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CONTENTMENT IN THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES: INTERPLAY OF THE
THEMES OF DEATH, THE ROLE OF GOD, AND CONTENTMENT IN
QOHELETH'S TEACHING

A Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Abstract

Larisa Igorevna Levicheva, Contentment in the Book of Ecclesiastes: Interplay of the Themes of Death, the Role of God, and Contentment in Qoheleth's Teaching, A Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Middlesex University/London School of Theology, 2014

The purpose of this thesis is to study the development of the theme of contentment in the book of Ecclesiastes and the relationship of this theