence, only known and controlled by God.[396]

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[393] M. S. Seale, "Chance", in *ISBE*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 593.

[394] Kees W. Bolle, "Fate," in *ER* vol 5. ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 290. See also Peter Machinist, "Fate, *miqreh* and Reason," 160.

[395] Machinist, "Fate, *miqreh* and Reason:" , 160

[396] According to Machinist, Ruth's *miqreh* consists mainly in God's guidance of Ruth to a new life with Boaz. In 1 Sam 6:9, on the other hand, God and *miqreh* appear to be envisaged as two possible and contrasting causes for a particular action.

Likewise, in Qoheleth, מִקְרֶה is beyond humans' control and understanding.[397] It happens both to human beings and to animals unexpectedly (פִּתְאֹם), at its own time (עִתּוֹ), without any distinction (לַכֹּל מִקְרֶה אֶחָד). It is a common and shared reality between humans and animals, the wise and the fool, the righteous and the wicked, which is death. In Qoheleth in fact, מִקְרֶה is identified with death.[398] The fate (מִקְרֶה) that comes to the fool will come to him (כְּמִקְרֶה הַכְּסִיל גַּם־אֲנִי יִקְרֵנִי). Said otherwise, he will die just as any other human being. This מִקְרֶה אֶחָד appears therefore as an equalizer in the sense that it destroys the difference between the wise and the fool.[399]

We might accordingly state that a person's behavior does not affect the way God treats that person. It does not matter whether one is righteous or wicked (לַצַּדִּיק וְלָרָשָׁע); clean or unclean (וְלַטָּהוֹר וְלַטָּמֵא), offers sacrifices or does not offer it (וְלַזֹּבֵחַ וְלַאֲשֶׁר אֵינֶנּוּ זֹבֵחַ). There is no distinction between the good and the sinner (כַּטּוֹב כַּחֹטֶא). It is the same fate for all: לַכֹּל מִקְרֶה אֶחָד (9:2). Without any regard for the merits of the righteous, death indiscriminately brings life to an end for all people (לַכֹּל). Scott is right when he asserts that "fate makes no distinction among men on moral grounds."[400] There is one fate for all and there is no distinction in the way the righteous and wicked die.

Qoheleth even goes further in describing the nullification that death brings in term of oblivion. Neither the wise nor the foolish will be remembered (1:11; 2:16a; 9:5). In

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[397] The noun מִקְרֶה occurs seven times (2:14.15; 3:19-20; 9:2-3) and its verbal form קָרָה three times (2:14.15; 9:11).

[398] Jerome offers in his translation three different rendings of the word מִקְרֶה: *interitus* "death, violent and untimely death" (2:14; 3:19), *occasus* "opportunity, chance, downfall, death" (2:15), and *condicio* "situation, state, circumstances, condition" (3:19). For the remaining occurrences of the term מִקְרֶה, Jerome uses the verb *evenire* "to happen, to fall by lot" (9:2-3).

[399] Richard P. Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 94.

[400] Robert Balgarnie Young Scott, *Proverbs & Ecclesiastes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1965), 248.

the face of death, which is the inevitable fate of all, the wise and the foolish are equals. Qoheleth understands that his life is brief, temporary, and passing, that is, הֶבֶל.

In chapter 3:19-20, Qoheleth takes up the comparison in 2:14-16 and radicalizes it by comparing human and animals. The two share the same origin (הַכֹּל הָיָה מִן־הֶעָפָר), the same breath (רוּחַ אֶחָד לַכֹּל), the same fate (מִקְרֶה אֶחָד לָהֶם) and they all go to the same place (הַכֹּל הוֹלֵךְ אֶל־מָקוֹם אֶחָד). By comparing humanity and animals in their fate, Qoheleth does not intend to identify human beings with animals (3:22). For Qoheleth, humans are different from beasts. The main difference according to him resides in their quality of life. As a matter of fact, human beings are given the ability of enjoying life and having a relationship with the Creator, during their lifetime (כִּי־הוּא חֶלְקוֹ, 3:22). What Qoheleth is then doing in this comparison is to highlight the frailty and temporariness of human beings.

Overall, for Qoheleth life is a time one should learn about death. That is why in chapter 7 he urges his audience to frequent the house of mourning (בֵּית־אֵבֶל) rather than the house of feasts (בֵּית מִשְׁתֶּה), for this is the end of everyone, and the living will lay it to heart: בַּאֲשֶׁר הוּא סוֹף כָּל־הָאָדָם וְהַחַי יִתֵּן אֶל־לִבּוֹ (7:2-4). Delitzsch rightly comments that "sorrow penetrates the heart, draws the thoughts upwards, purifies, transforms."[401] On the other hand, the moment of death is for Qoheleth an opportunity for one to learn and gain wisdom, "a time to see the real value and worth of a person and to recognize what he has left behind."[402]

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[401] Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Songs of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 315.

[402] Larisa Igorevna Levicheva, "Contentment in the Book of Ecclesiastes: Interplay of the Themes of Death, the Role of God, and Contentment in Qohelet's Teaching." (PhD diss., Middlesex University, 2014), 72. ProQuest Publishing: https://search-proquest-com.proxy.bc.edu/docview/1687701038?accountid=9673.

By encouraging his audience to go the house of mourning, Qoheleth wants them, on the one hand, to realize the inescapability of death and its power on humanity; and, the other hand, to see life as precious, valuable and enjoyable (cf. 3:12-13; 5:17-19; 8:15; 9:7-10), though temporary.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter offered a comparative criticism of the nature poems (Qoh 1:2-11 and 12:1-8). We argued that Qoh 1:2-11 and 12:1-8, despite their dissonance, have a structural, literary and thematical function together as a frame, and should therefore go hand in hand, not only as an *inclusio* but also as mirror-texts. As they reflect each other, they also mirror life in the world, both of animate and of inanimate creatures or human and non-human beings.

We thus analyzed the literary features of the nature poems, which make them partly alike and partly different. As shown in our examination, the poem in 12:1-8 reuses images and language from the poem in 1:2-11. Yet they are different. The most prominent contrast, as argued, is the tension between a nature which continually renews itself and the human being who does not; a tension between the cyclical, regular and recurrent movement of natural phenomena and the linear or unidirectional movement of humans; between permanence/stability and impermanence/ fleetingness, which Qoheleth singles out by the use of the term הֶבֶל, whose meaning and functionally we will now consider in our next chapter.

Chapter IV THE MEANING AND FUNCTIONALITY OF הֶבֶל

Focusing on the book's use of הֶבֶל, this chapter aims at finding the meaning of הֶבֶל that will explain the most features of the book. In other words, we will approach the discussion of הֶבֶל in the perspective that הֶבֶל is a "situation", a "state of being". A contextual reading, as we will show, suggests that הֶבֶל refers to something that is fleeting, impermanent, temporary, in contrast to the stability and regularity of nature as described in 1:4-7, and in reaction to the "absurdity, meaningless" family of meaning.

For that purpose, we will begin by looking at the theme of fleetingness whether of human beings or of things in the ancient Near East and in the Hebrew Bible. We will focus on the semantic field of fleetingness, that is, the concepts that are used to grasp the transient nature of people and things in the Hebrew Bible and thus in Qoheleth. The question we accordingly ask is to what extent the image of transience/brevity/fleetingness /impermanence/transitoriness is simply an incidental or initial implication in Qoheleth's thought, or another major strand of the entire theme of the book? In other words, is the "transient family" a unique emphasis of הֶבֶל or only one of them?

In contending that the "transient family" should be adopted as the most appropriate meaning of the word הֶבֶל in most of its appearances, we are conscious that there are cases where הֶבֶל may connote futility or absurdity (5:6). A key to this interpretation is found and has been discussed in the opening (1:2-11) and closing poems (12:1-8) which we have pinned as the interpretive key for the meaning of הֶבֶל.

Using texts as our basis, we will substantiate our view that הֶבֶל functions in Qoheleth predominantly as a metaphor for brevity of life, the non-lasting aspect or effects of

things. The most striking examples are the *hebelistic* nature of the royal deeds, and expressions such as יְמֵי־חַיֵּי הֶבְלוֹ (6:12), בִּימֵי הַבְלִי (7:15) and כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֵּי הַבְלֶךָ (9:9), which, we will argue, would make far better sense if הֶבֶל is understood and interpreted as "fleeting, impermanent," focusing on life's brevity. For Qoheleth, life is not vanity, meaningless, but is fleeting. Examples like these are not lacking in the book and will be considered in our study.

IV.1 THE TRANSITORINESS THEME IN HB AND ANE LITERATURE

IV.1.1 THE SEMANTIC FIELD OF TRANSIENCE IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

The theme of the transiency of life pervades the ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature. One ancient Egyptian text from the third millennium BCE, "The Man who was tired of Life", was aware that "life is a transitory state, and even trees fall."[403] The song from the Tomb of King Antef, which generically belongs to the Harper Songs, refers to the passing of generations, from one to another, which in fact expresses the fleetingness of human life.[404]

Death is a kindly fate
A generation passes
Another stays,
Since the time of the ancestors
The gods who were before rest in their tombs
Blessed nobles too are buried in their tombs
(Yet) those who built tombs,
Their places are gone,
What has become of them ?
I have heard the words of Imhotep and Hardedef whose sayings are recited whole.
What of their places ?
Their walls have crumbled
Their places are gone
As though they had never been!
None comes from there
To tell of their state,
To tell of their needs,
To calm our hearts
Until we go where they have gone...
Lo, none is allowed to take his goods with him, Behold, none who departs comes back again!

[403] Raymond Olivier Faulkner, "The Man Who Was Tired of Life." *JEA* 42 (1956), 27.

[404] "The Song from the Tomb of King Antef," in *AEL* 1, 194-197.

One does not need much reflection to realize the similarity between this song and the "nature" poems in Qoheleth (1:2-11; 12:1-8). The song indeed confirms the non-return aspect of humans' movement. The generation that goes, does not come back; it is only taken over by another : "A generation passes; Another stays... none who departs comes back again." The poem goes further by reflecting on the fact that the places of the dead do not last for eternity;[405] they are doomed to destruction:

> What of their places ?
> Their walls have crumbled
> Their places are gone
> As though they had never been!

The transiency and frailty of the human existence are also depicted in "The Instruction of Amenemope," where the human is described as clay and straw, built by the god who everyday tears down and builds up.[406]

In the Mesopotamian wisdom literature, the transience family is found in at least six cuneiform wisdom writings dating back to the Old Babylonian period, which have been brought to our attention by scholars such as Bendt Alster and Wilfred G. Lambert.[407] These texts, singled out by the expression *níg-nam nu-kal* "nothing is of worth,"[408] argue, on

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[405] In Qoheleth the place of the dead (בֵּית עֹלָם) is not temporary, but forever (לְעוֹלָם).

[406] *ANET*, 421; *AEL* II, 160 [25:13-15].

[407] "Šima Milka", "Ballad of Early Rulers" and "Enlil and Namzitara" in *Wisdom from the Late Bronze Age*, ed Yoram Cohen (Atlanta: SBL, 2013), 81-128; 129-150 and 151-164; 'niĝ2-nam nu-kal' (Henceforth Niĝnam) in *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer* , ed Bendt Alster (Bethesda, 2005), 264-284); "Dialogue of Pessimism" in *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 107-109); "Counsels of a Pessimist" (*ibid*., pp. 139-149); See also A.R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic, Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts I* (Oxford, 2003), 200-201; line 140-143; 278-279, lines 1-15.

[408] Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer,* 266.

the one hand, that comprehension of the gods' ways is impossible, and, on the other hand, life is fleeting, human deeds and achievements are passing.

The wisdom composition "Enlil and Namzitarra" expounds one of the key themes we are concerned with: the shortness of human life and the inevitability of death. In this wisdom tale, Namzitarra rejects material gifts of silver, gold, lapis lazuli gems and sheep from the god Enlil for his good deeds, because they are of fleeting value.

> To where will I take your silver, your lapis lazuli gems, your sheep?
> The days of mankind are approaching, day after day-so it (life) will diminish,
> month after month-so it will diminish, year after year-so it will diminish,
> [...]-so it will diminish, 120 years-so will be the limit of mankind's life...
> from that day till now as long as mankind lived![409]

Namzitarra speaks about the very shortness of life which renders material wealth insignificant. And not only are the days of mankind decreasing with the passing of time, but they are also limited. Similar thought and emphasis is also found in the wisdom instruction of Šimâ Milka in which a son upon the day of death rejects his father's material wealth as fleeting and useless

> Few are the days in which we eat (our) bread,
> but many will be the days in which our teeth will be idle,
> Few are the days in which we look at the Sun,
> but many will be the days in which we will sit in the shadows.
> The Netherworld is teeming, but its inhabitants lie sleeping.
> Ereškigal is our mother and we her children.
> At the gate of the netherworld, blinds are placed,
> So that the living will not be able to see the dead.[410]

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[409] Cohen, *Wisdom from the Late Bronze Age,* 155.

[410] Šimâ Milka, lines 140-146, in *Wisdom from the Late Bronze Age,* 99-100.

We may conclude from the foregoing quotes that "Šimâ Milka" and "Enlil and Namzitarra" highlight the transiency and the futility of material things and wealth. Therein too, one finds a precise limit to humans' days, which in The "Ballad of Early Rulers" is determined by Ea:

> The fates are determined by Ea,
> The lots are drawn according to the will of the gods,
> Since always so it was.[411]

After such an opening, the poem goes on to depict the brevity of life and to question human beings' ability to comprehend the way of gods

> Has it never been heard from the mouth of (our) predecessor(s)?
> Above these were the kings...
> Above the houses of their dwelling, below their house of eternity.
> Like the distant heaven, nobody can reach (them),
> Like the depths of the Netherworld, nobody can know (them)
> Life is but a swivel of the eye,
> Life of mankind cannot [last] forever.[412]

In order to sustain his view on the fleetingness of life, the poet enumerates famous figures who, despite their glorious achievements, were not granted eternal life. Not only have they perished, but also their grandeur is now forgotten.

> Where is Alulu who reigned for 36,000 years?
> Where is Entena who went up to heaven?
> Where is Gilgameš who sought (eternal) life like (that of) Ziusudra?
> Where is Huwawa who was subdued when bowing down (to Gilgameš)?
> Where is Enkidu who was famous in his strength throughout the land?
> Where is Bazi? Where is Zizi?

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[411] Cohen, *Wisdom from the Late Bronze Age,* 141.

[412] Cohen, *Wisdom from the Late Bronze Age,* 141.

> Where are they-the great kings
> Where are the great kings from past days up to now?
> They are not (anymore) engendered, are not born
> Life without light- how can it be better than death?[413]

The idea that a human's lifespan is limited, that gains as wealth, happiness and achievements are futile and passing, is expressed elsewhere in Mesopotamian literature. One can, indeed, see the same concern for the brevity of human life in *Ludlul Bel Nemeqi*, "I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom": "Where have humans learned the way of a god? He who was alive yesterday is dead today."[414]

In "The Counsels of a Pessimist," the sage instructs his audience on the fleetingness not only of their lives, but also of their activities: "Whatever men do does not last forever, mankind and their achievements alike come to an end." [415] Likewise, in The Epic of Gilgamesh, the hero speaks of the brevity of life and compares human achievements to a wind, indicating the fleeting nature of their accomplishments:

> Only the gods [live] forever under the sun.
> As for mankind, numbered are their days;
> whatever they achieve is but the wind! [416]

This brief survey on the "transient family" has shown that the idea of the fleeting nature of one's life, possessions and achievements has been a great and crucial concern for the ancient Near Eastern sages. This concern is not however unique to their time.

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[413] Cohen, *Wisdom from the Late Bronze Age,* 141.

[414] "Ludlul Bel Nemeqi, 'I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom,'" *ANET*, 368.

[415] "Counsels of a Pessimist" Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 109.

[416] "The Epic of Gilgamesh," *ANET*, 50.

The images used to speak of the brevity and fleetingness of human life are also found in the HB: number of days, of years, wind.

IV.1.2 THE SEMANTIC FIELD OF TRANSIENCE IN THE HB

IV.1.2.1 The Term הֶבֶל

In the Hebrew Bible the word הֶבֶל prominently occurs in the book of Qoheleth with a large range of meanings. Yet the term has a literal meaning, that is, "vapor," "breath". One of the semantic implications of הֶבֶל as breath is fleetingness or transitoriness, for breath or vapor quickly flees away. It is in that vein that the biblical authors use הֶבֶל to describe and characterize human life.

In the Bible, indeed, it appears from a few occurrences that transience, brevity or fleetingness is apt for הֶבֶל. Thus, Isaiah warns his contemporaries against depending too heavily upon Egypt as an ally "for Egypt's help is הֶבֶל (fleeting) and empty" (Isaiah 30:7). Furthermore, to worship or to give ultimate value to anything which is transitory is the essence of idolatry. Thus, idols are air-like, transitory, and lacking in substance and permanence, and those who go after הֶבֶל (transitoriness) will certainly become הֶבֶל (transitory), that is they will quickly vanish.

Without denying the presence of the transience motive in other parts of the Hebrew Bible, Fredericks contends that the sense of ephemerality or fleetingness is found "primarily in the poetic or wisdom texts dealing with humanity and lifespan."[417]

A number of Psalms use הֶבֶל to describe the brevity of human life and the transitory nature of human affairs, compared to the eternity of God and the duration of God's

[417] Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, 22.

concerns (Ps 39:6.11; 62:9; 78:33; 94:11; 144:4). In Psalm 144:3-4, for instance, the psalmist acknowledges humanity's transiency. This human being is as short-lived as a breath and lives for only a day. The comparison with a breath or a passing shadow which parallels passages such as Ps 39:6 and Ps 102:12 expresses this side of the word הֶבֶל.

> O Lord, what is a human being (אָדָם) that you know him,
> or a son of man (בֶּן־אֱנוֹשׁ) that you think of him?
> They are like a breath (אָדָם לַהֶבֶל דָּמָה);
> their days are like a passing shadow (יָמָיו כְּצֵל עוֹבֵר) (Ps 144:3-4)

The picture described here is that of the brevity, the coming and going of the individual. The parallel expression כְּצֵל which we will consider later suggests the quick and fleeting nature of human life. As for the synonymous parallelism, that is, לַהֶבֶל דָּמָה "like a breath" and כְּצֵל "like a shadow", it would suggest that life is brief, continuously moving, and passing away.

Similarly, Psalm 39 highlights the psalmist's awareness of his temporary existence,[418] through the expressions קִצִּי, מִדַּת יָמַי, חָדֵל אָנִי and בְּצֶלֶם all denoting brevity of life along with the connotations of הֶבֶל.

> Lord, let me know my end (קִצִּי),
> and what is the measure of my days (מִדַּת יָמַי);
> let me know how fleeting my life is (חָדֵל אָנִי)[419]

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[418] Richard J. Clifford, *Psalms 1-72* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 199.

[419] Clifford offers a different view and reading of אֵדְעָה מֶה־חָדֵל אָנִי. According to him the NRSV translation of חָדֵל as "fleeting", which we stand for, is not an accurate translation of the Hebrew term חָדֵל (Clifford, *Psalms 1-72*, 199). The verb חָדַל is also used to refer to cessation of human's activity or to human life. Understood as "cessation of" "withdrawal", "end of", the term חָדֵל connotes temporariness, fleetingness, impermanence. As we mentioned the psalmist is already aware of the transience of life. What he wants to know is how this transient life will end. In Job 3:17 one reads that in Sheol the "the wicked cease (חָדְלוּ) from troubling", because they no longer exist. It is here underlined not only the fleetingness of the wicked but also their deeds. Thus, our reading of חָדֵל as "fleeting" in this verse is more contextual than lexical.

> You have made my days a few handbreadths,
> and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight.
> Surely everyone stands as a mere breath (כָּל־הֶבֶל).
> Surely everyone goes about like a shadow (בְּצֶלֶם).
> Surely for breath (הֶבֶל) they are in turmoil;

Job also uses הֶבֶל as a metaphor for the brevity of life (Job 7:16). Finally, in Proverb 31:30 the statement שֶׁקֶר הַחֵן וְהֶבֶל הַיֹּפִי אִשָּׁה יִרְאַת־יְהוָה הִיא תִתְהַלָּל ("charm is deceitful (שֶׁקֶר), and beauty is הֶבֶל, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised") may very well mean that beauty simply is a less enduring quality to look for in a woman than piety.

IV.1.2.2 The Term צֵל (Shadow)

The word צֵל as a parallel expression to הֶבֶל is not univocal.[420] Both the Hebrew and the Greek words for shadow (צֵל /σκιά) are used in the Bible in a literal and metaphorical sense. In the literal sense it is used for the place where the sunlight or light cannot penetrate, especially the shadow of a tree (Jonah 4:6; Judg 9:15, Ezek 31:6.12.17; Hos 4:13; Ps 80:10); of a rock (Judg 9:36); of a cloud (Isa 16:3; 25:5); of a roof (Gen 19:8) etc. Since shadow protects against the heat of the sun, the word צֵל conveys the metaphorical meaning of shade, protection, and defense by a man (בְּצִלּוֹ חִמַּדְתִּי, Sol 2:3); by a city (Jer 48:45; Isa 30:2; Ezek 17:23); by a rock (Isa 32:2); but especially by God (Num 14:9; Ps 17:8).

Another metaphorical use of צֵל which is of great importance for our investigation is found in its application and reference to ephemerality, transitoriness and fleetingness. The likening of the human lifespan (יָמִים) to a shadow (כְּצֵל) derives from the wisdom tradition. A significant accompanying key term is אָדָם, "human being" (Job 14:1-2;

[420] Johannes Schwab, "צֵל," *TDOT* 12:372-382; James D. Price, "צלל," *NIDOTTE* , "צֵלל," 3:807-810.

Ps. 144:4; Qoh 6:12; Job 8:9; Ps 102: 12). A human being's life is compared to a shadow, for it has no permanence and flees quickly away (כַּצֵּל יָמֵינוּ עַל־הָאָרֶץ וְאֵין מִקְוֶה, 1Ch 29:15).

In Psalms 102:12 and 109:23, the psalmist speaks about human life that continually moves towards its end (קֵץ /סוֹף) like "an evening shadow (כְּצֵל נָטוּי)"; and it withers away like grass (כָּעֵשֶׂב אִיבָשׁ). Job also, in his speeches, repeatedly acknowledges and emphasizes the fleeting nature of human life and his own powerlessness before God (7:7; 8:9; 16:9-14. 22-17:1; 17:-16). In Job 8:9, indeed, Job declares that humans days on earth are short-lived, for they go through life like a shadow (כְּצֵל):

> for we are but of yesterday (תְּמוֹל אֲנַחְנוּ),
> and we know nothing (וְלֹא נֵדָע),
> for our days on earth are but a shadow (כִּי צֵל יָמֵינוּ עֲלֵי־אָרֶץ) (Job 8:9; see also 14:1-2; 17:7).

According to Schwab "the idea is that a human life span, like a shadow, cannot be grasped or held fast (Sir. 34:2 par. "wind"; cf. Ps 144:4), but rather simply runs inexorably forward, i.e out"[421]

IV.1.2.3 The Term מִסְפָּר (few, number)

In chapter two of this study we argued that human beings, formed with a fixed number of days (מִסְפַּר יָמָיו),[422] are free and limited in their lifespan. The opening of Sirach 17 speaks of God's allocation of a fixed number of days for human life: *κύριος ἔκτισεν ἐκ γῆς ἄνθρωπον καὶ πάλιν ἀπέστρεψεν αὐτὸν εἰς αὐτήν ἡμέρας ἀριθμοῦ καὶ καιρὸν ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς* (Sir17:1-2a). While the works of the heavenly beings are for eternity: *ἐκόσμησεν εἰς αἰῶνα τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ καὶ τὰς ἀρχὰς αὐτῶν εἰς γενεὰς αὐτῶν* (Sir 16:27a), human beings are given only a small number

[421] Schwab, *TDOT* 12:381.

[422] *NIDOTTE*, "מִסְפָּר," 2:1008-1009; *HALOT*, s.v. "מִסְפָּר," 1:607. See also Gen 34:30; Num 9:20; Deut 4:27.

of days. While Genesis 6:3 fixes the number of a human beings days at 120 years, the psalmist numbers human lifespan at seventy years and eighty for the strong (אִם בִּגְבוּרֹת):

כִּי כָל־יָמֵינוּ פָּנוּ בְעֶבְרָתֶךָ
כִּלִּינוּ שָׁנֵינוּ כְמוֹ־הֶגֶה
יְמֵי־שְׁנוֹתֵינוּ בָהֶם שִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה
וְאִם בִּגְבוּרֹת שְׁמוֹנִים שָׁנָה
וְרָהְבָּם עָמָל וָאָוֶן
כִּי־גָז חִישׁ וַנָּעֻפָה (Ps 90:9-10)

For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh.
The days of our life are seventy years,
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
even then their span is only toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away. (Ps 90:9-10; see also v. 12)

Other biblical writings also reflect the awareness that the days of human life are numbered (Ps 103:1539:5; 78:39; 103:15 Isa 40:6-7.24). In the book of Job, the word מִסְפָּר is used in reference both to limited, fixed and determined things and to the unlimited, uncountable ones. The latter is used to speak of God's great and unsearchable actions. In this case the word מִסְפָּר is preceded by the particle עַד־אֵין as follows:עֹשֶׂה גְדֹלוֹת וְאֵין חֵקֶר נִפְלָאוֹת עַד־אֵין מִסְפָּר ("The one who does great things and unsearchable, marvelous things without number," Job 5:9 see also 9:10). Occurrences which refer to the human duration in life include prominently Job 14:5-6; 16: 22; 21:21. In chapter 14 for instance, the notion "of a few days" is present in v. 1b (קְצַר יָמִים) and v. 5a (יָמָיו מִסְפַּר־חֳדָשָׁיו) in which Job affirms that God has determined the span of a human's life of a short number of months (מִסְפַּר־חֳדָשָׁיו) and years which will not pass (לֹא יַעֲבוֹר).

> A mortal, born of woman, few of days and full of trouble...their days are determined (חֲרוּצִים), and the number of their months is known to you, and you have appointed the boundaries (עָשִׂיתָ חֻקּוֹ) that they cannot pass (14:1.5-6).

Further Job affirms that after a short number of years (שְׁנוֹת מִסְפָּר) he will be gone never to return (יֶאֱתֶיוּ וְאֹרַח לֹא־אָשׁוּב אֵהֵלֵךְ, Job 16:22). Besides the term מִסְפָּר, Job makes

use of the expression מְעַט יָמַי (Job 10:20) still in allusion to the shortness and transience of life. From the whirlwind, God makes an ironic comment to Job, reminding him of the brevity of his life: "You must know, for you were born then, and the number of your days (מִסְפַּר יָמֶיךָ) is great" (Job 38:21).

The assertion that God gave humanity "a number of days" (Sir 17:2) seems to derive more from the sage's reflection on divine eternity and human mortality. Most importantly, this expression emphasizes the shortness of human life in comparison with God's everlasting nature but also with the eternity of a good reputation, since a contrast exists between the limited length of one's human life and the permanence of a good reputation, and the stability of the earth as stated in Qoheleth.

IV.1.2.4 Other Words and Images of Transience

Besides the above-mentioned terminologies (הֶבֶל, צֵל, מִסְפָּר) the HB also uses other expressions, metaphors and images to depict the fleeting nature of human beings and life in the cosmos. Suffice it to mention rhetorical questions such as, מָה־אֱנוֹשׁ (Ps 8:5; Job 7:17), מָה־אָדָם (Ps 144:3); and the terms, בֶּן־אֱנוֹשׁ (Ps 144:3); בֶּן־אָדָם (Ps 8:5) which all denote the brevity along with the connotations of הֶבֶל.

Aa a בֶּן־אֱנוֹשׁ or בֶּן־אָדָם, though he does not accept it (מָאַסְתִּי), Job acknowledges that he will not live forever (לֹא־לְעֹלָם אֶחְיֶה, 7:16a), because his days are fleeting (כִּי־הֶבֶל יָמָי, Job 7:16b), and his life is like the wind (רוּחַ חַיָּי). In the opening poems of Qoheleth we have seen that the wind (רוּחַ) has a cyclical movement. There is no such thing in Job's description of his life like the wind. For him there is no return whence he is gone: לֹא־תָשׁוּב עֵינִי לִרְאוֹת טוֹב ("my eye will not return again to see good" (Job 7:7). As Hawley comments, "by calling upon God to recognize that his life is wind in the context of other expressions of the fleeting nature

of life, he [Job] metaphorically evokes the temporal properties of wind. Wind comes and goes quickly."[423] In other words, Job uses רוּחַ to describe the brevity of existence.

Later, Job again emphasizes this transiency of life in chapter 14: 1-2 in which he appeals to the terms קְצַר יָמִים (few days), and the images of a flower (כְּצִיץ) that flourishes and withers (יָצָא וַיִּמָּל),[424] and that of a shadow (כַּצֵּל), as we have seen earlier, to describe the impermanent nature of human beings (לֹא יַעֲמוֹד ; יִבְרַח).

Elsewhere in the book of Psalms, elements of nature are used to characterize the temporariness of life (Ps 103:15-16; 90:5). Thus, in Psalm 103:15-16, the psalmist compares the days of man (אֱנוֹשׁ) to the grass (כֶּחָצִיר). He even goes further in depicting אֱנוֹשׁ as the flower of the field (כְּצִיץ הַשָּׂדֶה) which flourishes (יָצִיץ) in its time, but which disappears when the wind passes over it (כִּי רוּחַ עָבְרָה־בּוֹ וְאֵינֶנּוּ). Even the place he used to be acknowledges his absence (וְלֹא־יַכִּירֶנּוּ עוֹד מְקוֹמוֹ). Finally in Proverbs 30:18-20, the concept of a world of permanent transience is noticeable through the metaphorical use of דֶּרֶךְ (way, path).

Three things are too wonderful for me;	שְׁלֹשָׁה הֵמָּה נִפְלְאוּ מִמֶּנִּי
four I do not understand:	(וְאַרְבָּע) [וְאַרְבָּעָה] לֹא יְדַעְתִּים
the way of an eagle in the sky,	דֶּרֶךְ הַנֶּשֶׁר	בַּשָּׁמָיִם
the way of a snake on a rock,	דֶּרֶךְ נָחָשׁ עֲלֵי צוּר
the way of a ship on the high seas,	דֶּרֶךְ־אֳנִיָּה בְלֶב־יָם
and the way of a man with a girl.	וְדֶרֶךְ גֶּבֶר בְּעַלְמָה
This is the way of an adulteress:	כֵּן	דֶּרֶךְ אִשָּׁה מְנָאָפֶת
she eats, and wipes her mouth,	אָכְלָה וּמָחֲתָה פִּיהָ
and says, "I have done no wrong."	וְאָמְרָה לֹא־פָעַלְתִּי אָוֶן

[423] Lance R. Hawley, *Metaphor Competition in the Book of Job*. Journal of Ancient Judaism. Supplements, Volume 26 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 93.

[424] The image of the blossoming tree appears in the final poem of Qoheleth, as opposed to the withering of the human being.

In the ANE and the HB as we have shown so far, not only is life itself temporary, fleeting, but the results of man's labor and action are also fleeting (Prov 13:11a; 21:6). Qoheleth frequently speaks of the limits to human lifespan as well. One finds, indeed, statements and expressions that highlight the temporariness, fleetingness of activities and achievements in life.

IV.2 IMAGES OF TRANSIENCY WITHIN QOHELETH

The metaphorical reading of הֶבֶל as "temporary", "fleeting" or "brief"[425] as we have been contending, shows Qoheleth's concern with the *pan-hebelness*. By using הֶבֶל, Qoheleth portrays a lively image of humanity's transiency. As he speaks of the brevity of human life, Qoheleth uses companion phrases or expressions of הֶבֶל. The most frequent are רְעוּת רוּחַ (Qoh 1:14; 2:11.17.26; 4:4.6; 6:9) and רַעְיוֹן רוּחַ (Qoh 1:17; 4:16), which Martin A. Shields considers as "the most significant for delineating Qoheleth's understanding of הֶבֶל."[426] Taking רְעוּת רוּחַ as a virtual equivalent to הֶבֶל, Farmer argues that the use of רוּחַ indicates that the material referent of "vapor" or "breath" serves as a pointer to the ephemeral that should color our understanding of הֶבֶל in each instance.[427]

The terms רְעוּת רוּחַ and רַעְיוֹן רוּחַ appear nowhere else in the HB. Modern translations render them variously: "a striving after wind" (RSV, NASB, ESV),[428] "a chasing

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[425] Fredericks, *Coping with Transience,* 22-26. See also Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good?,* 145.

[426] Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, 114.

[427] Farmer, *Who knows what is Good?*, 143-146.

[428] Graham Ogden opts for this translation of רְעוּת רוּחַ which he connects with "a shepherd attempting to herd the wind as he would herd goats." According to him the phrase "striving after the wind" is used in reference to someone who is attempting something beyond his power to control, which means human life and work. Certain things that are God-given are beyond our power to understand them as fully as we may wish (Graham Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 2007), 40.

after the wind" (NIV, NRSV, NIV),[429] "grasping for the wind" (NKJV),[430] and "a pursuit of the wind" (HCSB), "poursuite du vent" (TOB, FBJ), "course après le vent" (BFC), "Haschen nach Wind" (ELB), "Haschen nach Luft" (HRD), "Greifen nach Wind" (ZUR), and "vexation of spirit" (KJV).

What in fact is at issue is the meaning and underlying root of the key word רְעוּת which is disputed among four different roots with the consonant רעה meaning "to feed, shepherd, tend, herd" (רָעָה); "to associate with"; "to strive"; and "to take pleasure, to desire."[431] If scholars seem to agree that the forms רְעוּת and רַעְיוֹן derive from the Semitic root רעה, there is, however, the question as to know whether they are of the Hebrew meaning "shepherding, grazing" or borrowed from the Aramaic meaning "desire, will; thought."[432] In the former, "wind" is seen as an objective genitive as in Prov 15:14 where "the mouths of fools shepherd on folly: וּפְנֵי כְסִילִים יִרְעֶה אִוֶּלֶת ; and as in Hos 12:2 where the same idiom occurs (רֹעֶה רוּחַ) and in parallel with the verb to pursue, to chase (רָדַף) the wind (קָדִים) all day long (כָּל־הַיּוֹם).

The picture is complicated if one refers to the older exegesis according to which the two nouns רְעוּת and רַעְיוֹן derive from the root רעע, meaning "to be evil, bad" or "to break".[433] The idea of "breaking of the spirit" or "badness of the spirit" refers to someone who

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[429] Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 81.

[430] Hubbard who follows this view understands the phrase רְעוּת רוּחַ as puzzlement at the workings of life and our human striving to make sense of them (David A. Hubbard, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, The Communicator's Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1991), 44.

[431] BDB, s.v. "רָעָה " 944-946; See also Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, 114; Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 81.

[432] BDB, s.v. "רָעָה " 946. See Ezra 5:17 and 7:18 רְעוּת as "will or desire" (רְעוּת מַלְכָּא, 5:17; כִּרְעוּת אֱלָהֲכֹם, 7:18), and Daniel 2:29-30; 4:16; 5:6.10; 7:28 for רַעְיוֹן as denoting frustrating, perplexing or incomprehensible thoughts.

[433] BDB s.v. "רעע" 949; This meaning is found in *Symmachus* reading of Qoh 4:6; 6:9 where the word κάκωσις (mistreatment, affliction, oppression) is used instead of προαίρεσις. Hence, κάκωσεως πνεύματος.

is conflicted and unhappy, whose soul is afflicted by various thoughts. Thus, the Vulg. reads *afflictio spiritus* (Qoh 1:14). According to Jerome, citing his Jewish instructor, the word רְעוּת means rather affliction and evil than vexation and will (magis afflictionem, et malitiam, quam pastionem, et voluntatem significaret).[434]

This old view is echoed prominently in Michael Fox's reading of the phrase רְעוּת רוּחַ as a "vexation of spirit",[435] arguing that most of the phenomena and experiences described by רְעוּת רוּחַ are not pursuits, and that some of the activities covered by the phrase do attain their immediate goal.[436] What is at issue, as he claims, is "the psychological experience of the pursuer," given that the object being pursued has turned out to be unpleasant.[437] He states that "vexation (or where appropriate, vexatious), which can be predicated of both activities and events, is a suitable translation of the metaphor."[438] Accordingly, the phrase רְעוּת רוּחַ could be translated "affliction of the spirit" or "vexation of the spirit." Fox emphasizes that in Aramaic, especially in Syriac, the root רעי produces verbs for both thinking and wishing and understands the meaning of רְעוּת as 'senseless thoughts'.[439]

We, however, contend that the phrase רְעוּת רוּחַ in Qoheleth has less to do with the emotional effect of the הֶבֶל judgments on the pursuer as Fox claims[440] than with life's transient nature. It connotes the temporariness, the brevity of life and their experiences which are like the wind that constantly changes direction from north to south, east to west,

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[434] Jerome, *Commentarius in Ecclesiasten*, 260.

[435] Fox, *Qoheleth and his Contradictions*, 51. See also Anderson, *Qoheleth and its Pessimistic Theology*, 19-20.

[436] Fox, *A Time to Tear down and a Time to build up,* 43; Idem, *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, 49.

[437] Fox, *Qohelet and his contradictions*, 49.

[438] Fox, *Qohelet and his contradictions*, 49.

[439] Fox, *A Time to Tear down and a Time to build up*, 45.

[440] Fox, *Qohelet and his contradictions*, 48.

downward, upward, around and even virtually still and so is fleeting.[441] Furthermore, it tells of the impossibility of the human being to grasp or control God's ways. As it is impossible to hold a breath of air in one's hand, so it is impossible to direct the wind which is constantly passing. Wind comes and goes quickly before one realizes what has happened.

Besides הֶבֶל and רְעוּת רוּחַ as images of fleetingness, Qoheleth refers to צֵל and מִסְפָּר to characterize the *hebelistic* nature of life under the earth. In two occurrences out of four Qoheleth compares humanity's duration to צֵל "shadow,"[442] which cannot be kept or grasped. He also highlights מִסְפָּר "short number" of days of one's life: "For who knows what is good for a human being among the living during the short number (מִסְפָּר) of days of his fleeting life (הֶבֶל)? And he spends them like a shadow (צֵל)" (Qoh 6:12). According to Levicheva, by using the word צֵל, "Qoheleth brings to mind a picture of a shadow that always moves away and eventually disappears without a trace as the day gives way to the night. He points out that human life always moves forward and ultimately runs out."[443]

Like the biblical and ancient Near Eastern sages, Qoheleth has no doubt about the limitedness of human life on earth. Unlike these writers, however, Qoheleth is interested not in the number of days allotted to human beings but how one should have a meaningful life in his lifetime that in fact is unknown to him. One of the motives for Qoheleth's search highlighted in Chapter 2:3 and 6:12 was to find what is good for a human to do under heaven during the few days of his fleeing life (הֶבְלוֹ) which passes like a shadow (כַּצֵּל, 6:12).

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[441] Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, 30.

[442] The word צֵל occurs two other times in chapter (7:12a; 7:12b) but in reference to protection, shelter (7:12a): "For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money."

[443] Levicheva, "Contentment in the Book of Ecclesiastes," 55.

In Qoh 2:3, for instance, one reads:

I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine, my mind still guiding me with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I see what was good for the sons of men who will work under heaven during the few days of their life.	תַּרְתִּי בְלִבִּי לִמְשׁוֹךְ בַּיַּיִן אֶת־בְּשָׂרִי וְלִבִּי נֹהֵג בַּחָכְמָה וְלֶאֱחֹז בְּסִכְלוּת עַד אֲשֶׁר־אֶרְאֶה אֵי־זֶה טוֹב לִבְנֵי הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם מִסְפַּר יְמֵי חַיֵּיהֶם:

In response to his question of interest, Qoheleth goes on to propose in 5:17 the enjoyment of one's labor as what is good and appropriate (יָפֶה) in life for people, but also the recognition that the brevity of life is one's lot (חֶלְקוֹ).

This is what I have seen to be good, which is appropriate: [that one should] eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives him; for this is his lot.	הִנֵּה אֲשֶׁר־רָאִיתִי אָנִי טוֹב אֲשֶׁר־יָפֶה לֶאֱכוֹל־וְלִשְׁתּוֹת וְלִרְאוֹת טוֹבָה בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ| שֶׁיַּעֲמֹל תַּחַת־הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ מִסְפַּר יְמֵי־(חַיָּיו) [חַיָּיו] אֲשֶׁר־נָתַן־לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים כִּי־הוּא חֶלְקוֹ

One common interpretation has been to relate the call to eat, to drink and to find joy in all toil to אֲשֶׁר־נָתַן־לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים כִּי־הוּא חֶלְקוֹ. If this reading is granted, it remains possible, however, to take מִסְפַּר יְמֵי־חַיָּיו as the direct object of אֲשֶׁר־נָתַן־לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים. We might accordingly argue that, for Qoheleth, the first and fundamental step for one to have a meaningful life is to accept the חֵלֶק, given to him by God, which consists in recognizing and accepting that his days are limited on earth. This מִסְפַּר יְמֵי־חַיָּיו appears to be in conflict with the eternity (הָעֹלָם) God has put in their hearts or minds (נָתַן בְּלִבָּם, 3:11). The desire of immortality and enduring memories is inherent to human nature. As shown in our second chapter, it is this desire that led the humans to eat of the forbidden fruit, and to its consequent expulsion from the garden. The only way remaining for humanity to overcome the fate of mortality and to achieve immortality and continuity is progeny and achievements which for

Qoheleth are limited in time and space, since there is no remembrance (1:11). Thus, by using the term מִסְפָּר Qoheleth creates an image of life that passes, but he also defines the human lifetime which proceeds inevitably to its end. This end, unknown to humans, happens suddenly (עֲלֵיהֶם פִּתְאֹם, 9:12).

Qoheleth's use of lexemes הֶבֶל "fleeting", רְעוּת רוּחַ "pursuit of wind", צֵל "shadow", and "מִסְפָּר "short number" with which, in fact, his audience is acquainted since these terms are frequently used in the Hebrew Bible to speak of the lack of permanence in life, aims at describing human life as brief, transitory and ungraspable. According to Farmer, "it is not something one can hang on to for long;...it is transitory, and elusive rather than meaningless."[444] It is, therefore, purposefully that Qoheleth uses these images, that is, "to present the fleeting nature of human life as a concern to his audience and to help them realize the value and meaningfulness of their existence under the sun."[445]

We conclude that, for Qoheleth, life is not meaningless, nor absurd, even though one can face absurd situations; rather, life for him and throughout his teaching, is fleeting, transitory, and enjoyable, for it is a gift from God. That is to say, the shortness of life and the limited duration of human achievements do not empty human life of its true meaning and value. Farmer rightly affirms that "the essential quality to which hebel refers is lack of permanence rather than lack of worth and value."[446] Succinctly put, Qoheleth believes and wants his readers/listeners to believe as well that everything in life is a gift from God which one should enjoy, though temporary and brief, and no matter how long one lives.

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[444] Farmer, *Who knows what is Good?*, 145.

[445] Levicheva, "Contentment in the Book of Ecclesiastes", 57.

[446] Farmer, *Who knows what is Good?*, 145.

IV.2.1 FURTHER IMPLICATIONS OF הֶבֶל AS FLEETING

IV.2.1.1 THE TRANSITORY NATURE OF THE ROYAL DEEDS

IV.2.1.1.1 The voice of Qoheleth in 1:1-11 and his deeds in 1:12-2:26

The link between the royal experiment in 1:12-2:26 and the cosmological poem (1:2-11) is a point of debate. The concern has been to know whether there is a meaningful connection between the two passages, or not. In other words, does one follow naturally after the other, or do the two sections function independently of each other?

As shown in our third chapter, scholars such as Longman and Koh argue for the later insertion of the cosmological poem. Excluding the opening poem (1:2-11) and the epilogue (12:8-14) which he considers later additions to the book, Longman makes the book of Qoheleth begin in 1:12 and end in 12:7.[447] Koh is more nuanced in his view arguing that "these poems could have been written by Qoheleth but at a different time and incorporated by a later editor."[448] This view does not, however, solve the problem of the relationship between 1:1-11 and 1:12-2:26.

One might even appeal to the struggle of those who view both sections as part of the original book to understand the relationship between these passages. Suffice it to mention Ingram who, though he finds some possible links, notes that

> it is difficult to see how the passages bear on each other: how does 1:1-3 affect 1:4-11, and how does it in turn affect 1:12-2:3? These three sections seem rather to be juxtaposed with no obvious attempt to establish a connection between

[447] Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 21.

[448] Koh, *Royal Autobiography in the Book of Qoheleth,* 23.

> them. However, 1:4-11 does establish a pattern that is followed throughout the book, more or less explicitly.[449]

Interestingly, Ingram reckons the foundational role of the cosmological poem as it establishes a pattern for the whole book. For instance, Qoheleth addresses the theme of death in opening poem (1:4) which he develops further later on (2:15-17; 3:18-21; 4:2-3; 7:1-4; 9:1-6; 12:1-7), extends his investigation to find profit and good in his own life (1:3) to the life of humanity in general (2:3.11.24-26; 3:9.19; 5:11.16.17; 6:8; 7:11-12). We might see the relationship between 1:2-11 and 1:12-2:26 stands on that pattern. Jennie Barbour derives the opening poem from the royal project of seeing everything that is done (1:12).[450]

Along these contentions, we argue that Qoh 1:1-11 is an account of Qoheleth's words and deeds (דִּבְרֵי קֹהֶלֶת,1:1), and as such it is connected to Qoh 1:12-2:26, linguistically and thematically, which is also an account of his words and deeds.

In his commentary on Qoheleth, Schwienhorst-Schönberger establishes the link between the "nature" poem and the royal experiment by simply referring to the book title. According to him the title דִּבְרֵי קֹהֶלֶת evokes a royal living world (*eine königliche Lebenswelt*) with ideas of greatness and duration (*Größe und Dauer*), of life, salvation and meaning (*Leben, Heil und Sinn*). He states,

> ...Aus dieser Spannung heraus entsteht die »Geschichte« des Buches: Eine königliche Figur sieht sich mit der Vergänglichkeit, mit dem Windhauch-Charakter des Lebens konfrontiert.[451]

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[449] Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes*, 72-73.

[450] Barbour, *The Story of Israel in the Book of Qohelet* , 48.

[451] "...The story of the book is born out of this tension: a royal figure is confronted with the transience, with the breath of wind character of life" (Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 148).

Furthermore, the linguistic affinities between Qoh 1:2-11 and Qoh1:12-2:26 help to establish the voice of Qoheleth in the opening poem and his deeds.

Terminology	*Opening poem (1:1-11)*	*Royal Experiment (1:12-2:26)*
הֶבֶל	1:2	1:14.15.17.19.21.23.26
מֶלֶךְ בִּירוּשָׁלָם	1:1	1:12
עָמָל	1:3	2:10.11.18.19.20.22.24
יִתְרוֹן	1:3	2:11.13
עָשָׂה	1:9	1:13.14; 2:2.3.5.6.8.11.12.17
תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ	1:3.9	1:14; 2:11.17.18.19.20.22
אֵין זִכְרוֹן	1:11	2:16

IV.2.1.1.2 Topos and Subject of Qoheleth's Search

The most prominent feature of king Qoheleth is his search for meaning and the description of his royal achievements. To help the reader to better understand and appreciate the results of his investigations, Qoheleth provides him with a *topos*. In the language of the 16th century Saint Ignatius of Loyola, he makes the "composition of place" for his search, which is תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ (under the sun)/תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם (under heaven). As we have already discussed in the previous section,[452] the expressions תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ and תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם refer to the world of human action. They are "the arena for seeing everything."[453] Before he narrates

[452] See the section 1.1.2.1.1 "Literary analysis of Qoh 1:2-3"

[453] Barbour, *The story of Qoheleth*, 44.

his quest, Qoheleth provides his audience with an initial project summary in 1:13-14 which highlights the method (how), the object (what), the arena (where) and the conclusion of his exploration (תּוּר) and search (דָּרַשׁ) as presented in the following structure.

A (*How?*): בַּחָכְמָה / וְנָתַתִּי אֶת־לִבִּי
B (*What?*): כָּל־אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה
C (*Where?*): תַּחַת הַשָּׁמָיִם
D (*Conclusion*): עִנְיַן רָע ׀ הוּא
D' (Conclusion): וְהִנֵּה הַכֹּל הֶבֶל וּרְעוּת רוּחַ
C' (*Where?*): תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ
B' (*What ?*): כָּל־הַמַּעֲשִׂים שֶׁנַּעֲשׂוּ
A' (*How?*): רָאִיתִי

The fact that the agents of the two verbs נַעֲשָׂה and נַעֲשׂוּ are explicitly stated might allude to the fact that Qoheleth has in mind deeds that humans perform and deeds that they are subjected to. Human actions are one part of the totality (כָּל־הַמַּעֲשִׂים שֶׁנַּעֲשׂוּ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ) that Qoheleth witnesses. The other part is God's deeds (כָּל־מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים, 8:17; 11:5), in terms of what he has planned and designed (אֶת־הַכֹּל עָשָׂה יָפֶה בְעִתּוֹ [אֱלֹהִים], 3:11). Qoheleth's search, therefore, could be seen as a comprehensive one, as his project refers to all that happens in life, which includes not only human deeds, but also the natural phenomena and the divine actions.

The first and important thing Qoheleth observes is the tension between permanence and impermanence, stability and ceaseless recurrent cycles and paradoxes. The sun rises, sets, and rises again; the wind turns in circles; and the rivers remain full of running water even as they empty themselves continually into the sea, which never fills. Human beings also participate in these ongoing cosmic cycles, each generation replacing the previous one.

There is, however, a significant difference between the cyclic nature of human existence and the cyclicality of the natural phenomena.

Whereas these latter are marked by endless repetitions of the same things, with a certain regularity, humans are mostly characterized by their temporariness, by unsatisfied desires. It is in such a world that Qoheleth undertakes his search to seek out (לִדְרוֹשׁ) and explore (לָתוּר) the meaning of life and what the human condition is all about. This search in which king Qoheleth puts all his heart and mind (נָתַתִּי אֶת־לִבִּי) and which he carries out by wisdom (בַּחָכְמָה)[454] is not an easy task. It is, according to Qoheleth, עִנְיַן רָע (unhappy task 1:13), certainly because of the inability of humans to come out with satisfying results. This is in fact echoed in the inconclusive striving of humans to have their eyes satisfied, their ears filled (1:9), and to find something new (1:9-11), due to their limited knowledge and the brevity of their life (מִסְפַּר יְמֵי חַיֵּיהֶם, 2:3).

Without offering details on his project to investigate all that is done under the earth, wisdom, madness and folly, Qoheleth concludes to their *hebelness*. In other words, Qoheleth attempts to make sense out of life as fleeting (הֶבֶל), as "chasing after the wind" (רְעוּת רוּחַ 1:14 / רַעְיוֹן רוּחַ, 1:17). The conclusion and observation in Qoh 1:12-18 are fleshed out in Qoheleth's next search in 2:1-26.

In 2:1-11 in fact, Qoheleth focuses his search on pleasure (שִׂמְחָה) and activities in life that bring pleasure. Specifically, he aims to experience pleasure in order to discern

[454] Some commentators take בַּחָכְמָה to be the direct object of the two infinitives. It is however better to understand the preposition ב in as an instrumental ב, which yields the translation "by" Hence, בַּחָכְמָה is best read by wisdom (cf. Qoh 2:3; 7:23; 9:15; see also Prov 3:19; 24:3).

whether it provides an answer in his search for the value of his toil in 1:3 (מַה־יִּתְרוֹן לָאָדָם בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ שֶׁיַּעֲמֹל תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ).

IV.2.1.1.3 The 'Expositio rerum gestarum' of Qoheleth

In his article, "The Deeds of Ancient Mesopotamian Kings", Mario Liverani sought the reason behind the writing and the publishing of the ancient kings' achievements, as well as the audience, and he came up with the conclusion that:

> they were written for a human audience,[455] and for the purpose of present, not future, times. They were written to become known -in some way- to subjects and enemies; they are written for self-justification, or to obtain or increase sociopolitical control, or to mobilize, or to impress, or even to frighten.[456]

This conclusion is evidenced and corroborated by the "historical writing of the Greeks and Latins whose purpose was prominently the description of men's deeds (πράξεις)."[457] In other words, it consists in the *expositio rerum gestarum* (the narration of deeds), the description of *res gestae*, that is, man's action in politics, diplomacy and war.[458]

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[455] Liverani distinguishes three spheres of audiences. The first is the inner audience which comprises officials, priests, courtiers, administrative personnel. The second is the wider audience which comprises the Assyrian citizens, mainly those living in the capital city or in other towns. The third audience is the peripheral in the social sense (women) or in the topographical (the villages). The only thing the latter category needs to know is that a king living and acting in the capital city is beloved by gods and he is able to ensure their well-being. (Mario Liverani, "The Deeds of Ancients Mesopotamian Kings", in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* vol IV ed., Jack M. Sasson (Scribner's, 1995), 2354-2355.

[456] Liverani, "The Deeds of Ancient Mesopotamian Kings", 2354.

[457] *Aristotle Rhet.* 1. 1360 a.

[458] Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 2.4.2. Cicero also defines *narratio* more narrowly as *rerum gestarum aut ut gestarum expositio* "an exposition of events that have occurred or are supposed to have occurred" (*De Inventione* I. xix. 27, tr. Harry Mortimer Hubbell, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1949, 54-55).

Examples of *expositio* of the memorable deeds of a single individual, mainly kings, are not lacking in both worlds, the Greek and ancient Near East. Without discarding the deeds of humans in Greek historical writing,[459] we find more relevant for our current investigation the *expositio rerum gestarum* of the ancient Near Eastern kings whose prominent deeds are buildings and wars.

Indeed, the successful Mesopotamian king is portrayed as a relentless builder and victorious warrior.[460] Suffice it to look at the Assyrians royal inscriptions (ARI), and one will notice that the building of palaces, and temples and city wall constructions, as well as the wealth of the kings are widespread in comparison with their predecessors.

In the inscription "Broken Obelisk" we are told of the building of the city of Assur, and of a canal dug by Assur-dan, king of Assyria.

> the great wall of my city Assur, the whole circuit thereof, I built anew, and raised on high a mound of earth around it. A palace of cedar-wood, a palace of boxwood, a palace of pistachio-wood, a palace of tamarisk-wood, in my city Assur, I built...The canal, which Assur-dan, king of Assyria, had dug I cut the head of that canal in a new place. I let the waters flow into it, and I planted orchards (by its side).[461]

Quintilian 2.4.2, in *The Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome,* ed. Charles W. Fornara (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 2-3.

[459] Worth noting here is Xenophon's reference to the rise of Jason of Pherae as "the deeds of Jason"(Xenophon *Hellenica* 6.i.19; John Dillery, *Xenophon and the History of His Times* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1995), 164-178; The Theopompus' Philippica (FGrHist 115, see also www.press.umich.edu/pdf/0472113275-ch5.pdf The Philippika of Theopompus, 143-175), the history of Alexander's campaign against Persia written by Callisthenes (FrGrHist 124 F 28ff) cf. Fornara, *The Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome,* 34-35.

[460] Koh, *Royal autobiography*, 93.

[461] "The Broken Obelisk Inscription" in *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* vol 1, ed. Daniel David Luckenbill (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 118-124.

Likewise, Ashurnasirpal II is presented in the royal inscriptions as one of Assyria's great builder kings. His main building enterprise was at Calah: a canal was dug, gardens were planted, a huge palace and several temples were erected, and a wall was built around the city:

> The ancient city Calah which Shalmaneser, king of Assyria, a prince who preceded me, had built-this city had become dilapidated; it lay dormant (and) had turned into ruin hills. I rebuilt this city. I took people which I had conquered from the lands over which I had gained dominion, from the land Suhu, (from) the entire land…I settled (them) therein. I dug out a canal from the Upper Zab (and) called it Patti-hegalli. I planted orchards in its environs. I offered fruit (and) wine to Aššur, my lord, and the temples of my land. I cleared away the old ruin hill (and) dug down to water level; I sank (the foundation pit) down to a depth of 120 layers of brick. I built its wall. I built (and) completed it from top to bottom.[462]

Sennacherib likewise boasts not only of his military campaigns but also of his building achievements. His royal inscriptions display a detailed and extravagant account of the building works which comprise the rebuilding of Egalzagdinutukua (the Palace without a rival)[463] and the planting of a botanical garden,[464] the construction of the great wall of Badnigerimḫuluḫa (terrorizer of the enemies),[465] the enlargement of Nineveh, the royal city, along with the restructuration of its public areas, the buildings of its walls, of aqueducts, of

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[462] RIMA 2, A.0.101.1 iii 132b-136, with duplicates; A.0.101.17 v 1-23, in *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC. II, (858-745 BC)* ed., Albert Kirk Grayson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 222-223; 252. Work on the palace is also described in A.0.101.23, 14b-22 in idem, 276.

[463] RINAP 3/1, 1:79; 3.56 in *The Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib*, *King of Assyria* (704-681 BC), eds., Kirk A. Grayson and Jamie Novotny (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 38. 68.

[464] RINAP 1:87-88.

[465] RINAP 15, vii.24 in Ibid., 103.

a bridge, and the digging of canals for irrigating fields and orchards given to the citizens of Nineveh.

> I had enlarged the site of Nineveh, my capital city. I broadened its squares, makings them as bright as clay. I had a bridge constructed opposite the Citadel Gate with paving stones of white limestone for the passage of my lordly chariot. Beside the city, in a botanical garden one *pānu* in size and a garden one *pānu* in size) for a game preserve, I gathered every type of aromatic tree of the land Ḫatti, fruit trees of all lands, and trees that are the mainstay of the mountains and Chaldea. Upstream of the city, on newly tilled soil, I planted vines, every type of fruit, and olive trees. For the expansion of Orchards, I subdivided the meadowland upstream of the city into plots of two *pānu* each for the citizens of Nineveh and I handed them over to them…I caused an inexhaustible supply of water to flow.[466]

The works of Qoheleth also exhibit strong similarities with ARI[467] which were written not only to describe the past, but mainly to serve certain political agendas. Qoheleth's lists of achievements and possessions in 2:4-8 are also similar to the items mentioned in the ARI.

After finding that pleasure is fleeting, Qoheleth sets forth his great achievements which according to Seow fit the "résumé of a king."

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[466] RINAP 15, vii 29b-viii 14, in *Ibid.*, 104.

[467] Douglas J. Green, "*I Undertook Great Works*": *The Ideology of Domestic Achievements in West Semitic Royal Inscriptions* (FZAT 2, 41; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 285.

2:4	הִגְדַּלְתִּי מַעֲשָׂי בָּנִיתִי לִי בָּתִּים נָטַעְתִּי לִי כְּרָמִים:	I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself;
2:5	עָשִׂיתִי לִי גַּנּוֹת וּפַרְדֵּסִים וְנָטַעְתִּי בָהֶם עֵץ כָּל־פֶּרִי:	I made myself gardens and parks and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees.
2:6	עָשִׂיתִי לִי בְּרֵכוֹת מָיִם לְהַשְׁקוֹת מֵהֶם יַעַר צוֹמֵחַ עֵצִים:	I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.
2:7	קָנִיתִי עֲבָדִים וּשְׁפָחוֹת וּבְנֵי־בַיִת הָיָה לִי גַּם מִקְנֶה בָקָר וָצֹאן הַרְבֵּה הָיָה לִי מִכֹּל שֶׁהָיוּ לְפָנַי בִּירוּשָׁלָם	I bought male and female slaves and had slaves who were born in my house; I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem.
2:8	כָּנַסְתִּי לִי גַּם־כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב וּסְגֻלַּת מְלָכִים וְהַמְּדִינוֹת עָשִׂיתִי לִי שָׁרִים וְשָׁרוֹת וְתַעֲנוּגֹת בְּנֵי הָאָדָם שִׁדָּה וְשִׁדּוֹת:	I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and of the provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and delights of the flesh, and many concubines.
2:9	וְגָדַלְתִּי וְהוֹסַפְתִּי מִכֹּל שֶׁהָיָה לְפָנַי בִּירוּשָׁלִָם אַף חָכְמָתִי עָמְדָה לִי:	So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me.
2:10	וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר שָׁאֲלוּ עֵינַי לֹא אָצַלְתִּי מֵהֶם לֹא־מָנַעְתִּי אֶת־לִבִּי מִכָּל־שִׂמְחָה כִּי־לִבִּי שָׂמֵחַ מִכָּל־עֲמָלִי וְזֶה־הָיָה חֶלְקִי מִכָּל־עֲמָלִי:	Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil.

Like Sennacherib, Qoheleth builds for himself houses (בָּתִּים),[468] vineyards (כְּרָמִים), gardens (גַּנּוֹת) and parks (פַּרְדֵּסִים) with all kinds of fruit trees in them, and he makes

[468] The building of houses for himself (בָּתִּים) in Qoheleth's royal deeds lists was known by the author of the book of Kings. Therein Solomon is said to have built his own house (בֵּיתוֹ, 1 Kings 3:1; 7:1), the house of the

pool of water (בְּרֵכוֹת מָיִם) to irrigate the forest of growing trees (2:6). Large property holdings required many servants and Qoheleth acquired (קָנִיתִי) them, servants (עֲבָדִים), maidservants (שְׁפָחוֹת) and those born in the house (בְּנֵי־בַיִת).

Wealth is also a keynote of Qoheleth royalty, described in his livestock and also in his accumulation (כָּנַסְתִּי) of silver (כֶּסֶף) and gold (זָהָב), and the treasure (סְגֻלַּת) of kings and provinces.[469] He also boasts of male and female singers (שָׁרִים וְשָׁרוֹת),[470] and many concubines (שִׁדָּה וְשִׁדּוֹת).[471] The description of Qoheleth's accumulated wealth in 2:8 echoes the Sargonid inscription and the inscriptions of Ashurnasirpal II. In a building inscription attributed to Adad-nirari I, the king's spoils of war are described as follows:

> I took and brought to my city, the possessions of those cities, the accumulated (wealth) of his (Uasašatta's) fathers and the treasure of his palace. I conquered, burnt and destroyed the city Irridu (and) sowed salty plants over it...I took out from the city Irridu his "wife of the palace, his sons, his daughters, and his people. Bound, I brought them and his possessions to my city, Aššur.[472]

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king (בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ, 1Ki 9:1), the house of the Lord (בֵּית יְהוָה) and the walls around Jerusalem (חוֹמַת יְרוּשָׁלַם סָבִיב), and all that he desired to build (1 Kings 9:1).

[469] See the description of Solomon's wealth in 1 Kings 10:14-27. The source of treasure of kings and provinces might refer to the wealth from foreign tribute and taxation sources.

[470] See 1 Kings 10:12.

[471] The meaning of the superlative construction שִׁדָּה וְשִׁדּוֹת is unclear because the term שִׁדָּה occurs only here in the OT. The LXX related the term to the Aramaic root שדא (to pour out [wine]) and rendered the phrase as *οἰνοχόον καὶ οἰνοχόας*, "a male-butler and female cupbearers." Aquila took a similar approach: *κυλίκιον καὶ κυλίκια*, "wine cups and wine vessels." This is reflected in the Vulgate: *scyphos et urceos in ministerio ad vina fundenda* "cups and vessels to serve to pour out wine." The LXX understands it to be a reference to male and female wine stewards Barbour, *The story of Israel*, 19-23.

[472] RIMA 1, A.0.76.3, 30-49, in *Assyrian Rulers of the Third and Second Millennia BC* (to 1115) vol 1 ed., Albert Kirk Grayson (Toronto ; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 136.

Closer to Qoheleth's wealth and treasure is that of king Ashurnasirpal II. In one of the inscriptions which describes his victory over the enemies, Ashurnasirpal II provides a list of his booty:

> I carried off his silver, gold, possessions, property, bronze, iron, tin, bronze casseroles, bronze pans, bronze pails, much bronze property, gisnugallu-alabaster, an ornamented dish, his palace women, his daughters, captives of the guilty soldiers together with their property, his gods together with their property, precious stone of the mountain, his harnessed chariot, his teams of horses, the equipment of the horses, the equipment of the troops, garments with multi-colored trim, linen garments, fine oil, cedar, fine aromatic plants, cedar shavings, purple wool, red-purple wool, his wagons, his oxen, his sheep -his valuable tribute which, like the stars of heaven, had no number.[473]

The descriptions in details of his buildings, wealth and household have led Qoheleth to affirm his greatness and superiority over the previous kings: וְגָדַלְתִּי וְהוֹסַפְתִּי מִכֹּל שֶׁהָיָה לְפָנַי בִּירוּשָׁלָם אַף חָכְמָתִי עָמְדָה לִי , "So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me" (Qoh 2:9). This boasting of Qoheleth echoes the *Karatepe* inscription. In it, Azitawadda, king of Adana, tells of his establishment of peace and prosperity in his own time ("in my days"), his military prowess and the security of the borders, and especially he narrates his exploits in building constructions, gathering of wealth and victories over the failures of his predecessors, to underscore his supremacy.

> I have built strongholds in all the outposts at the borders in places where there were evil men, gang-leaders...I, Azitawadda...have subdued powerful countries in the west which the kings who were before me had not been able to subdue. I, Azitawadda, subdued them...in my day... And in all my days, the Danunites and the entire Plain of Adana had plenty to eat, a well-being, a good situation

[473] RIMA 2, A.0.101.1.i 83-88 in Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC,* 199.

> and peace in mind...I have built this city. I have given it the name of Azitawaddiya, for Ba'l and Reshet-Ṣprm commissioned me to build it.[474]

The expression "in my days" in the Karatepe inscription or "before me" highlights the king's achievements in reference to the situations in the kingdom in the period that preceded his rulership. For instance, in the Kilamuwa of Y'dy-Sam'al's inscription, Kilamuwa compares his own accomplishments with those of several of his predecessors and claims to have surpassed them all.

> I am Kilamuwa, the son of Hayya. Gabbar became king over *Y'dy* but he was ineffective. There was *Bmh* but he was ineffective. There was my father Hayya but he was ineffective. There was my brother *Sha'il* but he was ineffective. But I, Kilamuwa, the son of *Tm,* what I achieved, the former (kings) did not achieve.[475]

The boasting of deeds is part of the royal propaganda which is needed to guarantee the authority and legitimacy of the king for his subjects and for posterity. Qoheleth does not do otherwise in telling his own royal achievements. They aim at legitimating his kingship and his place in the history of Israel. A major difference between the Assyrian kings and Qoheleth resides, however, in the evaluation of their exploits. If the assessment of their deeds has led both the Assyrian kings and Qoheleth to affirm their superiority over their predecessors, Qoheleth goes further in considering the *hebelistic* nature of his deeds (2:11) as we will examine in the following section.

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[474] John Van Seters, *In Search of History : Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 192; see also *ANET,* 653-654.

[475] *ANET,* 654.

We may, accordingly, understand the descriptions in detail of Qoheleth's constructions, wealth and household as evidence of a wealthy royal house, or kingdom whose ruin is described in 12:1-8. On the other side, they tell of the nature of the deeds under the sun, mainly characterized by their *hebelness* (temporality, transience, fleetingness).

IV.2.1.1.4 The Transitory Nature of the Royal Deeds

According to verse 10, Qoheleth's efforts are partly successful, for he does indeed find enjoyment (שִׂמְחָה) in his toil.

Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them;	וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר שָׁאֲלוּ עֵינַי לֹא אָצַלְתִּי מֵהֶם
I kept my heart from no pleasure,	לֹא־מָנַעְתִּי אֶת־לִבִּי מִכָּל־שִׂמְחָה
for my heart found pleasure in all my toil,	כִּי־לִבִּי שָׂמֵחַ מִכָּל־עֲמָלִי
and this was my reward for all my toil.	וְזֶה־הָיָה חֶלְקִי מִכָּל־עֲמָלִי

One might see in this a statement a contradiction with Qoh 1:8a where Qoheleth states that "the eye is not satisfied (לֹא־תִשְׂבַּע) with seeing (לִרְאוֹת)." Though Qoheleth does not keep his eyes from seeing what they desire to see, neither does he show that they are satisfied. According to 1:8, the eyes will never cease to ask for something new to see, which in fact does not exist (אֵין כָּל־חָדָשׁ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ). This leads one to a continuous striving for the pleasure of the eyes.

Elsewhere, in 4:8, Qoheleth speaks of a lonely laborer whose eyes are never satisfied with his riches. Yet he does not end his labor. We may thus assert that Qoheleth's search for meaning in pleasure cannot be separated from the activity of his labor which he

described in 2:4-8, and in which he finds his delight (כִּי־לִבִּי שָׂמֵחַ מִכָּל־עֲמָלִי). Such enjoyment, Qoheleth calls it " my portion" (חֶלְקִי).

Read in the context of the cosmology of the opening poems, Qoheleth's חֵלֶק might refer to God's allotment. In other words, it is God's design that one's חֵלֶק consists in finding joy in his labor. As we have mentioned earlier, Qoheleth believes in the order in the cosmos designed and controlled by God (1:15; 3:14). For Qoheleth, enjoyment is found amid the toiling, that is to say, it resides within the realm of the work and beyond, because it is a gift to be received from God (מִיַּד הָאֱלֹהִים הִיא, 2:24; זֹה מַתַּת אֱלֹהִים הִיא, 3:13) but not only or simply something earned through one's labor.

Nonetheless, upon further reflection on his labor and its results in 2:11, Qoheleth concludes once again to their *hebelness*, but also that there is no יִתְרוֹן under the sun.

v. 11aα וּפָנִיתִי אֲנִי בְּכָל־מַעֲשַׂי שֶׁעָשׂוּ יָדַי	Then I considered all that my hands had done
v. 11aβ וּבֶעָמָל שֶׁעָמַלְתִּי לַעֲשׂוֹת	and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again,
v. 11bα וְהִנֵּה הַכֹּל הֶבֶל וּרְעוּת רוּח	all was fleeting and a chasing after wind,
v. 11bβ וְאֵין יִתְרוֹן תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ	and there is no profit under the sun.

Scholars are right in seeing in this verse the response to the מַה־יִּתְרוֹן לָאָדָם בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ שֶׁיַּעֲמֹל תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ question in 1:3. But what it really means is subjected to many interpretations, depending on how one reads 2:11bα (וְהִנֵּה הַכֹּל הֶבֶל וּרְעוּת רוּח) and 2: 11bβ (וְאֵין יִתְרוֹן תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ). Qoheleth is not affirming that labor and its product are worthless, profitless, or meaningless. Otherwise he would have not encouraged his audience to find joy in their toil. Farmer explains this more accurately. For Qoheleth,

> none of the good things we work so hard to acquire are permanent or enduring. This is not to say that work or things which are gained through work are without value. They are like breath, which is precious to the one who breathes it. But also like a breath, they cannot be grasped and kept…The value hard work has is the pleasure one feels in doing it, but no amount of work can produce material benefits that can be grasped and permanently gained under the sun.[476]

Qoheleth is, indeed, in search of a lasting and permanent *ṣimḥah* and *yitrôn* which he finds impossible because of the fleeting nature of things and human life. As he looks back at his personal toil and accomplishment, he realizes that these achievements are of only a transient value. They are valuable (2:10) and do not render life vain (2:22-26; 3:19-22; 6:8.9). They are only for the moment. This transitory value of Qoheleth's efforts is, according to Fredericks, the primary cause of his despair in the royal experiment.[477]

Going further, one might argue that it is not only the deeds and achievements that are temporary but also the worker himself is a passing event. Qoheleth frequently speaks, indeed, of the limits to human lifespan (5:18; 6:12). Life is temporary, fleeting, passing, especially compared with the stability of the earth and its element (1:4-7). Hence, we agree with Fredericks that "the temporary value to labor is based in one's one ephemerality, but it is confirmed by everyone else's fleeting memory."[478] For Qoheleth, indeed, the transience of life impacts what he can take from his pursuits and achievements. Not only the outcome of his labor is fleeting, temporary, but also, he is even doomed to the fate of mortality and oblivion like the fool (2:16-17), as well as to the inaccessibility of the future (2:18-19).

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[476] Farmer, *Who knows what is Good?*, 153.157.

[477] Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, 53.

[478] Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, 55.

2:16	כִּי אֵין זִכְרוֹן לֶחָכָם עִם־הַכְּסִיל לְעוֹלָם בְּשֶׁכְּבָר הַיָּמִים הַבָּאִים הַכֹּל נִשְׁכָּח וְאֵיךְ יָמוּת הֶחָכָם עִם־הַכְּסִיל	For there is no enduring remembrance of the wise or of fools, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How can the wise die just like fools?
2:17	וְשָׂנֵאתִי אֶת־הַחַיִּים כִּי רַע עָלַי הַמַּעֲשֶׂה שֶׁנַּעֲשָׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ כִּי־הַכֹּל הֶבֶל וּרְעוּת רוּחַ	So, I hated life, because the pain upon me was the work that is done under the sun; Indeed, all is fleeting and a chasing after wind.

Verse 16 displays verbs and expressions that denote the fleeting or impermanent nature of life: אֵין זִכְרוֹן לְעוֹלָם, הַיָּמִים הַבָּאִים and הַכֹּל נִשְׁכָּח. The expectation one might have that the wise and the fool be treated differently and according to their ways of life is denied by the fact that they both have the same destiny: death occurs to all without discrimination (2:15). Death is the end of both the wise and the fool, not because of their ethical or religious quality, but rather because of their fleeting nature. Both the wise and the wicked are marked by the brevity of life.

This conclusion of Qoheleth stands in conflict with the wisdom of Proverbs according to which wisdom has the power to prolong the life of those who seek it (אֹרֶךְ יָמִים וּשְׁנוֹת חַיִּים, Prov 3:1-2), unlike the wicked whose life is cut short (כָּל־מְשַׂנְאַי אָהֲבוּ מָוֶת, Prov 8:36). The sages believe that their teachings are a fountain of life (מְקוֹר חַיִּים, Prov 13:14a; 10:11a; 14:27a), and a remedy against the snares of death (מְמוֹקְשֵׁי מָוֶת, Prov 13:14b; 10:11b; 14:27b). Those who find wisdom, find life חַיִּים [מָצָא] (מֹצְאֵי) כִּי מֹצְאַי, Prov 8:35); 19:23).[479]

The notion of life as presented here and in general in the wisdom tradition is beyond materiality. The life that wisdom gives has much more to do with ethical behavior

[479] Roland Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 29.

than immortality, or eternal life. As we hear from Qoheleth, the wise and the righteous are not exempted from the transient nature of human beings. Though the wise have their eyes in their head, and the fools walk in darkness, the same fate befalls all of them (Qoh 2:14). Neither one can enjoy the lasting pleasure or permanence of remembrance.

In the nature poem (1:2-11), Qoheleth has observed that there is a lack of remembrance of the past and the present, just like everything else in the world that is passing. Casting doubt on Prov 10:7 according to which "the memory of the righteous is a blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot," Qoheleth states that there is no enduring remembrance (אֵין זִכְרוֹן לְעוֹלָם) of the wise and the fool. Both of them will be forgotten (הַכֹּל נִשְׁכָּח) by their contemporaries or the generations to come.

Thus, the heroic poor sage who delivers a city by his wisdom is not remembered (אָדָם לֹא זָכַר אֶת־הָאִישׁ הַמִּסְכֵּן, 9:15); the dead are forgotten (9:5). This impossibility of achieving any kind of lasting gain or memory leads Qoheleth to a temperamental reaction in verse 17a: וְשָׂנֵאתִי אֶת־הַחַיִּים ("I despise life /the living") and which Crenshaw understands as a radical denial of life.[480] We, however, argue that Qoheleth despises life, not *in se*, but for its accompanying grief and brevity, that is, the lack of eternal duration or permanent fruit of his efforts.[481]

The temporary and unexpected nature of Qoheleth's outburst is extended to all his works as a king. Verses 18-23 speaks in fact of the "failure" of the results of his hard work, still because of the transient nature of life, wealth and possessions, which Qoheleth wastes

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[480] Crenshaw, "The Shadow of death", in *Israelite Wisdom : Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien*. eds. John G. Gammie, et al, (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press for Union Theological Seminary, 1978), 206.

[481] Fredericks and Scott, *Ecclesiastes,* 98.

no time to highlight in verses 18-19. Therein, the transitoriness of life is expressed in conjunction with the phrases שֶׁאַנִּיחֶנּוּ (which I will leave them) and לָאָדָם שֶׁיִּהְיֶה אַחֲרָי (to the man who will be after me) and in the context of human ignorance of events following death (2:19).

As a transitory being, Qoheleth realizes that not only will he have to leave everything that he has acquired, built, gathered, to his successor, but also, he has no control over the person who will inherit his possessions. The possibility of a fool taking control of his wealth brings great despair to Qoheleth over כָּל־הֶעָמָל שֶׁעָמַלְתִּי תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ (2:20), as he foresees his lifelong hard works and achievements being shattered by the אַחֲרֵנִים, those who did not toil for it (לְאָדָם שֶׁלֹּא עָמַל־בּוֹ יִתְּנֶנּוּ חֶלְקוֹ, 2:21); a situation which Fredericks describes as a "transient tragedy."[482] Each one of the above described cases has been judged הֶבֶל. The demonstrative pronoun or expression, גַּם־זֶה (also this) prominently used in this section (2:18-23) stands in contradistinction with the הַכֹּל formula (1:14; 2:11.17).

1:14	הִנֵּה	הַכֹּל	הֶבֶל	וּרְעוּת רוּחַ
1:17		גַּם־זֶה		רַעְיוֹן רוּחַ
2:11	וְהִנֵּה	הַכֹּל	הֶבֶל	וּרְעוּת רוּחַ
2:15		גַּם־זֶה	הָבֶל	
2:17	כִּי	הַכֹּל	הֶבֶל	וּרְעוּת רוּחַ
2:19		גַּם־זֶה	הָבֶל	
2:21		גַּם־זֶה	הֶבֶל	וְרָעָה רַבָּה
2:23		גַּם־זֶה	הֶבֶל	
2:26		גַּם־זֶה	הֶבֶל	וּרְעוּת רוּחַ

[482] Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, 81.

In Qoheleth the pronoun גַּם־זֶה is employed to indicate that הֶבֶל is being applied to something specific, yet is sometimes difficult to figure out as Fox puts it,

> it is frequently difficult, sometimes virtually impossible, to identify the antecedents of the pronouns in the *hebel*-judgments. Thus, in particular cases it is uncertain what exactly is being judged-a certain thing or action mentioned in the context, or the entire event or situation described.[483]

However difficult or unclear what גַּם־זֶה might referred to, it is possible to discuss the underlying reasoning of Qoheleth in those passages. In fact, in the book of Qoheleth, an act or thing is judged to be הֶבֶל because it is part of a fleeting event or nature: the act or thing derives its fleetingness from what happens to the actor or to the product of the action. Accordingly, in 2:19, גַּם־זֶה הֶבֶל refers to the fact that someone will take possession of all the works he did. The same applies in 2:21 where גַּם־זֶה הֶבֶל might refer to חֵלֶק , that is to the fact that someone who did not work for it gets the portion.

In a sense, what Qoheleth's experimentation and wisdom have helped him to discover, and what he wants his audience to pay heed to, is that human effort cannot create anything which may be relied upon to endure. As Farmer comments, Qoheleth's observations have indeed led him to the conclusion that excessive work, "toil and strain" (כָּל־עֲמָלוֹ וּבְרַעְיוֹן לִבּוֹ) will produce little other than insomnia (בַּלַּיְלָה לֹא־שָׁכַב לִבּוֹ, v. 23b), pain (מַכְאֹבִים v. 23a) and vexation (כַּעַס).[484] Qoheleth reassures his audience, however, that all his days of pain (כָּל־יָמָיו מַכְאֹבִים), his vexation (וְכַעַס עִנְיָנוֹ), and insomnia (בַּלַּיְלָה לֹא־שָׁכַב לִבּוֹ), are fleeting, transitory (הֶבֶל). Succinctly put, Qoheleth's despair is הֶבֶל, rightly and mainly because it does not endure, just like the profit that one gains from his work.

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[483] Fox, "The meaning of Hebel in Qohelet", 415; or Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, 38.

[484] Farmer, *Who knows what is Good?*, 158.

As evidence of the temporariness of pain (מַכְאֹבִים) and vexation (כַּעַס), Qoheleth turns his disappointment to acceptance, as he learns to appreciate the ability God gives to human beings to find enjoyment in their works (2:24-26).

There is nothing better for a man	אֵין־טוֹב בָּאָדָם	2:24
than to eat and drink	שֶׁיֹּאכַל וְשָׁתָה	
and find joy in his toil.	וְהֶרְאָה אֶת־נַפְשׁוֹ טוֹב בַּעֲמָלוֹ	
This also, I saw, is from the hand of God;	גַּם־זֹה רָאִיתִי אָנִי כִּי מִיַּד הָאֱלֹהִים הִיא:	
Indeed, who will eat or who will rejoice	כִּי מִי יֹאכַל וּמִי יָחוּשׁ	2:25
apart from me?	חוּץ מִמֶּנִּי:	
Indeed, to the one who pleases him,	כִּי לְאָדָם שֶׁטּוֹב לְפָנָיו	2:26
he gives wisdom and knowledge and joy;	נָתַן חָכְמָה וְדַעַת וְשִׂמְחָה	
but to one who misses the mark	וְלַחוֹטֶא	
he gives the task to gather and to heap,	נָתַן עִנְיָן לֶאֱסוֹף וְלִכְנוֹס	
in order to give to one who pleases God.	לָתֵת לְטוֹב לִפְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים	
This also is fleeting and a chasing after wind.	גַּם־זֶה הֶבֶל וּרְעוּת רוּחַ:	

As if he was concluding his investigation on מַה־טּוֹב לָאָדָם בַּחַיִּים מִסְפַּר יְמֵי־חַיָּיו (2:3), Qoheleth goes in the final verses of his experiments (2:24-26) to state the good he found, its source, beneficiary, and pronounces a verdict on this good. In his most recent article on "Qoheleth 2:26: The Versions and Two Disputed Lexemes," Clifford argues that Qoh 2:24-26 functions as a conclusion to the King' search for wisdom, as he provides a critical and insightful analysis of two disputed lexemes in v. 26: *šēṭṭôb lĕpānāyw* and *ḥôṭe᾽*.[485] In 2:24-26, indeed, Qoheleth employs the term טוֹב four times (אֵין־טוֹב, טוֹב, שֶׁטּוֹב, לְטוֹב), which he

[485] Richard J. Clifford, "Qoheleth 2:26: The Versions and Two Disputed Lexemes," in *A Necessary Task: Essays on Textual Criticism of the Old Testament in Memory of Stephen Pisano,* eds Dionisio Candido and Leonardo Pessoa da Silva Pinto (Roma: GBP, 2020), 197-210.

substantiates with verbs and expressions of contentment: אָכַל, שָׁתָה, רָאָה טוֹב, חוּשׁ, שִׂמְחָה/ שָׂמַח. In verse 24, one reads indeed

> There is nothing better for mortals
> than to eat and drink and find enjoyment in their toil.
> This also, I saw, is from the hand of God.

The good one should enjoy is to be found in his toil (בַּעֲמָלוֹ) and in God (מִיַּד הָאֱלֹהִים הִיא). This gift of טוֹב בַּחַיִּים (the good in life) is made not to anybody, like the fool or the wicked, but to לְאָדָם שֶׁטּוֹב לִפְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים 2:26 which according to Clifford should be understood not as the "one who pleases God"[486] but as the "the one who is good in God's sight," that is, "whom God favors."[487] Parallel and in contradistinction to שֶׁטּוֹב לִפְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים is the חוֹטֶא, here understood not as the sinner or offender, but rather as "the one who fails to gain" or misses out" God's favor;"[488] and whose tasks (עִנְיָן) is to collect and gather (לֶאֱסוֹף וְלִכְנוֹס) only to give it all away to the טוֹב לִפְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים (the one who is favored by God; who is good before God).

Though such a situation might sound absurd and unjust, we agree with Crenshaw that Qoheleth is here glancing ironically at all those striving to seize everything that can be seized from life before the end of their days on earth, that is those engaged in amassing wealth and possessions without realizing that they cannot clutch them, because they too, are fleeting.[489] More importantly, Qoheleth brings forth the non-lasting profit

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[486] NRSV, NABR, BJ, TOB.

[487] Clifford, "Qoheleth 2:26: The Versions and Two Disputed Lexemes," 206.

[488]Clifford, "Qoheleth 2:26: The Versions and Two Disputed Lexemes," 207; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 141-142; Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes : an Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 88-89.

[489] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 91.

motive. Even though the righteous may receive what the חוֹטֶא owns only momentarily, the enjoyment of it by the righteous is just as temporary too. It is indeed this temporariness that Qoheleth stresses with his *leitwort:* גַּם־זֶה הֶבֶל וּרְעוּת רוּחַ .

Whether this last הֶבֶל statement in the royal experiment refers to its immediate context or serves as the concluding verdict on the whole business and search that Qoheleth has endeavored (1:12-2:26), it may be taken to mean that however one acquires an abundance of possessions they cannot be relied upon to endure. Likewise, pleasure and enjoyment in one's labor are only temporary.[490]

Section Conclusion

To conclude this section on the fleeting nature of the royal deeds, we may say that king Qoheleth, as a transient being, is subject to the temporal order (1:4-7), unable to do anything really new and that can last forever (1:10). Thus, he cannot find any uniqueness in being king because anyone who assumes the royal throne -his predecessor, himself, and his successor-only repeats what has already been done by other kings. The word כְּבָר (already) establishes the link between 1:10 and 2:12b.

Furthermore, the royal succession (הָאָדָם שֶׁיָּבוֹא אַחֲרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ) manifests the going (הֹלֵךְ) and coming (בָּא) of humanity (1:4). Even though kingship, defined in 2:12b as the king's ability to undertake many different projects, may distinguish Qoheleth from others, he shares the same characteristic of repetition inherent in all humanity. Kingship alone cannot grant Qoheleth any superiority to other human beings.[491]

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[490] See Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, 75-76.

[491] Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 90.

Thus, the nature poem in 1:2-11 provides the basic order, against which all human prerogatives are weighed. Qoheleth, in fact, evaluates his deeds and achievements in terms of 1:2-11 and declares them incapable of generating any lasting profit, mainly in a world where no activity produces any lasting effect, where everything is repetitive, and death is unavoidable. We, accordingly, assert that Qoh 1:2-11 functions as a guideline by which human activities, such as the accumulation of wealth and acquisition of wisdom, should be appraised. In other words, the basic structure of the cosmos ensures that humans are kept ignorant about their conditions of life, and yet they seek to understand everything which is done under the heavens (1:13) through words and use of "nature" language.

IV.2.1.2 TEXTS-TRANSLATION-INTERPRETATION

We have seen in our first chapter how the semantic diversity of הֶבֶל has prompted scholars to several proposed translations of the term in Qoheleth, such as vanity, meaninglessness, absurd, enigmatic, futile or fleeting, or simply vapor or breath. It results from this quest for the meaning of הֶבֶל that many scholars and translators have assumed one special meaning and reading of הֶבֶל which they applied to the whole book.[492] Such a reading of הֶבֶל "is not only misleading, but in some cases, it makes the text impossible to read."[493] Even Michael Fox, the father of the "absurdity" thesis, recognizes the limit of his proposal, stating: "many of the verses with this term are difficult, and different interpretations of these passages might place some occurrences in different categories."[494]

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[492] Fox, "the Meaning of Hebel for Qohelet," 413.

[493] Ethan Dor-Shav, "Ecclesiastes, Fleeting and Timeless," *JBQ* vol 37, No 1 (2009), 17.

[494] Fox, "The Meaning of Hebel for Qohelet," 415.

It is now time to turn our attention to an examination of the actual use to which the word הֶבֶל is put in the book of Qoheleth to depict the fleeting/transient nature of life and human achievements. We have already dealt with a number of them in the above sub-section, "the transitory nature of the royal deeds."

In what follows, we will highlight and discuss other texts that support our reading of הֶבֶל as fleeting/temporary/transient/impermanent, as it is applied first to humans and beasts, second to one's life, and finally to one's activities or events in the world.

IV.2.1.2.1 Qoh 3:18-21 The Fleeting Existence of Humans and Beasts: הַכֹּל הָבֶל

One of the provocative or shocking statements of Qoheleth stands in 3:18-21 with his equating humans to beasts.

> I said in my heart with regard (עַל־דִּבְרַת) to human beings (בְּנֵי הָאָדָם)
> that God has set them apart (לְבָרָם)
> to show (וְלִרְאוֹת) that they are but animals (שְׁהֵם־בְּהֵמָה הֵמָּה לָהֶם).

Worth noting is God's role and relation to human beings, along with the use and meaning of the infinitive constructs לְבָרָם and לִרְאוֹת, and the function of הֵמָּה לָהֶם. These three syntagms are respectively rendered in the LXX by ὅτι διακρινεῖ αὐτοὺς, "that he will set them apart", καὶ τοῦ δεῖξαι, καί γε αὐτοῖς[495] whereas the Vulg. has *ut probaret eos*, *et ostenderet* and *similes esse bestiis* for הֵמָּה לָהֶם.

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[495] Strictly speaking καί γε αὐτοῖς (גם להם) is the LXX reading of לָהֶם, since it omits הֵמָּה which scholars regard as a dittography of the last letters of בְּהֵמָה (BHQ 18, 77). Some have even recommended that לָהֶם or הֵמָּה be deleted (Seow, *Ecclesiastes,* 168). We do, however, agree with Schoors that "syntactically the phrase is a bit awkward, but it cannot be rejected as impossible" (Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 300). According to him, the lexeme לָהֶם can be understood as a "dativus ethicus in emphatischer Funktion sein" (Schoors, *The Preacher*, 114). Following Mottais, Murphy assumes a dativus commodi (Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 30). As it stands in its context, לָהֶם expresses some sort of emphasis or intensification whether one understands ל as *lamed emphaticum*, or a

The syntagm ברר plays a key role in the interpretation of this verse and the following as well (vv. 18-21). Yet, the exact meaning in the present context is obscure and debated. The root ברר means "to test, to prove."[496] According to Eaton, the *niphal* (הִבָּרוּ) "to keep clean" and the *hiphil* (לְהָבַר) "to cleanse" might suggest the meaning "to make clear, bring to light"[497] which is well attested in Mishnaic Hebrew.[498] Another possible approach consists in understanding ברר as "to set apart, to separate," [499] or "to select, to choose."[500]

While the idea of "proving, testing, or purifying" needs one to assess how does God test the *bᵉnê hā'ādām*, or what does he purify them from, the reading of ברר as "to make clear" or mainly "to separate, to set apart" sounds appropriate in the context and for our current investigation. We, thus, agree with the LXX reading of ברר as διακρινεῖ "to separate one from another" against the *probaret* of the Vulg. As such, the LXX reading recalls the Genesis creation story in which the narrator shows the similarities between animals and humans (see our discussion in chapter two).

That Qoheleth puts humans on the level of animals thus is not surprising or unique. He does not however wipe out differences,[501] still in light of the Genesis narrative.

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lamed relationis introducing the meaning "even in their own estimation"(Holmstedt, *Qoheleth*, 139; BHQ 18, 77).

[496] BDB, s.v. "בָּרַר", 141; See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 175.

[497] Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* , 85-86.

[498] Jastrow s.v. "בָּרַר", 197-198; See *b. Ketubbot* 46a: ובוררין את הדבר כשמלה חדשה (they make the fact as clear as a new garment).

[499] *HALOT*, s.v. "בָּרַר", 1:163. Robert Gordis, *Koheleth : The Man and His World,* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1951), 226-227.

[500] Ibn Ezra and Rashbam interpret the בָּרַר as from the root ברה "to select". See M. Gomez-Aranda. "IBN Ezra and Rashbam on Qohelet: Two Perspectives in contrast (Abraham Ibn Ezra)(Report)." *HSJ* 46 (2005), 235-258.

[501] According to Longman, this observation throws into doubt the human assumption of superiority over the animals and questions God's teaching that humans should rule over the animals (Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 129).

Therein, the creation of אָדָם "in the image and likeness of God" (בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כִּדְמוּתֵנוּ), the responsibility given to humans to name (קָרָא) any living creature (נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה 2:7.19), to rule (רְדוֹת) over them (Gen: 1:26a), and to serve (לְעָבְדָהּ) and care (לְשָׁמְרָהּ) for the garden (2:15) tells of the difference between humans and the other living creatures. It is indeed in that sense one should understand Qoheleth's use of לְבָרָם. Nevertheless, if the separation in the Genesis narrative, via responsibility and the nature of creation, focuses on the supremacy of human beings, in Qoheleth, this separation is to show that they are not like God but are indistinguishable from animals,[502] and thus do not hold a special position, as Schwienhorst-Schönberger points out: "In V.18 besteht die Aussonderung der Menschen allerdings darin, zu zeigen, dass ihnen keine Sonderstellung zukommt."[503]

Following our reading of ברר, we assert that God sets human beings apart, so that they can "see" (וְלִרְאוֹת) that they are animals. Krüger rightly comments, not without a certain irony, that "the sole difference between humans and animals consists in the fact that human beings know (or should know) that they are not essentially different from animals."[504]

Qoheleth goes on to provide the rationale for his statement in v. 19-20, which he literarily patterns with the particles כִּי, כֵּן.....כְּ, הַכֹּל, אֶחָד, and אַיִן, as well as the repetition of terms such as מִקְרֶה, מוֹת .

As for his argumentative structure (*Begründungsstruktur*), it stands according to Fischer in a twofold argument, that is, in "*ein einziges Todesgeschick*" and in "*ein einziger*

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[502] Arguing that the meaning of "set apart" is more probable for ברר, Whybray understands the verse to mean that God decides to show men that they are totally different from him and are in fact indistinguishable from the animals. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes,* 78. Similar thoughts are found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (Gn 2:7.19; 6:3, 17; 7:15.22; Ps 104:29-30; Gen 3:19; Job 34:14-15).

[503] Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet,* 282.

[504] Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 92.

Lebensodem."[505] In fact, while the first argument focuses on the same fate (מִקְרֶה אֶחָד לָהֶם)[506] and death (כְּמוֹת זֶה כֵּן מוֹת זֶה) that affects humans and animals, the second highlights the presence of the one and same breath of life (*Lebensodem*) in both (רוּחַ אֶחָד לַכֹּל).[507] In verse 19 for instance Qoheleth begins his argumentation with humanity, moves to animal, and provides a conclusion concerning the relationship between humanity and beasts, as shown in the following structure:[508]

A_1: כִּי מִקְרֶה בְנֵי־הָאָדָם
B_1 : וּמִקְרֶה הַבְּהֵמָה
C_1 : וּמִקְרֶה אֶחָד לָהֶם
A_2 : כְּמוֹת זֶה
B_2 : כֵּן מוֹת זֶה
C_2: וְרוּחַ אֶחָד לַכֹּל
A_3 : וּמוֹתַר הָאָדָם
B_3 : מִן־הַבְּהֵמָה
C_3 : אָיִן כִּי הַכֹּל הָבֶל

It results from the above *Begründungsstruktur* that "Qoheleth's rationale in 3:19 displays a development from "fate" to "death" to "profit," concluding the absence of profit (מוֹתַר) of

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[505] Jens A. A. Fischer, "Kohelet und die Frühe Apokalyptik eine Auslegung von Koh 3,16-21" in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, ed. Antoon Schoors (Leuven: University Press, Uitgeverij Peeters, 1998), 349.

[506] Four times in Qoheleth אָדָם is associated with the concept of מִקְרֶה (2: 14.15; 9:2.3), to express the equalizing function of death, as it makes no difference between wise and fool, righteous and wicked (מִקְרֶה אֶחָד לַכֹּל). This function is now applied to animals (בְּהֵמוֹת), since they share the same fate with the sons of man (מִקְרֶה אֶחָד לָהֶם).

[507] Fischer, "Kohelet und die Frurhe Apokalyptik eine Auslegung von Koh 3,16-21", 348.

[508] Laurent bases Qoheleth's structural argumentation in steps : מִקְרֶה אֶחָד, כֵּן.....כְּ formula, and רוּחַ אֶחָד. Seh states: "La Première est aiguillonée par un vocabulaire plus insolite mais caractéristique de Qoheleth: le sort, מִקְרֶה....(v.19a). Une deuxième est juxtaposée : l'égalité du sort... כֵּן.....כְּ.... (v.19b). Elle atteint sa concision maximale avec la dernière phrase: "et un souffle, un, pour tous" וְרוּחַ אֶחָד לַכֹּל (v.19c)» (Laurent Françoise, «L'homme est-il supérieur à la bête? Le doute de Qohéleth Qo 3,16-21», *RevScRel* 91 (2003/1): 26-27. DOI: 10.3917/rsr.031.0011. URL: https://www.cairn.info/revue-recherches-de-science-religieuse-2003-1-page-11.htm).

humanity over beasts"[509] and the *hebelness* of both humans and beasts (הַכֹּל הָבֶל) which Qoheleth demonstrates in verse 20:

הַכֹּל הוֹלֵךְ אֶל־מָקוֹם אֶחָד
הַכֹּל הָיָה מִן־הֶעָפָר
וְהַכֹּל שָׁב אֶל־הֶעָפָר׃

The lexeme הַכֹּל is used in reference to both humans and beasts, and as subject of the verbs of movement הָלַךְ and שׁוב. All share the same *movement* of going (הוֹלֵךְ) and returning (שָׁב), which is illustrated in the opening poem of 1:2-11. All share the same origin (מִן־הֶעָפָר) and the same destination (מָקוֹם אֶחָד) to which they all return הַכֹּל שָׁב אֶל־הֶעָפָר.[510]

As a result of the foregoing analysis, we argue that the terms and phrases מִן־ מָקוֹם אֶחָד, שׁוב, הוֹלֵךְ, מִקְרֶה, רוּחַ, הֶעָפָר are expressions of the transience, the temporariness and brevity of humans and beasts. If both are transitory (הֶבֶל), there is no advantage (אַיִן מוֹתַר) of human beings over the animals (3:19). The majority of scholars admit the הֶבֶל meaning in 3:19 to be temporary, since the whole point of the comparison is to show that both animals and humans are temporary.[511]

Thus, Crenshaw writes, "the meaning of *hābel* would probably be fleeting, ephemeral or transient."[512] Whybray also concedes that הֶבֶל here means ephemeral, transitory rather worthless.[513] With a condition, which is "if the *hakkol* in 3:19 means both man and

[509] Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, 115.

[510] Similar thoughts are found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 2:7.19; 6:3.17; 7:15.22; Ps 104:29-30; Gen 3:19; Job 34:14-15).

[511] Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes and Song of Song*, 122. See also Ingram, *Ecclesiastes*, 115.

[512] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes,* 104.

[513] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 79.

beast," Fox acknowledges that the best translation of הֶבֶל in 3:19 is ephemeral rather than absurd.[514]

Consequently, the transitoriness of human existence and the fact that there is no distinction made between humans and animals call forth the הֶבֶל conclusion in 3:19 which Qoheleth substantiates in vv. 20-21 with the use of transient markers (מִן־הֶעָפָר, רוּחַ, מִקְרֶה, הוֹלֵךְ, מָקוֹם אֶחָד). Just as human effort fails to yield a lasting and enduring profit, so humans themselves, as dust, are perishable and transient.

IV.2.1.2.2 The Days of One's Life: יְמֵי־חַיֵּי הֶבֶל

In his classification of the *hebel* judgments into three categories,[515] Michael Fox gives a prominent place to the judgements that are related to human toil and its products, and to everything (הַכֹּל), arguing that these two categories [(1a) and (3b)] involve "together over half the occurrences of hebel."[516]

We think, however, that his second category, "Living being and times in their lives", should hold an important place, for the *hebelness* of human behavior is best explained and understood by the *hebelness* of his nature, which Qoheleth underlines in the opening

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[514] Fox, *Qoheleth and his Contradictions*, 42.

[515] Fox, "The Meaning of Hebel for Qohelet", 415.

1. Human behavior
   a) toil and its products
   b) pleasure
   c) wisdom
   d) words
2. Living beings and times in their lives
3. Divine behavior-events
   a) divine justice
   b) "everything."

[516] Fox, "The Meaning of Hebel for Qohelet," 415.

and closing poems of the book (1:2-11; 12:1-8). Prominently and explicitly, Qoheleth speaks of the days of one's הֶבֶל life in four key passages (6:12; 7:15; 9:9; 11.8.10).

The *hebelness* of one's life

6:12		יְמֵי	חַיֵּי	הֶבְלוֹ
7:15	בְּ	יְמֵי		הַבְלִי
9:9a	כָּל	יְמֵי	חַיֵּי	הֶבֶל־
9:9b	כֹּל	יְמֵי		הֶבֶל־
11:8		כָּל־שֶׁבָּא		הָבֶל
11:10		הַיַּלְדוּת וְהַשַּׁחֲרוּת		הָבֶל

IV.2.1.2.2.1 Qoh 6:12: Human's הֶבֶל Days

6:12	כִּי מִי־יוֹדֵעַ מַה־טּוֹב לָאָדָם	For who knows what is good for mortals
	בַּחַיִּים מִסְפַּר יְמֵי־חַיֵּי הֶבְלוֹ	while they live the few days of their fleeting life,
	וְיַעֲשֵׂם כַּצֵּל	which they make like a shadow?
	אֲשֶׁר מִי־יַגִּיד לָאָדָם	For who can tell them
	מַה־יִּהְיֶה אַחֲרָיו תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ	what will be after them under the sun?

Qoh 6:12 forms with the preceding verses (vv. 10-11) a section that deals with the limitations of human knowledge and memory. Qoheleth first affirms that everything that exists (מַה־שֶּׁהָיָה) or that will come to existence (מַה־שֶּׁיִּהְיֶה), that are done (מַה־שֶּׁנַּעֲשָׂה) or will be done (מַה־שֶּׁיֵּעָשֶׂה) has already been determined, named (כְּבָר נִקְרָא שְׁמוֹ, 6:10) by the creator and sustainer of life, and whom Qoheleth calls (שֶׁתַּקִּיף, 6:10).[517]

Earlier in the opening poem, Qoheleth had brought to the mind of his audience the order of nature and the powerlessness of human beings to know the future and to change

[517] Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 197.

the order of the cosmos (1:9-11; 3:14-15), due prominently to the passing nature of life. The expression וְנוֹדָע אֲשֶׁר־הוּא אָדָם in 6:10 reminds humans of their transient nature, and thus, their inability to prevail against things that determine life and its experiences to be only momentary, and which Qoheleth explicitly highlights in 6:12.

As a matter of fact, Qoh 6:12 displays four key lexical markers of the fleeting nature of human life: מִסְפַּר יְמֵי, חַיֵּי הֶבְלוֹ, כַּצֵּל, אַחֲרָיו. The majority of scholars, even those who hold a pessimistic view on Qoheleth and his thought, admit the "transient" reading of הֶבֶל in this verse.[518] For instance, Fox states that

> in 6:12… hebel refers to human life in general, and it is impossible to determine just what Qohelet has in mind; ephemeral or absurd (or a number of other adjectives) could apply equally well.[519]

Crenshaw, more balanced in his reading of הֶבֶל, alternates between empty and brief/fleeting.[520] Seow has no doubt that the word הֶבֶל here refers to the brevity of life. Hence, his translation of מִסְפַּר יְמֵי־חַיֵּי הֶבְלוֹ as "the few days of their fleeting life."[521] The NJPS and JSB interestingly substitute "fleeting" for the appearances of הֶבֶל in 6:12; 7:15; 9:9. Contra these

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[518] Schoors offers a different viewpoint, arguing that "in the context of 6:12 and 7:15, the short duration of life does not have that importance whereas the absurdity of life does" (Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 492). Focusing the importance of מִסְפַּר יְמֵי־חַיֵּי הֶבְלוֹ on the "absurdity of life" rather than its transiency, as Schoors suggests, is misleading and does not respect Qoheleth's thought in the current context. What is even more striking in Schoors' view and argument is the recognition that "the phrase מִסְפַּר יְמֵי־חַיֵּי הֶבְלוֹ denotes the short duration of life," that is, its ephemerality, its transitoriness. This is our contention.

[519] Fox, "The Meaning of Hebel for Qohelet," 421. Idem, *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, 43.

[520] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 131.

[521] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 233. See also Köhlmoos' translation of יְמֵי־חַיֵּי הֶבְלוֹ as "in seinen flüchtigen Lebenstagen" (in the fleeting days of his life), Köhlmoos, *Kohelet,* 162.

readings, Longman holds *mordicus* to his interpretation of הֶבֶל as "meaningless" arguing that "to translate transitory or its equivalent in this verse would be awkwardly redundant."[522]

We, however, agree with Fredericks that there is no redundancy in Qoh 6:12. The expressions: מִסְפַּר יְמֵי, חַיֵּי הֶבְלוֹ, כַּצֵּל and אַחֲרָיו are not identical as Longman suggests, but cumulative; they are transient markers. The transitoriness of life is accentuated by the fact that it is numbered, although unknown to humans, and it vanishes quickly like shadows (כַּצֵּל)[523] which provides shade only for a while, for it soon disappears. Thus, contra Goldman's view that "in Qoh 6:12, the theme related to the expression is not the shortness of life but the ignorance of the human, who will never know what comes after this own life",[524] we argue that כַּצֵּל expresses the ungraspable and fleeting nature of life. In Psalm 144:4, as shown above, הֶבֶל and צֵל occur together to comment upon the shortness of human lifespan, and they will be paired again at Qoh 8:13: וְטוֹב לֹא־יִהְיֶה לָרָשָׁע וְלֹא־יַאֲרִיךְ יָמִים כַּצֵּל. The phrase מִסְפָּר also indicates the brevity of an individual's life.

The answer to the question מִי־יוֹדֵעַ מַה־טּוֹב לָאָדָם which introduces v. 12 should, consequently, be found in the limited horizon of human life which is characterized as fleeting (הֶבֶל). Likewise, the quest for knowledge of the future (מִי־יַגִּיד לָאָדָם מַה־יִּהְיֶה אַחֲרָיו) is limited to the possibilities offered in one's lifetime. It is not mortals who determine what will happen.

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[522] Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 178.

[523] The LXX renders ἐν σκιᾷ (בצל, "in a shadow") for כַּצֵּל "like a shadow", certainly due to a graphic confusion between ב and כ. Instead of reading כַּצֵּל the LXX translator of Qoheleth reads בצל. See Gentry, *Ecclesiastes*, 189; BHQ 18, 88. 4QQoh[a] offers a shorter reading of the entire verse in which the phrases מִסְפַּר יְמֵי־חַיֵּי הֶבְלוֹ and אֲשֶׁר כַּצֵּל מִי are lacking. According to Armin Lange, the most likely explanation would be a parablepsis (oversight, or faulty seeing). The eye of the scribe skipped from a medial *mem* (ם) in the word שׂם[ויע to the mem (ם) of the word מִי (THB, vol 1 C, 351; see also Eugene Ulrich, Frank Moore Cross, and Maurice Baillet, eds. *The Biblical Qumran Scrolls : transcriptions and textual variants* (Leiden, Boston, MA: Brill, 2010), 747.

[524] BHQ 18, 88.

One does not even know what will happen. Destiny lies not within human grasp, but in the power of the Maker (עֹשֶׂה). As all that happens in the present has already been determined (6:10), so all that will happen in the future is beyond the knowledge of humanity (6:11). Neither the present nor the future is within human control (see also 3:22; 9:10; 10:14).

IV.2.1.2.2.2 Qoh 7:15: Qoheleth's הֶבֶל Days

In tandem with 7:13-14 Qoheleth calls upon his audience to consider (רְאֵה) the activities of God in the world which are made up of good days (בְּיוֹם טוֹבָה) and bad days (בְּיוֹם רָעָה, 7:14), and which no one can make straight (תַּקִּן) or crooked (עַוֵּת, 7:13; see also 1:15). Now Qoheleth describes in 7:15 a paradoxical situation he has observed (רָאִיתִי).

7:15	אֶת־הַכֹּל רָאִיתִי בִּימֵי הַבְלִי	Everything I have seen in my fleeting days
	יֵשׁ צַדִּיק אֹבֵד בְּצִדְקוֹ	there is a righteous person perishing in his righteousness,
	וְיֵשׁ רָשָׁע מַאֲרִיךְ בְּרָעָתוֹ	and there a wicked who prolongs his life in his wickedness

The construction with הֶבֶל (בִּימֵי הַבְלִי) is similar to that found in 6:12 (יְמֵי־חַיֵּי הַבְלוֹ) in reference to human transience. It is, however, remarkable that this time Qoheleth is not speaking about the brevity or fleetingness of life in general, but his own temporariness (הַבְלִי). From the examination of his deeds and achievements, from his search for wisdom (1:12-2:26), Qoheleth has come to the understanding that it is not only what he has acquired or realized that is temporary, but he himself (אֲנִי הֶבֶל). Hence, the use of the phrase בִּימֵי הַבְלִי (in my fleeting days/ in the days of my fleetingness). Seow and Krüger are among those scholars who believe Qoheleth uses הֶבֶל in this verse to mean transient or fleeting.[525]

[525] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 151-152. Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 139. A similar reading is also found in Melanie Köhlmoos' translation and commentary on Qoheleth. In 7:15, for instance, she reads and translates הֶבֶל by *flüchtigen*: "Alles sah ich in meinen flüchtigen Tagen..."(Köhlmoos, *Kohelet*, 175). See also NJPS, JBS translation of 7:15.

The situation Qoheleth describes is that of a fleeting being in a fleeting world. As we mentioned earlier for 6:12, Qoheleth, though wise, could observe and see only in the limited horizon of human fleeting life. Furthermore, one does not have to live long in order to see many things. One could recall Pierre Corneille's dictum « aux âmes bien nées la valeur n'attend point le nombre des années »[526] or Job 32:9 "It is not the old that are wise, nor the aged that understand what is right"; or Wisdom 4:8-9 "For old age is not honored for length of time or measured by number of years; but understanding is gray hair for anyone, and a blameless life is ripe old age." Qoheleth does not think otherwise when he says: "Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king, who will no longer take advice" (Qoh 4:13). This textual detour is not only meant to show the supremacy of wisdom over old age, but it is also and mainly to highlight the fleetingness of the human condition. However great one is, he cannot escape, wash out his fleeting nature, and what goes along with it as well.

In 7:15, the king who represents Qoheleth has seen much in his brief life, including the fact that some righteous die young and some wicked live long, literarily introduced by the particle יֵשׁ and which scholars understand as Qoheleth's critique of the "ever-operating" *Tun-Ergehen Zusammenhang* theory (deed-consequence-nexus).[527] Traditional wisdom taught, indeed, that the righteous will be delivered from trouble or even from death (Prov 10:2; 11:4, 8, 21; 12:21; 18:10), whereas the wicked will perish with their hopes (Prov 11:5-8; 12:12; 14:32). In the book of Deuteronomy, longevity in the land is

[526] "To well-born souls, value does not wait for the number of years", Pierre Corneille, *Le Cid*, II. 2.

[527] Klaus Koch, "Is There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?" trans. T.H. Trapp, in *Theodicy in the Old Testament,* ed. James L. Crenshaw, IRT 4 (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1983), 64 originally published as "Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma im Alten Testament?" *ZTK* 52 1955):1-42.

frequently said to be the lot of all who act aright, that is, all who obey the legal stipulations (Deut 4:26.40; 5:16; 6:2; 11:9; 22:7; 25: 15; 32:47; 30: 18).

According to the teachings of the wise, prolongation of life (אֹרֶךְ יָמִים וּשְׁנוֹת חַיִּים) is one of the advantages of wisdom, which implies right conduct (Prov 3:2.16; 28:2.16). The sages taught that the righteous will live long, whereas the years of the wicked will be short (יִרְאַת יְהוָה תּוֹסִיף יָמִים וּשְׁנוֹת רְשָׁעִים תִּקְצֹרְנָה , Prov 10:27).

Coming from the wisdom tradition, Qoheleth may have expected this belief to be implemented. However, in real life, he observes that a person receives what would be expected concerning the other kind of person such as the perishing of the righteous, and the wicked living long (Qoh 7:15). Qoh 8:14 also makes clear this point stating:

there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked,	יֵשׁ צַדִּיקִים אֲשֶׁר מַגִּיעַ אֲלֵהֶם כְּמַעֲשֵׂה הָרְשָׁעִים
and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous.	וְיֵשׁ רְשָׁעִים שֶׁמַּגִּיעַ אֲלֵהֶם כְּמַעֲשֵׂה הַצַּדִּיקִים

In addressing this issue, Qoheleth does not stand alone. Indeed, in the prophetic hymnic, and wisdom traditions of Israel we find occasional challenges to the doctrine that the righteous and the wicked will receive their appropriate recompense in this life. Sometimes people receive the opposite of what they deserve. The situation was so real and prevalent that Jeremiah put forth this question to the Lord :מַדּוּעַ דֶּרֶךְ רְשָׁעִים צָלֵחָה שָׁלוּ כָּל-בֹּגְדֵי בָגֶד (why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive? (Jer 12:1; see also Job 21:7-26; Ps 10:1-3; 73:2-14; Hab 1:4.13).

Our take on Qoheleth's observation and the analysis that followed is that a person's character and accomplishments apparently make no difference to his fate (מִקְרֶה). As we have discussed in our section on the notion of death, the righteous and the wicked, the

wise and the fool are all transient beings, living in a transient world, and called to meet the same inevitable fate (3:19; 7:15; 8:14). Furthermore, though the wicked live long, they are not eternal, permanent; their fleeing nature still remains. At the appointed time (עֵת לָמוּת, 3:2), they will begin their journey toward *sheol*, their dwelling place:

> This is the way of the foolish, and of those after them who are pleased with their words. Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; Death shall be their shepherd (מָוֶת יִרְעֵם); straight to the grave they descend, and their form shall waste away; Sheol shall be their home (שְׁאוֹל מִזְבֻּל לוֹ, Ps 49:14-15).

IV.2.1.2.2.3 Qoh 9:9: The הֶבֶל Days of the Youth

Enjoy ("see") life with the wife whom you love,	רְאֵה חַיִּים עִם־אִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר־אָהַבְתָּ	9:9
all the days of your fleeting life	כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֵּי הֶבְלֶךָ	
that are given you under the sun,	אֲשֶׁר נָתַן־לְךָ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ	
all the days of your fleetingness	כֹּל יְמֵי הֶבְלֶךָ	
for that is your share in life and in your toil	כִּי הוּא חֶלְקְךָ בַּחַיִּים וּבַעֲמָלְךָ	
at which you toil under the sun.	אֲשֶׁר־אַתָּה עָמֵל תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ׃	

Qoheleth 9:9 is thematically one of the seven שִׂמְחָה statements in the book (2:24-26; 3:12.22; 5:17; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:9-10) and it belongs to the literary unit 9:7-10. In this unit, Qoheleth gives recommendations to his audience on how one should live in response to the circumstances of this fleeting existence. Even though their days and lives are fleeting, humans should embrace and live them out joyfully, because they are from the hand of God (מִיַּד הָאֱלֹהִים, 2:24; 3:13; 5:19; 8:15; 9:7). Eating, drinking, seeing good (רָאָה טוֹב) and finding joy in one's labor (שָׂמַח מִכָּל־עֲמָלִי, 2:10; רָאָה טוֹב בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ, 2:24; 3:13) constitute for Qoheleth

the חֵלֶק that God has given to mankind to be enjoyed now, in his temporal and fleeting life.[528]

Through a series of imperatives and jussives such as לֵךְ (go), אֱכֹל לַחְמֶךָ (eat your bread), שְׁתֵה יֵינֶךָ (drink your wine),[529] יִהְיוּ בְגָדֶיךָ לְבָנִים (let your garments be white), שֶׁמֶן עַל־ רֹאשְׁךָ אַל־יֶחְסָר (let not the oil lacking on your head), רְאֵה חַיִּים (see life) עֲשֵׂה (do), Qoheleth presents positive recommendations to his readers, encouraging them to enjoy life to the fullest by accepting life as God's gift. As scholars have pointed out, a similar counsel is also found in the Gilgamesh Epic.[530] The similarity between the two texts is remarkable not only for the various elements that appear in both, but for the identical sequence in which they are enumerated. When Siduri the tavern keeper encounters Gilgamesh, who is despondent over his search for immortality, she gives him the following admonishment

> You, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full;
> Keep enjoying yourself day and night.
> Every day make merry,
> Dance and play day and night!

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[528] Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 359.

[529] Bread and wine represent everyday needs of life. They are symbolic of what is necessary to sustain physical life (Gen 14:18; Judg 19:19; Lam 2:12; Ps 104:14-15); wine is also a bringer of joy (Qoh 2:3; 10:19; Amos 9:14; Pss 4:8; 104:15; Sir 40:20).

[530] The striking parallel between the alewife's speech and Qoheleth 9:7-9, first identified by Hubert Grimme ("Babel und Kohelet-Jojakhin", in *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* 8 (1905) 432-438), is well recognized in commentaries and studies of Qoheleth. Nevertheless, some scholars were quick to dismiss this discovery, prominently because of Grimme's attempt to explain these similarities by attributing Qoheleth to Jehoiachin. For more details, see Jean de Savignac, "La sagesse du Qôhéléth et l'épopée de Gilgamesh," *VT* 28 (1978): 320-321; W. H. U. Anderson, "Ecclesiastes in the Intertextual Matrix of Ancient Near Eastern Literature," in *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually*, 157; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 676-678; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 172-173; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 55. For a synoptic comparison of Siduri's and Qoheleth's advice, see Nili Samet, "The Gilgamesh Epic and the Book of Qohelet: A new Look" *Bib* 96. 3 (2015):375-390; Matthew J. Suriano, "Kingship and Carpe Diem, Between Gilgamesh and Qoheleth," *VT* 67 (2017):285-306; William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes,* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 2000), 94.

Let your cloth be clean,
Let your head be washed, may you be bathed in water!
Gaze on the little one who holds your hand!
Let a wife enjoy your repeated embrace!
Such is the destiny (of mortal men).

The point of the passage in the Gilgamesh epic and in Qoheleth, is that "life is something that mortals cannot hold on to forever. Immortality is something that human beings cannot find; people cannot live forever."[531] Consequently, one must make the most of the present. Siduri tells Gilgamesh that his quest for immortality will come to nothing, since the gods have ordained death for all humanity, retaining life "in their own hands."[532] Said otherwise, the life human beings is given is not eternal life, but life in this world, lived to the utmost.

Reflecting on the inevitable fate of death and the impossibility of immortality, the Egyptian "Harpers' Songs," urges also the living to enjoy themselves while they are able.[533] A similar counsel is found in an inscription on a late Hellenistic tomb in Jerusalem, advising those who are alive to enjoy themselves: εὐφραίνεστε οἱ ζῶντες [sic] (you who are living, enjoy).[534]

As in 6:12 and 7:15, הֶבֶל is used here in 9:9 in reference to the days of one's transient life. In 6:12, Qoheleth alludes to the brevity of human life in general, via the use of the third person suffix pronoun הֶבְלוֹ (his fleeting). To convince his audience Qoheleth appeals to his own experience of transience, that is, to his own fleeting days, using the first-person

[531] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 306.
[532] *ANET*, 90.
[533] *AEL* I, 196-197.
[534] Pierre Benoit, « L'Inscription Grecque du Tombeau de Jason,» *IEJ* 17 (1967):112-113.

suffix pronoun הֶבְלִי (my fleeting). Here in 9:9, Qoheleth addresses the audience about his temporariness, using this time the second person suffix pronoun הֶבְלֶךָ (your fleeting). As we have pointed out earlier for 6:12, the cumulative effect of transient units drives even some of those who understand Qoheleth to be a pessimist or a skeptic to interpret these cases of הֶבֶל as temporary/fleeting/impermeant. Scholars who hold this view include Fox,[535] Crenshaw,[536] Seow,[537] and Krüger.[538]

The life that the reader is exhorted to enjoy is in the context of כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֵּי הֶבְלֶךָ. We might even argue that this interpretation of Qoheleth stated in 9:9 tells *de facto* and *in se* of the fleeting aspect of that joy, given that it is limited to the time of one's life assigned by God on earth (כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֵּי הֶבְלֶךָ). There is no enduring joy. The ability of one to see joy with his wife (עִם־אִשָּׁה) is not only a gift but also one's חֵלֶק in life (בַּחַיִּים) and in toil (בַּעֲמָלוֹ). Lisa M. Wolfe in her 2020 publication on Qoheleth points out this striking link between אִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר־ אָהַבְתָּ and עֲמָלְךָ, arguing that

> there is something about a man's toil that relates to his life with a woman he loves...Perhaps his toil allows him to spend life with this woman, or it allows him to have this woman as an actual outcome of the toil.[539]

This idea of seeing the woman as the outcome of the man's toil connotes that the man is making or taking profit in the woman, presented as an object in Qoheleth's lessons to

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[535] Fox, "The Meaning of Hebel for Qohelet," 421. Idem, *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, 43.

[536] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 158.163.

[537] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 302.

[538] Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 166. Likewise ZUR version reads "all die Tage deines flüchtigen Lebens," See also NJPS, JBS translation of 9:9.

[539] Lisa Michelle Wolfe, *Qoheleth* (*Ecclesiastes*), Wisdom Commentary vol. 24, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2020), 144-145.

young men.[540] We do, however, think that the link between אִשָּׁה and עֲמָלְךָ is best understood in terms of companionship or partnership (*Partnerschaft*).[541] For, Qoheleth is not calling the young man to enjoy life *in* or *from* (מִן/בְּ) any woman (cf. וּשְׂמַח מֵאֵשֶׁת נְעוּרֶךָ, Prov 5:18) but *with* the loved woman (עִם־אִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר־אָהַבְתָּ). In other words, life is not to be enjoyed alone by the man (אִישׁ), but with a wife (Gen 3:6 וַתִּתֵּן גַּם־לְאִישָׁהּ עִמָּהּ וַיֹּאכַל). It is, according to Schwienhorst-Schönberger, a "gemeinschaftliches Konsumieren".[542] Said otherwise, the woman is not the man's יִתְרוֹן, but his חֵלֶק, she is neither his "Gegenstand des Genusses" nor for a simple sexual pleasure (bloßen sexuellen Genuß),[543] but his Partnerin[544] that is, the man's life companion, his helper (עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ, Gen 2:18). We may thus argue that the formulation רְאֵה חַיִּים עִם־אִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר־אָהַבְתָּ is not only a call to enjoy the good together with her, but it includes the entire life. Richter is thus right in arguing that for Qoheleth, the value of the relationship with a woman consists mainly in the community of partnership (der partnerschaftlichen Gemeinschaft).[545]

We have not, nevertheless, been unaware of the *problema* of the identity of that woman and her relationship with the man, which has raised much debate with no consensus among scholars. The fact that אִשָּׁה is used without the article (הָ) has led some interpreters to think and to argue that Qoheleth has in mind a woman rather than a wife.[546]

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[540] Wolfe, *Qoheleth*, 145.

[541] Köhlmos, *Kohelet,* 206.

[542] Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 462.

[543] Hans-Friedemann Richter, "Kohelets Urteil über die Frauen : zu Koh 7,26.28 und 9,9 in ihrem Kontext." *ZAW* 108, no. 4 (1996): 592.

[544] Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 462. See also Melanie Köhlmoos, *Kohelet,* 207.

[545] "Das bestätigt, daß der Wert der Beziehung zu einer Frau für ihn in der partnerschaftlichen Gemeinschaft besteht, nicht im bloßen sexuellen Genuß" (Richter, "Kohelets Urteil über die Frauen : zu Koh 7,26.28 und 9,9 in ihrem Kontext", 592).

[546] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 144. Whitley, *Koheleth: His Language and Thought*, 80.

According to these proponents, Qoheleth is promoting promiscuous behavior, "encouraging going from one infatuation to another like the legendary Solomon."[547]

Yet, the word אִשָּׁה by itself (without the definite article) may refer to one's wife (Gen 21:21; 24:3; 30:4.9; Lev 20:14; 1 Sam 25:43; Deut 22:22). Furthermore, the relative clause אֲשֶׁר־אָהֲבְתָּ clearly indicates that Qoheleth is not alluding to a *quaedam mulier* but rather to an *uxor* (Vulg.), that is, to the one the young man has chosen to be his חֵלֶק. She is loved by the man. Crenshaw is thus correct in his argument that אִשָּׁה without the article could refer not only to a married woman but also "to the one who will be taken in marriage."[548]

Whether Qoheleth alludes to a wife or to any unmarried woman does not affect his thought that enjoyment should be found in this fleeting life. Ideas of fleetingness are also at the heart of 11:8-10.

IV.2.1.2.2.4 Qoh 11:8-10 : The יְמֵי הַחֹשֶׁךְ of One's Life

In 11:7, Qoheleth stresses the value of being alive by means of the metaphor of light (מָתוֹק הָאוֹר) and seeing the sun (לִרְאוֹת אֶת־הַשָּׁמֶשׁ) in contradistinction with חֹשֶׁךְ (darkness) and לֹא רְאוֹת אֶת־הַשָּׁמֶשׁ (to not see the sun). In 6:4-5 for instance, the absence of the sun, and the darkness are used in connection with death and nonexistence.[549] Elsewhere, however, in 2:13-14 the light and darkness imagery is used of ignorance, and in 5:16 for oppressiveness in allusion to the one who has lost everything before the end of his days.

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[547] Longman, *The book of Ecclesiastes*, 230.

[548] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 163. Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, The JPS Commentary, 64; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 296. Schwienhorst-Schönberger argue likewise saying: "die Aussage 'mit einer Frau, die du liebst' vor allem auf jene liebe anspielt, die junge Mäanner und Frauen Zueinander und in die Ehe fürhrt" (the statement 'with a woman you love' alludes above all to the love that brings young men and women together and into marriage). Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 462.

[549] Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes*, 145.

In the final poem, Qoheleth uses the imagery of darkness to describe the cosmological chaos (12:1-3). No matter the reference of חֹשֶׁךְ -death, or problems during life, or both-, the point Qoheleth is making is the transitoriness not only of one's sunny days, but also his days of darkness as well, which includes כַּעַס and רָעָה (11:10).

For Qoheleth, life has its good moments that people should enjoy as long as they can, because more challenging and dark days loom ahead on the horizon of life which will not be as pleasant or as delightful. Köhlmoos comments indeed that light and darkness form the outer framework, within which many years and numerous days are assigned to humans.[550] The dark horizon comes into view in 11:8

11:8 כִּי אִם־שָׁנִים הַרְבֵּה יִחְיֶה הָאָדָם בְּכֻלָּם יִשְׂמָח וְיִזְכֹּר אֶת־יְמֵי הַחֹשֶׁךְ כִּי־הַרְבֵּה יִהְיוּ כָּל־שֶׁבָּא הָבֶל:	Even those who live many years should rejoice in them all; yet let them remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that has come is fleeting.

The verse begins with an emphatic כִּי, which connects v. 8 to v. 7 and is followed by the conditional clause אִם. It is also characterized by temporal references, שָׁנִים הַרְבֵּה, יִזְכֹּר and יְמֵי הַחֹשֶׁךְ here understood as transience markers. Qoheleth does not focus on the fact that a long life is a blessing from God, but he emphasizes how the young should respond to a long life with the exhortation בְּכֻלָּם יִשְׂמָח. While rejoicing, one should keep in mind the impermanence of his enjoyment, which is brought to end by "the days of darkness" (יְמֵי הַחֹשֶׁךְ). We thus agree with Belcher that "the enjoyment of life comes with the full

[550] "Licht und Finsternis bilden den äußeren Rahmen, in dessen Innern, 'viele Jahre' und 'zahlreiche Tage' einander zugeordnet sind" (Köhlmoos, *Kohelet*, 233.)

recognition that there will also be many days of darkness."[551] Like שָׁנִים הַרְבֵּה and יִשְׂמָח that are fleeting, the days of darkness are not permanent either. The gloomy, depressive, dark and long nights of winter are succeeded by the sunny, flowerful and long days of spring and summer. Everything that comes is temporary: כָּל־שֶׁבָּא הֶבֶל.

The situation of הֶבֶל in this verse is not clear for many scholars, as it stands in the expression כָּל־שֶׁבָּא הֶבֶל. Scholars' debate on the significance of כָּל־שֶׁבָּא leads to many proposals. Most commentators take כָּל־שֶׁבָּא to mean the future, after death. Whybray, for instance, interprets the expression as alluding to "that which will happen afterwards: that is, the future (after death)."[552] According to Miller, כָּל־שֶׁבָּא could refer to the "the days of darkness", or life's oppression, to old age, or death.[553]

For Qoheleth, however, it is everything, all the experiences of life, and life itself that are הֶבֶל; not just what comes after death, about which no one knows anything (3:21; 10: 14). Furthermore, in the book, Qoheleth often refers to future events using the expression שֶׁיִּהְיֶה (1:9.11; 2:18), מָה שֶׁיִּהְיֶה אַחֲרָיו "whatever will be" (see 3:22; 8:7; 10:14), מַה־ יִּהְיֶה אַחֲרָיו "what will be" (6:12; 11:2), but rarely, if not, never כָּל־שֶׁבָּא.

Thus, following our contention that שָׁנִים הַרְבֵּה, and יְמֵי הַחֹשֶׁךְ are expressions of one's brief life, we might read כָּל־שֶׁבָּא (all that has come) in reference to both, the days of darkness and the many years of one's life, which are qualified as הֶבֶל, fleeting, because they are all passing. Unlike then those who refer to the "absurd family" or the "vanity family" to understand הֶבֶל in this verse, we stand for the "transience family" reading, arguing that the

[551] Belcher, *Ecclesiastes*, 309.

[552] Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 161.

[553] Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes*, 147.

phrase כָּל־שֶׁבָּא הָבֶל in v. 8 stresses the fleetingness of one's life. However long one may live, he will never escape the transiency of the human condition. He will pass at the appointed time (cf. 3:3; 8:6; 9:11). Seow is then right in rendering כָּל־שֶׁבָּא הָבֶל to "anyone who comes." Seow observes, indeed, that the term שֶׁבָּא which appears twice in Qoheleth refers both times to people coming into existence (5:14-15. See also 6:4); שֶׁיָּבוֹא (someone) who comes" (2:12).

Furthermore, in the opening poem Qoheleth speaks of generations of people going (הֹלֵךְ) and coming (בָּא) while the earth stands לְעוֹלָם (1:14). In the closing poem as well, we see Qoheleth speaking of humanity going (הֹלֵךְ) to the "house of eternity" (בֵּית עוֹלָמוֹ) (12:5). Given the provided evidence, Seow affirms that

> it makes sense to take כָּל־שֶׁבָּא in 11:8 as referring to anyone who comes - or any generation that comes - into existence. The point is that every human, like anyone or anything else on earth, is הֶבֶל. Nothing is permanent, so one who has come into this world better enjoy while there is still time.[554]

In that same vein, the days of darkness are temporary; there is no permanent old age, even death, understood as a movement, a passage to the house of eternity is not a permanent state. As one comes on earth through birth, one goes to *Sheol* or to *bêt ʿōlām* through death. For Qoheleth neither the past, nor the present, nor the future is permanent. They are all transient and subjected to oblivion.

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[554] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 349. This view on כָּל־שֶׁבָּא is also held by Lohfink. Although he translates כָּל־שֶׁבָּא "all that comes", he comments that for Qoheleth it is not the dark days that "come" but rather people (see 1:4). Lohfink, *Qoheleth,* 135). We think however that כָּל־שֶׁבָּא is for both: the people who live many years and the many dark days attached to them. It is all these that have come that Qoheleth qualifies הֶבֶל, as fleeting.

IV.2.1.2.2.5 Qoh 11:9-10: The Days of One's Youth (יְמֵי בְּחוּרוֹתוֹ)

11:9	a שְׂמַח בָּחוּר בְּיַלְדוּתֶיךָ	Rejoice, young man, while you are young,
	b וִיטִיבְךָ לִבְּךָ בִּימֵי בְחוּרוֹתֶךָ	and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth.
	c וְהַלֵּךְ בְּדַרְכֵי לִבְּךָ וּבְמַרְאֵי עֵינֶיךָ	Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes,
	d וְדָע כִּי עַל־כָּל־אֵלֶּה יְבִיאֲךָ הָאֱלֹהִים בַּמִּשְׁפָּט׃	but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.
11:10	וְהָסֵר כַּעַס מִלִּבֶּךָ	Banish anxiety from your mind
	וְהַעֲבֵר רָעָה מִבְּשָׂרֶךָ כִּי־הַיַלְדוּת וְהַשַּׁחֲרוּת הָבֶל	and put away pain from your body; for youth and the dawn of life are fleeting.

After a general reminder on the fleetingness of one's years in life, and the exhortation to enjoy before the days of darkness (11:7-8), Qoheleth as wisdom instructor in 11:9-10 now addresses the young man (בָּחוּר) on how he should enjoy life.

Following merely the same literary pattern as seen in 9:9, Qoheleth uses a series of imperatives and jussives to encourage, to give force to the call to enjoy life (שְׂמַח, וִיטִיבְךָ, וְהַלֵּךְ, וְדָע, וְהָסֵר, וְהַעֲבֵר), still in the horizon of one's fleeting life. Besides Qoheleth's thematic refrain about transience which explicitly appears in v. 10, we might consider the expressions בְּיַלְדוּתֶיךָ, בִּימֵי בְחוּרוֹתֶךָ, וְהַשַּׁחֲרוּת as transience indicators.

The assumption or rationale behind these expressions and the call to the בָּחוּר to enjoy in the days of his youth (בִּימֵי בְחוּרוֹתֶךָ) is the transitoriness of this stage. Youth is not a permanent state, as humans move from childhood (יַלְדוּת) to youth (שַׁחֲרוּת/ בְּחוּרוֹת), and from youth to old age (שֵׂיבָה, Prov 16:31; 20:29; זֹקֶן, Gen 48:10). Qoheleth does not waste time in plainly telling it to the young man as we can read in 11:10:

כִּי־הַיַלְדוּת וְהַשַּׁחֲרוּת הָבֶל.

There is a wide consensus among scholars that הֶבֶל in 11:10 indicates transience. For instance, unlike their reading of הֶבֶל as absurd in verse 8, Whybray, Crenshaw, and Fox maintain that in v. 10, הֶבֶל means what is fleeting or ephemeral rather than vanity.[555] Even Longman, despite his pessimistic and skeptical reading of Qoheleth and his 'meaningless' theme, admits the temporal aspect of הֶבֶל in this verse.[556]

It is, therefore, in the horizon of the fleetingness and transitoriness of this stage in life that the youth is called to enjoy life. As Miller writes

> Youth is not detestable (foulness) nor is Qohelet lamenting that the prime of life is a mystery or amounts to nothing (insubstantial). Rather, he celebrates youth and urges the young person to make the most of it while possible. It is *hebel*, transient, gone all too soon.[557]

The coming days of darkness we have just discussed in 11:8, suggest indeed the shortness of the days of youth (יְמֵי בְּחוּרוֹת). In fact, these can be shortened by a premature death (תָּמוּת בְּלֹא עִתֶּךָ, 7:17) caused by too much wickedness (רֶשַׁע הַרְבֵּה) and foolishness (סָכָל הַרְבֵּה), but also by anxiety (כַּעַס) and pain (רָעָה). What Qoheleth is doing here is to offer the *bāḥûr* advice on choosing a lifestyle. Such a choice is best made during one's youth so as to establish good patterns of conduct. It is in this ethical dynamic that one should understand Qoheleth's call to the young man to pay attention to his heart and eyes.

As a wisdom teacher, Qoheleth is not without knowing the importance of לֵב, עַיִן or אֹזֶן in the wisdom tradition. For instance, in Proverbs 4:23, the heart is described as the

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[555] Fox, *Qoheleth*, 278 "In 11:10 the time of youth is called hebel. Here alone something is called hebel in order to emphasize its precariousness"; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 184 "The period when you can do these things is brief, fleeting like breath or a puff of smoke"; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 163.

[556] Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 261-262.

[557] Miller, *Symbolic and Rhetoric*, 147.

source of life (תּוֹצְאוֹת חַיִּים), which one should keep with all vigilance (מִכָּל־מִשְׁמָר נְצֹר), on the right path (אַשֵּׁר בַּדֶּרֶךְ לִבֶּךָ, Prov 23:19; see also 23:26). The sages also mention the possibility of one being led astray by his heart (Prov 7:25 אַל־יֵשְׂטְ אֶל־דְּרָכֶיהָ לִבֶּךָ) or of his eyes. Proverbs 3:7 accordingly warns the son (בְּנִי) against being wise on his own eyes (אַל־תְּהִי חָכָם בְּעֵינֶיךָ , see also 12:15; 21:2; 28:11), and against haughty eyes (עֵינַיִם רָמוֹת, Pro 6:17; 21:4). Similarly, Sir 5:2 cautions "Do not follow your heart and your eyes, so that you wander in evil desires." Instead, the wisdom student should let his eyes look straight forward (עֵינֶיךָ לְנֹכַח יַבִּיטוּ), and his gaze (עַפְעַפֶּיךָ) be straight before him (Prov 24:25).

Thus, in urging the *bāḥûr* to walk in the ways of his heart and to follow the desire of his eyes (וְהַלֵּךְ בִּדַרְכֵי לִבְּךָ וּבְמַרְאֵי עֵינֶיךָ),[558] Qoheleth is not promoting a permissive life which could mean to follow and realize whatever comes from the heart, or what the eyes see. He is rather calling the young man to a discerned, appropriate and wise lifestyle. We are, thus, reminded of Qoheleth's notion that pleasure-seeking is not only an intellectual pursuit (2:3), but mainly wisdom-related. In Qoheleth 2:4-10, Qoheleth presents the satisfaction of his eye's desires and heart's pleasures as a reward for his wise labor

> Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them;
> I kept my heart from no pleasure,
> for my heart found pleasure in all my toil,
> and this was my reward for all my toil. (2:10)

[558] Some Greek manuscripts add ἄμωμος as telling youth how they should respond to the call. Thus, instead of περιπάτει ἐν ὁδοῖς καρδίας σου (11:9 LXX), these manuscripts read περιπάτει ἐν ὁδοῖς καρδίας σου ἄμωμος "walk in the ways of your heart, unblemished" or "walk … not in the sight of your eyes"?

Yet, as mentioned in the section on "the transitoriness on the royal deeds", this reward had no lasting profit. That very same idea is at play in 11:9-10. For, the pleasure of youth passes as youth passes.

Furthermore, Qoheleth does call the *bāḥûr* not only to enjoy life, but also to know: וְדָע, which appears in the last clause, of 11:9d וְדָע כִּי עַל־כָּל־אֵלֶּה יְבִיאֲךָ הָאֱלֹהִים בַּמִּשְׁפָּט. This clause has often been viewed, on the one hand, as negative advice in contradistinction with 11:9c where Qoheleth is said to offer a positive exhortation, and, on the other hand, as "a redactional gloss added by a later pious reader "to tone down Qohelet's harsh rhetoric,"[559] or to "protect the text from libertine interpretation."[560]

However, in its literary, syntactical and grammatical form, Qoh 11:9d is an affirmative clause. Thematically, it does not negate the previous sentence. What often makes people understand 11:9b as negative exhortation is the idea of the coming judgment, but this is not *in se* negative. It is not, however, a new idea in Qoheleth, who has previously made clear to his audience that God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter, and a time to judge every deed:

3:17 כִּי־עֵת לְכָל־חֵפֶץ וְעַל כָּל־הַמַּעֲשֶׂה שָׁם

8:6 כִּי לְכָל־חֵפֶץ יֵשׁ עֵת וּמִשְׁפָּט

As for 11:9d as redactional gloss, we argue with Seow and Fox that Qoheleth's remark in 11:9d is not incongruous with his perspective. The enjoyment of life is both the lot of humanity (a "portion," 2: 10) and a gift of God (2:24-26; 3:10-15; 5:17-19; 9:7.9). Humans

[559] Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 260; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes,* 184.

[560] Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 139.

should enjoy life to the full because that is their divinely assigned portion, and God calls one into account for failure to enjoy. As Seow puts it, "for Qohelet, enjoyment is not only permitted; it is commanded; it is not only an opportunity; it is a divine imperative."[561]

Thus, what people do usually fear in that matter is not only how the *mišpāṭ* is done but also its negative consequences. This too, is not new in the book. Among the many things Qoheleth has observed is the corruption of justice. For instance, in chapter 3:16-17, Qoheleth explicitly complains about injustice in the place of judgement (מְקוֹם הַמִּשְׁפָּט)[562] and righteousness (מְקוֹם הַצֶּדֶק). Wherever one would expect to find justice, one surprisingly also discovers wickedness (רֶשַׁע). The administration of justice is infected by wickedness (רֶשַׁע). As Richard Belcher observes "the very places where the innocent should be cleared of wrongdoing and the wicked should be declared guilty with the appropriate punishment, have become places of wickedness because justice is not carried out."[563]

Such observations on the administration of judgment is not applicable to what Qoheleth is talking about in 11:9d for three reasons. First, the one bringing to judgement is אֱלֹהִים. Second, God being the judge, there is no possibility of a corrupt judgment, even though Qoheleth has observed the breakdown of the deed-consequence nexus (3:16; 7:15; 8:10.14;9:15). Yet, as we have shown, all these for Qoheleth are transitory. Third, the matter

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[561] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 371.

[562] How one understands the word מִשְׁפָּט will determine one's view or understanding of Qoheleth's great concern for justice. According to BDB 1048, מִשְׁפָּט is not only the act of deciding a case of litigation brought before a civil magistrate, but also the place of deciding a case of litigation and the process of litigation, as well. It is also understood as the sentence or decision issuing from a magistrate's court. Accordingly, מְקוֹם הַמִּשְׁפָּט and מְקוֹם הַצֶּדֶק would designate the court of justice. Lauha goes further and extends מְקוֹם הַמִּשְׁפָּט to all social situations (*alle Gesellschaftsbereiche*) in which justice (*in denen Gerechtigkeit*) should be practiced (*verwirklicht sein sollte*). See Aarre Lauha, *Kohelet*, Biblischer Kommentar / Altes Testament, vol 19 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verl. d. Erziehungsvereins, 1978), 74; Schoors, *Ecclesiastes* , 287.

[563] Belcher, *Ecclesiastes,* 129.

being judged is כָּל־אֵלֶּה (all these) which in the immediate context refers to the youthful enjoyment in 11:9a-c.

As he directs the young man and admonishes him to remember the brevity of life, Qoheleth exhorts him to enjoy life to the fullest, for sure. He also warns him against any excess in pursuing pleasure, which the youth in Qoheleth's audience has already and certainly heard of (cf. 10:16-19). In other words, Qoheleth is not calling the young man to fear the judgment of God, which could affect his enjoyment. If there might be judgment, it consists in the transitoriness of youth.[564] The point of Qoheleth is rather to call for an ethical pleasure or for a responsible and wise enjoyment. As Rachel Dulin notes, Qoheleth is cautioning youth to the accountability for their actions before God. She writes,

> The awareness of accountability is meant to bring a sense of balance to the activities of the young. If one is convinced that the good life is a gift from God to enjoy and fulfill, then one must live every moment to the fullest (11:10). At the same time, if one agrees that there is accountability for all actions before God, and that God's actions are not predictable (4:1; 5:1; 8:14), one has no choice but to fear God and act responsibly. Therefore, the advice to the young is to live well by balancing enjoyment with accountability. This balance brings a special quality to the experience of youth's ephemeral nature.[565]

These successive calls to enjoyment are predicated in 11:10c, on the fleeting nature of human experience, mainly the יַלְדוּת וְהַשַּׁחֲרוּת which is transient. Needless, however, we argue that those years are essential to the formation of good habits for living and to

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[564] Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 197.

[565] Rachel Z Dulin, ""How Sweet is the Light" Qoheleth's Age-Centered Teachings" *Int* 55 (2001):266. Fox holds a similar view arguing that the belief of man's accountability for his deeds is not foreign to Qoheleth (Fox, *Qohelet and his contradictions*, 279).

recognize early that life is fleeting. But within that understanding, one should pursue a meaningful life as God intended.

Section Conclusion

The notion of הֶבֶל used by Qoheleth to express the fleeting nature of human life goes hand in hand with the certainty of death motif. Dor-Shav rightly observes that the meaning of הֶבֶל in Qoheleth is "not the dismissive "vanity," but the more objective "transience," referring strictly to mortality and the fleeting nature of human life."[566] In the above quoted texts (6:12; 7:15; 9:9; 11:8-10), we have indeed argued that Qoheleth uses הֶבֶל along with explanatory terms such as צֵל, מִסְפַּר, אַחֲרָיו, יְמֵי הַחֹשֶׁךְ , בִּימֵי בְחוּרוֹתֶךָ to speak of the brevity of human life.[567] More specifically, he seeks to confront his listeners with human fleetingness and their inability to influence their own destiny.

In the face of this impossibility for humans to escape their limitations and to change the basic character of life, Qoheleth exhorts his readers/listeners to be wise, attentive to God's works and actions in their fleeting life, and to make the most of every day which God provides as a gift. In a fleeting life, there is no guarantee of tomorrow; indeed, each new day is a gift from God. Accordingly, we may assert that, for Qoheleth, any solution to the dilemma of הֶבֶל is not found in lengthening the duration of one's life, but rather, in improving the quality of one's fleeting life.

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[566] Ethan Dor-Shav, "Ecclesiastes, Fleeting and Timeless", 217.

[567] The issue of humanity's transience recalls the portion of the *Gilgamesh Epic* in which Gilgamesh says the following to Enkidu "Only the gods live forever under the sun; as for mortals, numbered are their days; whatever they achieve is but the wind" *ANET*, 79.

Worth mentioning here is Dor-Shav's analogy between Qoheleth הֶבֶל and Genesis הֶבֶל (Abel) in which he highlights the fleeting nature of Abel's life, not its vanity or meaninglessness. According to Dor-Shav "what is important about the life of Abel is not its futility, but its transience. It was as fleeting as a puff of air, yet his life's calling was nonetheless fulfilled."[568] Ideas of fleetingness are also evidenced in other passages as show below.

IV.2.1.2.3 The Fleetingness in One's Life and Events

As we have been arguing, הֶבֶל denotes the temporary state of everything in life. It points to the transitory nature of humanity and its world in comparison to the constancy and permanency of the earth (1:4). It goes without saying that any experience done by this fleeting being in a fleeting world is indubitably imprinted with temporariness/transience. Hence, for Qoheleth, הֶבֶל represents all that is fleeting. Life is הֶבֶל (1:1). Efforts to gain knowledge, wealth and success are fleeting (1:15-2:26).

In the lines that follow, and beside what we have discussed in the royal experiment we will present situations or events in one's life that are best understood when הֶבֶל is read as "fleeting/impermanent/transitory/transient."

[568] Ethan Dor-Shav, "Ecclesiastes, Fleeting and Timeless", 217.

The hebelness of events in the world

1:2c	הַכֹּל			הָבֶל		
3:19	הַכֹּל			הָבֶל		
4:4		גַּם	זֶה	הֶבֶל	וּרְעוּת	רוּחַ
4:7				הֶבֶל		
4:16		גַּם	זֶה	הֶבֶל		
5:9		גַּם	זֶה	הָבֶל		
6:2		גַּם	זֶה	הֶבֶל		
6:4				בַּהֶבֶל		
6:9			זֶה	הֶבֶל		
7:6		גַּם	זֶה	הָבֶל		
8:10		גַּם	זֶה	הָבֶל		
8:14		גַּם	זֶה	הָבֶל		
12:8a	הֶבֶל			הֲבָלִים		
12:8b	הַכֹּל			הָבֶל		

IV.2.1.2.3.1 The Fleetingness of עָמָל , Wealth (נְכָסִים) and Riches (עֹשֶׁר)

Qoheleth's interest is in the ephemerality of human labor (עָמָל) and its results. This subject matter is concentrated mainly in three passages which have at least three הֶבֶל statements each. The most prominent is the royal experiment section 2:10-26 where the results of Qoheleth's achievements and labor occur on seven occasions, of only a temporary and limited value (2:11.15.17.19.21.23.26).

Later on, in 4:4-8, the temporary value of עָמָל is stressed again, three times with הֶבֶל statements (4:4.7.8) and once with only רְעוּת רוּחַ (4:6). Standing in the literary context of injustice and oppression as Qoheleth observes (4:1-3), the focus of Qoheleth's observation in 4:4-8 is not much on the advantage to one's עָמָל, but prominently on the underlying motivation in human endeavor. For Qoheleth, all labor (כָּל־עָמָל) and skillful work

(כָּל־כִּשְׁרוֹן הַמַּעֲשֶׂה) are motivated by envy and jealousy (קִנְאָה)[569] to which scholars have given a positive and negative description. Ogden and Crenshaw for instance positively interpret קִנְאָה as a stimulus that encourages a person to greater effort when confronted with challenge, arguing that "it is not counterproductive."[570] To demonstrate this view, Crenshaw appeals to the Babylonian Talmud where Rav Dimi declares

> jealousy among teachers increases wisdom (דגריס טפי קנאת סופרים תרבה חכמה). The one who was dismissed will try to refine his skills so that he will be rehired, and this will prevent negligence on the part of the other teacher.[571]

Yet Crenshaw recognizes that the word קִנְאָה has prominently a negative sense in the Hebrew Bible, thus, agreeing with those scholars who hold a negative meaning of קִנְאָה. In the Hebrew Bible, indeed, the word קִנְאָה often expresses a dangerous and damaging attitude that can lead to violence and self-destruction, as Prov 14:30 "a calm heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot (וּרְקַב עֲצָמוֹת קִנְאָה)". Moreover, it is acknowledged in the wisdom tradition that envy causes one to engage in destructive behavior (Prov 6:34; 27:4), so that it may even be said that envy destroys the fool (Job 5:2).

According to Qoheleth, it is this destructive element that drives people to toil and to bring even more pressure on themselves. Envy is a motive that cannot be satisfied, the "raison d'être" of the unsatiated eye, the unfilled ears (1:8), and the "raison d'agir" of the lover of money (5:9), "of the behavior of the "king" in chaps. 1-2" as Krüger comments:

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[569] The noun קִנְאָה has a wide range of meanings: "zeal; jealousy; envy; rivalry; competition; suffering; animosity; anger; wrath" (*HALOT* s.v. "קִנְאָה", 2:1110; BDB s.v. "קִנְאָה", 888). Here, as in Qoh 9:6, it denotes "envy". The LXX rendered it *ζῆλος* ἀνδρὸς ("envy; jealousy"). The modern versions reflect this wide range: "rivalry" (NEB, NABR, NASB), "envy" (KJV, ASV, RSV, NRSV, NIV, NJPS, ZUR "Neid"), and "jealousy" (TOB, FBJ, ELB, HRD "Eifersucht").

[570] Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes,* 108. See also Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 136-137.

[571] *b. Bat 21a:11;* See also Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 108.

> he wants to surpass all his predecessors with his wisdom and his works (1:16; 2:7, 9). As a "wise man," he wants to have an "advantage" over the "fool" (2:13-16). And in 2:18-23, "clearly it is envy of his successor that turns life bitter for him." Whereas the "king," on the basis of this attitude determined by envy, devalues all presumed goods as "futile" and "a striving after wind," here in 4:4 envy itself is criticized as "futile and a striving after wind."[572]

In Qoheleth 4:4, likewise, much effort is motivated by envy, and like all efforts, is transitory. Qoheleth conveys this transitoriness by the use of הֶבֶל and its guarding expression רְעוּת רוּחַ. Read as a whole, the *hebel* judgment "גַּם־זֶה הֶבֶל וּרְעוּת רוּחַ" is not applied to *ʿāmāl* only or to *qin'āh* alone as Fox and Schoors suggest[573], but to both. Envy and the satisfaction or pleasure that results from it is indeed fleeting, impermanent and ungraspable. To give evidence to his observation, Qoheleth provides in 4:7-8 the scenario of a solitary man in which he assesses the temporary value of one's labor (vv. 7-8). This solitariness of this laborer is depicted in terms of יֵשׁ אֶחָד וְאֵין שֵׁנִי (one without a second), as one without son or brother (בֵּן וְאָח אֵין־לוֹ), a hard worker (וְאֵין קֵץ לְכָל־עֲמָלוֹ), as a never being satisfied with riches (עֵינוֹ לֹא־תִשְׂבַּע עֹשֶׁר) and depriving himself of pleasures (וּמְחַסֵּר אֶת־נַפְשִׁי מִטּוֹבָה).

Thus we may assert that the *hebel* judgment pronounced by Qoheleth is on the act of gathering wealth which does not yield only the effect of having someone worthy of passing it on, but also the expected effect of enjoying the wealth, that is, a lasting and permanent pleasure. According to Krüger "the behavior of this man would be not quite so senseless if he at least had an heir for whom he could work"[574] and who could benefit from it

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[572] Krüger, *Qoheleth,* 96.

[573] While Fox reads hebel as referring to "either skilled work (כִּשָּׁרוֹן הַמַּעֲשֶׂה) or the fact that skilled work is motivated by envy (קִנְאָה)" (Fox, *Time to Tear down*, 37), Schoors takes it as alluding solely to קִנְאָה "envy" (Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 335).

[574] Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 98.

after him (וּלְמִי אֲנִי עָמֵל). The desire of lasting memory or remembrance through achievements, possessions and generations, formerly discussed, is once again at play here. The lonely laborer is aware of his transient nature and of his wealth as well, and which Qoheleth evaluates in 5:10; and 6:2.9. In these verses, in fact, Qoheleth returns to the fruit of wealth and the simple possession gained from one's labor, and he ascribes brevity to them as well (5:10; 6:2.9). Nothing is permanent, stable. All is הֶבֶל, fleeting, impermanent.

We may conclude by saying that for Qoheleth achievements and labor are of only a transient and limited value. They give no enduring satisfaction. Such experience of fleetingness is not tied, however, to Qoheleth only, but to everybody. In an Egyptian song, "The Good Fortune of the Dead", the Harper points out the temporariness of human effort on earth in these terms "the duration of what is done on the earth... is a kind of dream."[575] Qoheleth shares in and expresses the same belief at the beginning of his book "fleeting, fleeting, says Qoheleth, fleeting, fleeting, complete fleetingness. What advantage is there to a man in all his toil under the sun?"

As we have argued in chapter three, if one understands מַה־יִּתְרוֹן לָאָדָם בְּכָל־עֲמָלוֹ שֶׁיַּעֲמֹל תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ, as a rhetorical question, it goes without saying that the answer will be negative, that is, there is no advantage. Yet the question is beyond the rhetorical. Qoheleth does not deny the value of his labor. He is rather interested in the nature of the profit; in other words, the "advantage which would justify his exhaustive efforts."[576] For Qoheleth, if there is יִתְרוֹן it consists mainly in the joy (שִׂמְחָה), the good (טוֹב: 2:1,24; 3:12,13; 6:3,6; 9:7;

[575] "The Egyptian Harper: The Good Fortune of the Dead", in *ANET*, 34.

[576] Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, 48.

11:7-9), the sweetness (מָתוֹק: 5:11; 11:7), the pleasure (חֵפֶץ: 5:3; 8:3.6; 12:1.10), or the enjoyment (חוּשׁ: 2:25)[577] one should find in his labor and which have no lasting effect.

IV.2.1.2.3.2 The Transience of Injustice and Oppression

Qoheleth continues to substantiate and to illustrate his הַכֹּל הֶבֶל statement. The first and foremost fact that sustains Qoheleth's view is the transient nature of human beings, prominently expressed in the use of הֶבֶל with the suffix pronoun (הֶבְלִי, 6:12; הֶבְלֶךָ, 9:9) along with companion terms such as צֵל, מִסְפַּר, אַחֲרָיו, יְמֵי חַיֵּי הַשָּׁוְא, בִּימֵי בְחוּרוֹתֶךָ, to speak of the brevity of human life. Qoheleth realizes that not only his life is impermanent, temporary, but also the works of his hands, that is, his achievements, wealth and possessions.

To show how הֶבֶל permeates all spheres of human life and experience under the sun, Qoheleth proceeds to present life situations which he characterizes as הֶבֶל, that is temporary, fleeting. Examples of these are oppressions, injustice, and the prosperity of the wicked.

In Chapter 8:10, Qoheleth observes how the wicked are brought to burial.

8:10	וּבְכֵן רָאִיתִי רְשָׁעִים קְבֻרִים	Then I saw the wicked buried;
	וָבָאוּ וּמִמְּקוֹם קָדוֹשׁ יְהַלֵּכוּ	they had come and gone from the holy place,
	וְיִשְׁתַּכְּחוּ בָּעִיר	and they were forgotten in the city
	אֲשֶׁר כֵּן־עָשׂוּ	where they had done such things.
	גַּם־זֶה הָבֶל	This also is fleeting.

This verse is in fact among the most difficult and puzzling ones in the book. The MT seems to have suffered some corruptions, best explained by the transposition of ב (*bet*) and ר (*resh*) in קָרַב (to approach) and קָבַר ("to bury"), and by graphic confusion between

[577] W. E. Staples, "The Meaning of Ḥēp̄eṣ in Ecclesiastes", *JNES* 24.12 (1965): 110-112.

כ and ב in שָׁכַח (to forget; to become forgotten)[578] and שָׁבַח (to laud, to praise, or to boast).[579] These critical issues have led to at least three textual readings: the MT's reading by most translations (KJV, RSV, NRSV, NASB, NIV, NJPS); the ancient versions' reading; and the modern scholars' reading.

As a matter of fact, while the MT, Syr, Vulg. and Tg read 8:10a:

וּבְכֵן רָאִיתִי רְשָׁעִים קְבֻרִים וָבָאוּ וּמִמְּקוֹם קָדוֹשׁ יְהַלֵּכוּ
וְיִשְׁתַּכְּחוּ בָּעִיר אֲשֶׁר כֵּן־עָשׂוּ

the LXX, SyrH, and Copt. emend קברים ובאו to קְבָרִים מוּבָאִים "being brought to the grave," although the Coptic version and Syro-Hexapla suggest the singular (קבר), *versus* the plural form קְבָרִים of the LXX (εἰς τάφους εἰσαχθέντας).[580] Modern scholars who adopt this alteration and reading of the LXX includes Seow, and Fox.[581]

Furthermore, against the MT reading וְיִשְׁתַּכְּחוּ (they forgot),[582] many medieval Hebrew MSS read וישתבחו "and they praised". This alternate textual tradition is reflected in the Greek versions, Old Greek: *και ἐπηνέθησαν* ("and they were praised"), Aquila and

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[578] *HALOT*, s.v. "שָׁכַח", 2:1490

[579] BDB s.v. "שָׁבַח", 986; *HALOT*, s.v. "שָׁבַח", 2:1387.

[580] Gentry, *Ecclesiastes*, 208. Furthermore, it is worth noting that a number of scholars read קְרֵבִים instead of קברים, some of them even change ובאו into ובאים (Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 135; Loader, *Ecclesiastes, A Practical commentary*, 99). For further information on the text tradition, see Goldman's analysis in *BHQ* 18, 100-101.

[581] Seow, *Ecclesiastes,* 284; Fox, *A time to Tear Down*, 282-284.

[582] Some scholars retain the verb "were forgotten" but understand the whole clause to read: "but those were forgotten in the city who acted justly (Krüger, *Qoheleth,* 158, Murphy, *Ecclesiastes,* 79, Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 422.427-428; Köhlmoos, *Kohelet*, 193. Delitzsch, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, 346). These scholars understand this phrase to indicate the actions not of the wicked but of the righteous. Translations that adopt this reading include KJV, ASV, NASB, MLB, NJPS and German translations such HRD, ELB and ZUR where the word "vergessen" is used in reference not to the wicked ("Frevler", "Ungerechte") but to the righteous (die "Rechtes getan hatten"). In some French versions, however, it is the wicked who is forgotten (oublié) : « Ainsi, j'ai vu des méchants mis au tombeau; on allait et venait depuis le lieu saint et on oubliait dans la ville comme ils avaient agi » (TOB, FJB, BFC, see also KJV)

Theodotion: *και ἐκαυχήσαντο* ("and they boasted"), and Symmachus: *και ἐπαινούμενοι* ("and they were praised").[583] This is also reflected in the Vulg.: *et laudabantur* (they are praised) and some modern translations as well (NEB, RSV, NABR, NIV, NRSV).

MT and its corroborated versions		*LXX and its corroborated versions*	
Then I saw the wicked buried; they had come and gone from the holy place, and they were forgotten in the city where they had done such things. This also is fleeting	וּבְכֵן רָאִיתִי רְשָׁעִים קְבֻרִים וָבָאוּ וּמִמְּקוֹם קָדוֹשׁ יְהַלֵּכוּ וְיִשְׁתַּכְּחוּ בָעִיר אֲשֶׁר כֵּן־עָשׂוּ גַּם־זֶה הָבֶל:	Then I saw the wicked being brought into the grave; and they went to the holy place and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is fleeting.	וּבְכֵן רָאִיתִי רְשָׁעִים קְבָרִים מוּבָאִים וּמִמְּקוֹם קָדוֹשׁ יְהַלֵּכוּ וְיִשְׁתַּבְּחוּ בָעִיר אֲשֶׁר כֵּן־עָשׂוּ גַּם־זֶה הָבֶל:

However difficult the verse might be, whatever translation or emendation one might make, the point Qoheleth is assessing is the temporariness both of the righteous and the wicked, for they both die. In the traditional wisdom, it has been argued that Qoheleth is here highlighting the unfairness of justice in the world. As in 7: 15, the wicked are not getting what they deserve. Some of them in fact live long, while there are righteous who die prematurely (7:15).

As a matter of fact, in Qoh 8: 10, Qoheleth describes the wicked receiving a decent burial, appropriate for the righteous. Not only that, they are even honored with a procession "from a holy place" (מִמְּקוֹם קָדוֹשׁ). Notwithstanding this appraisal, the memory of the wicked will not last, they are forgotten (וְיִשְׁתַּכְּחוּ) even in their own city. In Qoheleth, the

[583] Gentry, *Ecclesiastes*, 208.

theme of oblivion and the transience of human life are central to the evidence that Qoheleth puts forward to prove his הַכֹּל הָבֶל thesis.

This is not, however, to argue that Qoheleth undermines the value of memory, or remembrance. There is no doubt that remembering the historical past might lead one to a better and meaningful life. That explains Qoheleth's appeals to remember notwithstanding the possibility that one be forgotten (2:16; 9:5.15; 8:10) or not remembered (1:11a; 1:11b; 2:16). For instance, Qoheleth calls on his audience to remember his days of darkness (וְיִזְכֹּר אֶת־יְמֵי הַחֹשֶׁךְ, 11:8) and his creator (זְכֹר אֶת־בּוֹרְאֶיךָ, 12:1).

Thus, the problem of Qoheleth, we may say, is not the lack of memory as such, but a lasting memory. The absence of lasting memory is intrinsically related to the transitoriness of human beings, to the passing of a generation. According to Lohfink, each generation must rebuild its store of knowledge, because each death wipes it out.[584] In other words, the generation that comes, comes and goes with its history, giving the place to another.

Thus, that the wicked are forgotten, despite their decent burial ceremony as stated here in 8:10, sounds ironic. Most importantly, it tells of the illusory, temporary nature of their success, and which Qoheleth calls here הֶבֶל. For Qoheleth, violations to justice are transient and evil will not prevail in the final round: "It is of the fleeting nature of the world, that some righteous receive what befits the acts of evildoers, while some evildoers receive what befits the righteous; this too, I say is only temporary (8:14)."[585] Said otherwise, while

[584] "Jede Generation muß das Bewußtein von neuen aufbauen, da jeder einzelne Tod es wieder vernichtet" (Norbert Lohfink, *Kohelet, Mit einer neuen Einleitung*, (Auflage Würzburg : Echter Verlag, 1999), 5.

[585] This translation of from Dor-Shav, in "Ecclesiastes, Fleeting and Timeless, Part II", 17.

the wicked may succeed, their success is only temporary (הֶבֶל)[586] and which Qoheleth ironically highlights in 8:12-13. The wicked prolong their life with their actions (אֲשֶׁר חֹטֶא עֹשֶׂה רָע מְאַת וּמַאֲרִיךְ לוֹ (8:12a) but they cannot prolong their days (וְלֹא־יַאֲרִיךְ יָמִים , 8:13). Their days are like a shadow (כַּצֵּל). They come and go quickly (Ps. 102:11), and their great success, only fleeting.

IV.3 Chapter Conclusion

That the term הֶבֶל constitutes the book's literary center, its piloting theme, functioning as the weaving thread and as the key to unlocking its theological hub, and that it plays a 'ligamentary' role in Qoheleth requires no further proof. Yet, depending how one understands and translates הֶבֶל largely will determine one's understanding of the book as a whole.

Thus, it has been our aim in this chapter to suggest and argue that the key word הֶבֶל in Qoheleth connotes transitoriness, temporariness and fleetingness in most cases, contra any more negative and absolute meanings like "vanity, futile, vain meaningless, absurd", etc.

> It is only through the corrected reading of hebel as "transience" rather than "vanity" that we may understand the structure of the book of Ecclesiastes, and thereby learn its message. For Ecclesiastes does not offer a single, static

[586] The apparent success of the wicked is a recurrent theme in all of the Hebrew Bible. According to the Psalmist, the wicked are destroyed in a moment (כָּרָגַע סָפוּ), swept away utterly by terrors! as one waking from a dream (Ps 73:19-20). See also Ps 92:8: that though the wicked spring up like grass and all evildoers flourish, they will be destroyed forever (לְהִשָּׁמְדָם עֲדֵי־עַד). Michael Kolarcik, *The Ambiguity of Death in the Book of Wisdom 1-6 : a Study of Literary Structure and Interpretation*, (Roma: PIB, 1991), 91-105.

teaching from beginning to end, but a thematic progression, one that follows Kohelet's own discovery of meaning.[587]

We have appealed to evidence from the ancient Near Eastern Wisdom literature, the Hebrew Bible, and prominently from the whole of Qoheleth to show that הֶבֶל functions predominantly in Qoheleth as a metaphor for brevity of life, the non-lasting aspect or effects of things. When Qoheleth speaks of הֶבֶל he speaks of actions, things, situations and results. Succinctly put, he speaks of the objective world, as described in the opening poem and which is characterized by the fleetingness, the impermanence of the natural phenomena, and of human being.

The most striking examples we have analyzed are the *hebelistic* nature of the royal deeds (1:12-2:26), the transient nature of life in general both of humans and beasts, the brevity of one's days which Qoheleth highlights through some transience markers: יְמֵי־חַיֵּי הֶבְלוֹ (6:12), בִּימֵי הֶבְלִי (7:15) and כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֵּי הֶבְלֶךָ (9:9), יְמֵי הַחֹשֶׁךְ (11:8), יְמֵי בְּחוּרוֹת (11:9), הַיַּלְדוּת (11:9), וְהַשַּׁחֲרוּת הָבֶל (11:10), צֵל, מִסְפַּר, אַחֲרָיו; and the fleetingness in one's life and events in which Qoheleth presents the temporary value of labor, achievements, riches by the use of הַכֹּל הָבֶל (1:2;1:14; 2:11.17;3:19; 12:8) or גַּם־זֶה הָבֶל (2:15.19.21.23.26; 4:4.8.16; 5:9; 6:9; 7:6; 8:10.14). Not only good fortune and success, but sorrow, power, jealousy, and oppression are all, in the end fleeting.

Qoheleth is not however calling one to inactivity, laziness, and or lamenting over life, but rather to seek, find, and enjoy the good that is given in this fleeting world. The הֲבֵל הֲבָלִים הַכֹּל הָבֶל which introduces and almost concludes the book, and which meaning Qoheleth deploys in the two poems, is an appeal to contemplate the order, the beauty of the

[587] Perry, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 69.

cosmos, through the regularity, recurrence, and cyclicality of natural phenomena. It also calls to attention the role of human beings and the meaning of their actions, desires, thoughts, words, in such a fleeting world. We, thus, agree with Dor-shav who concludes that

> Like fleeting cherry blossoms, almost sacredly ephemeral, the transience of *hebel* inspires Kohelet's existential transformation. It encapsulates the beauty of sunsets, autumn leaves, or the Impressionist's fascination with fleeting light. For it is precisely the transience of these things that moves us. By understanding the fleeting nature of life as a whole, Kohelet is no longer paralyzed by the burden of death. Life's transience is dynamically transformed into a powerful motivational force: An urgency to live, to experience joy, to take action, and above all, to learn. The key to embracing transience, Kohelet discovers, is not to build monuments or expand empires, but to find the truth and inner understanding that flows from the eye-opening insight into the fleeting nature of it all.[588]

"Fleetingness of fleetingness, concludes Qoheleth, everything is fleeting". Yet in the midst of such transience of life and everything under the sun, there is good that one should find and enjoy.[589] Several times in the book, Qoheleth urges his audience to see good (רָאֹה טוֹב, 2:1.3.24; 3:13;5:17; 9:9); to be good (הָיָה בְּטוֹב, 7:10.14; 8:12), to do good (עֲשׂוֹת טוֹב, 3:12; 7:20). The use of expressions such as אֵין־טוֹב (2:24; 3:12.22; 8:15),[590] טוֹב מִן which Ogden

[588] Dor-Shav, "Ecclesiastes, Fleeting and Timeless", 21.

[589] In chapter 7 of his book, Ingram offers a detailed analysis and survey of the use of טוֹב in the Book of Qoheleth (Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes*, 168-249.

[590] Different prepositions follows the expression אֵין־טוֹב : בְּ (בָּאָדָם) 2:24; 3:12), ל (לָאָדָם , 8:15) מִן (מֵאֲשֶׁר יִשְׂמַח הָאָדָם בְּמַעֲשָׂיו, 3:22) to which one should add the deictic particle שֶׁ /אֲשֶׁר with the qal imperfect verb form (שֶׁיֹּאכַל, 2:24), or כִּי אִם (3:12; 8:15) plus the infinitive construct with prefixed ל (לֶאֱכוֹל וְלִשְׁתּוֹת וְלִשְׂמוֹחַ, 8:15). Graham S. Ogden, "Qoheleth's Use of the "Nothing Is Better"-Form." *JBL* 98.3 (1979):339-350 [340].

calls *tôb-Spruch,*[591] טוֹב בְּכָל־עֲמָל 2:24; 3:13; 4:9; 5:17) tells of the presence of good things (טוֹבִים).

For Qoheleth, however, everything but wisdom is transient, and history has proven him right. Neither Solomon's riches, nor his power, nor even his monumental temple in Jerusalem survived under the sun. What has indeed lasted, however, is the legacy of his wisdom, embodied in the wisdom books, among which is the book of Qoheleth. This leads us to the concluding part of our investigation, which mainly consists in the significance and relevance of this research to biblical scholarship on the book of Qoheleth.

[591] Graham S. Ogden, "The "Better"-Proverb (*Tôb-Spruch*), Rhetorical Criticism, and Qoheleth." *JBL* 96.4 (1977):489-505.

CONCLUSION AND APPRAISAL OF QOHELETH'S WISDOM

This last section of our investigation aims first at concluding our quest, second, assessing the nature and function of Qoheleth's wisdom within the biblical wisdom tradition.

CONCLUSION

As we stated at the onset of our investigation, the meaning of הֶבֶל in Qoheleth, which occurs 38 times, is widely seen as crucial to the meaning of the book. Yet there is no consensus concerning its meaning. Following, thus, the inconclusive scholarly debate on the meaning and translation of הֶבֶל which we surveyed in the first chapter,[592] this thesis concentrated on finding, through the cosmology of the opening and closing poems, the meaning of הֶבֶל in Qoheleth.

As was noted, it is our contention in this study, that the term הֶבֶל is best understood in relation to the fact that the unfolding of life is not only hidden from us, but also fleeting and ungraspable. Unlike the endlessly repeated natural phenomena (earth, sea, sky), human beings experience life in moments. Hence our proposal was to explain the word in the context of creation, in particular in the relation of human to non-human creation, inanimate to animate "nature", which we discussed in our second chapter. Therein we first looked closely at four biblical creation texts that are representative of others- Genesis 1, Genesis 2-3, Isaiah 35, and Psalm 148, arguing that a major and constant indication of the demarcation between the non-animate world (the three domains of earth, sea, sky) and the animate world is that the non-animate natural world is "eternal," characterized by endlessly

[592] For different categories of the meaning assigned to הֶבֶל as well as their authors, see appendix.

recurring movement, whereas the animate world (individual life forms) is mortal, that is, birth is followed by death; each life form is endowed with a seed to continue the species, but not of the individual.

We also attempted to situate and understand Qoheleth's *Weltanschauung* and his הֶבֶל statement in relation to the biblical sages' *Weltanschauung*. Hence, our treatise on the creation language in the wisdom tradition. It appears that the wisdom teachers believed that the real arena for exercising wisdom is the sphere of living beings. It is a tangible world that they sought to comprehend. They concluded that the world is characterized by a natural order. We have seen, for instance, in Sirach's teaching on creation (16:24-18:14) how Yahweh creates the world and establishes order, determining boundaries and arranging forever all their tasks that never disobey his divine word.

For the biblical sages, the order and regularity of and in the cosmos, in which every creature, inanimate or animate, human or nonhuman has its assigned place and function, are purposefully and strategically designed by God, and harmony is given by the role and function performed by each one of them. The natural world is so significant in humans' relationship to each other, to the cosmos, and to the Creator that it deserves the reader's attention especially in any attempt to understand humans and their role in the cosmos. One cannot understand the natural world without understanding humanity's relationship to it.

With this background, we have examined in the third chapter the two texts from Qoheleth that offered an especially detailed look at the relation of nature and humanity-Qoh 1:2-11 and 12:1-8. We argued that the two poems are mirror texts, that is, reflecting each other though partly alike and partly different. The permanence and stability affirmed in

1:2-11 conflict with the impermanence and the cosmic and social chaos in 12:1-8. Notwithstanding the differences, the two poems describe the fixity of human nature, and the fleetingness of human experience in a fleeting world.

Thus, we have in the fourth chapter explored on a textual basis the meaning and functionality of הֶבֶל. We contended that הֶבֶל has a positive value, as it expresses not the absurdity or meaningless of life, but its fleetingness, its significance. From a purely human perspective, life is הֶבֶל with so many risks that one might think that it is not worth living. Yet, we contended that the fleetingness of things does not connote their meaningless, senselessness, but rather, their very nature. It is, one might say, an inherent condition of things, designed by the creator. In other words, the *hebelness* is from God who made things in a way that they are fleeting, temporary, transient compared to his eternity.

We might accordingly state that the use and reading of הֶבֶל as "fleeting" is a theological *topos*. It is to demarcate divine nature and human nature, creator and creatures, "Eternal God versus short-lived humans."[593] As Samuel Adams comments, "the frequent refrain הֲבֵל הֲבָלִים הַכֹּל הָבֶל....points to the contrast between Gods' eternal status and humanity's complete inability to transcend earthly existence."[594] In fact, Qoheleth never characterized God or his works as הֶבֶל. There is no הֶבֶל in the divine world. All the הֶבֶל judgement are done under the sun, that is in the world.

It is also worth noting that it is not because something does not last that it means it is vain or meaningless. It all depends upon what one is expecting, what one is trying

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[593] Richard J. Clifford, *Psalms 73-150* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 97

[594] Samuel L. Adams, *Wisdom in Transition : Act and Consequence in Second Temple Instructions*, (Leiden: Boston: Brill, 2008), 103.

to do or accomplish with הֶבֶל. For instance, the flowers in springtime are הֶבֶל, they are fleeting; but they are not in vain or meaningless; for in their season they are meaningful, as they contribute to the beauty to the nature. Likewise, for Qoheleth, the *hebelness* of things does not make life meaningless, but rather it calls for a better meaningful and joyful life.

Thus, we assert that the הֲבֵל הֲבָלִים הַכֹּל הָבֶל which introduces and concludes the book of Qoheleth, and the meaning Qoheleth discloses in the two poems, is an appeal to contemplate the order, the beauty of the cosmos, through the regularity, recurrence, and cyclicality of the natural phenomena. It also calls to our attention the role of human beings and the meaning of their actions, desires, thoughts, words, in such a fleeting world. In Qoheleth, having a meaningful and joyful life is first and foremost accomplished by acting wisely. Wisdom, indeed, is for Qoheleth the source of the happiness available in life, for everything but wisdom is transient.

QOHELETH'S PLACE WITHIN THE BIBLICAL WISDOM TRADITION

The value of wisdom and the unequivocal contrast between חָכָם and כְּסִיל found in the book of Proverbs does not match the reality described in Qoheleth. We have shown for example how the expectation one might have that the wise and the fool be treated differently and according to their ways of life, is denied by the fact that they both have the same destiny (מִקְרֶה אֶחָד) which destroys the difference between the wise and the fool, making the advantage wisdom has over folly to be an advantage.

Using Qoheleth's rhetorical question concerning the reason for being wise: לָמָּה חָכַמְתִּי אֲנִי אָז יוֹתֵר (2:15b; 6:8),[595] some commentators have accused Qoheleth of despising

[595] This type of question which is characteristic to the righteous lament is found in the Joban tale (Job 2:9), and in the book of Tobit (Tobit 2:14).

wisdom. This judgment and characterization of Qoheleth and his wisdom as a pessimistic wisdom book come both from comparison with the other wisdom books, and from the negative meaning and functionally attributed to הֶבֶל in Qoheleth.

If it is true that Qoheleth never explicitly identifies wisdom as "fear the Lord", unlike the other "wisdom" books of the HB (Job 28:28; Ps. 111:10; Prov 15:33; Sir 1:14), (though he often recommends fearing God: Qoh 5:7; 7:18; 8:12), he assumes an exceptionally broad understanding of wisdom, which Peter Machinist suitably characterizes as "a set of observations on the nature of the world and the God who created and controls it, and on where humans fit and how they should behave in this divine creation."[596] Such wisdom is not an intellectual skill but rather "presents itself as experiential."[597]

Qoheleth' concern is, indeed, to test the wisdom tradition by experience. He is a seeker after truth about humans and their fate in the world. For that purpose he adopts an empirical methodology which consisted in seeing (רָאִיתִי), searching (תור), examining (דָּרַשׁ), testing (נַסּוֹת) with wisdom (בַּחָכְמָה) all that occurs (כָּל־אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה) under the heavens (1:13). Qoheleth never invokes prior knowledge, anything he "heard" unlike Job and Proverbs; he is guided by experience that he observes and judges.

Like Prov 3:19-20, however, where it is stated that YHWH creates everything by wisdom (בְּחָכְמָה), wisdom is described in Qoheleth as an instrument, not to create things, but rather to comprehend them.

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[596] Peter Machinist, "Ecclesiastes", in *The Jewish Study Bible* 2nd edition, eds. A. Berlin and MZ. Brettler (NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1599.

[597] Machinist, "Ecclesiastes", 1599.

Furthermore, though there is no personification of wisdom as in Proverbs (8:1-21; 22-30; 9:2-12), Sirach (Sir 24:1-34), or in Wisdom of Solomon (Wis 7:21-8:21), חָכְמָה holds a central place in the book of Qoheleth (the root חכם occurs thirty-two times: twenty-eight for חָכְמָה, and four times for חָכָם). Nowhere, however, in the book does Qoheleth praise foolishness or encourage wickedness. Rather, he praises wisdom and stresses its practical aspects. For instance, he lauds the supremacy and the value of wisdom (טוֹבָה חָכְמָה 7:11). He considers it superior to folly like light is superior to darkness (2:13).

For Qoheleth, there is a יִתְרוֹן (advantage) in wisdom over folly (יֵשׁ יִתְרוֹן לַחָכְמָה מִן־הַסִּכְלוּת , 2:13), over ten rulers in a city (7:19). She offers protection (צֵל) and gives life to the one who possesses her (הַחָכְמָה תְּחַיֶּה בְּעָלֶיהָ, 7:12); she makes one's face shine (חָכְמַת אָדָם תָּאִיר פָּנָיו וְעֹז פָּנָיו יְשֻׁנֶּא, 8:1), and she saves (וּמָצָא בָהּ אִישׁ מִסְכֵּן חָכָם וּמִלַּט־הוּא אֶת־הָעִיר בְּחָכְמָתוֹ, 9:15). She is better than might (טוֹבָה חָכְמָה מִגְּבוּרָה, 9:16) and weapons of wars (טוֹבָה חָכְמָה מִכְּלֵי קְרָב, 9:16-18).

However, during his investigation of wisdom Qoheleth concludes that the world and human life are affected by fleetingness. In the face of world marked by transience, inevitable death and injustice, Qoheleth does not see absolute value in wisdom. Qoheleth, thus, realizes that human wisdom is limited.

Qoheleth's concern about the limitation and imperfection of human wisdom that is in contrast to didactic wisdom literature has led commentators to interpret Qoheleth's message as critical of traditional wisdom.[598] To this contention, we respond that Qoheleth is

[598] See Walther Zimmerli "The Place and Limit of Wisdom in the Framework of Old Testament Theology", in *SJT* 17 (1964):148-156; and von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 226.

not engaged in a polemic against traditional biblical wisdom. It is simply that Qoheleth's comprehension of human wisdom is multivalued, broad and limited.

Wisdom as knowledge has its limits because a human being is a fleeting and limited being. As such, a man cannot know and understand all aspects of life and he cannot foresee what will happen in the future. This limit to human wisdom is a call to acknowledge the supremacy, omniscience, and sovereignty of God controlling everything. As Machinist writes, "wisdom is most effective when it is used to clarify its own limits. In doing so, wisdom need not deny that God is in control and has a coherent pattern of activity that will bring every creature to account."[599]

The pursuit of wisdom, characterized in 1:13 as עִנְיַן רָע, or רַעְיוֹן רוּחַ, might allude to the unfulfilled desires of humans for newness (in seeing, hearing, and speaking), or to the עוֹלָם that God has put in the hearts of humans; yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end (3:11). In other words, wisdom is not something one can achieve or acquire from one's own quests or efforts. She is prominently a gift from God: "All this I have tested by wisdom; I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me" (7:23); for "to the one who pleases him (שֶׁטּוֹב לְפָנָיו), God gives wisdom (חָכְמָה) and knowledge (דַּעַת) and joy (שִׂמְחָה) (2:26). In that regard, Qoheleth resembles the author of Job and Proverbs where wisdom is found preeminently in God (Job 28:12-28) and revealed to humans (Prov 2:6), and that which one should pray for (Wis 9:1-18).

In any case, whether wisdom is experiential or revelatory, the sages believed that the actual arena for exercising wisdom is in the sphere of the living, that is, the everyday

[599] Machinist, "Ecclesiastes", 1600.

world with its successes and losses, its joys and troubles. It is in that tangible and fleeting world one should live and enjoy the days assigned to him by the Creator.

Thus, by opening and closing his book with cosmology (1:2-11; 12:1-8) where humans and non-humans, animate and inanimate creatures interact, Qoheleth introduces the reader to the real world, and provides a key to a meaningful, wise and happy life, which consists in finding joy in one's situation, and role in the world, no matter how long one lives.

AFTERWARD

Reinterpreting הֶבֶל along the lines of transience significantly affects one's view of Qoheleth as a whole. The book describes the human condition as being limited in its duration and the duration of its efforts, yet without emptying life of true though temporary value. The book read through that lens consoles rather than disturbs the realist. It simultaneously reminds readers of their transience in this world with its pressing and tragic problems, as well as comforts with the fact that evil itself is temporary in its impacts on life. This realism is in fact in line with the wisdom teaching in Qoheleth: how to cope in a world where wickedness and folly surrounds one. Qoheleth's advice is that true wisdom recognizes the temporality of what is experienced and will accept the fact that our own experience in the world and the evil within that world are temporary, they will pass away. Hence Qoheleth's affirmation in the opening and closing poem of the book: הֲבֵל הֲבָלִים הַכֹּל הָבֶל (1:2; 12:8).

It is, however, worth noting and helped by our reading of הֶבֶל that there is no absolute or exhaustive intellectual work or quest. As a human product, our work is marked by incompleteness and imperfection, and thus, it is subjected to constructive or deconstructive criticism.

Appendix

Categories of meaning assigned to הֶבֶל

Category	less abstract	authors	more abstract	authors
Negative	vanity meaningless futility frustrating unsatisfactory	Longman Jerome Sneed	absurdity irrationality senselessness	Fox Schoors Anderson Christianson Tamez
Positive	fleeting transitory brevity temporary transient	Frederick Scott Farmer Schwienhorst-Schönberger Perdue Dor-Shav	incomprehensible, enigmatic ungraspable mystery	Staples Seow Bartholomew Ogden
Middle Position Negative or Positive	Fleeting, Futility	Crenshaw Krüger	Absurdity	Crenshaw Krüger

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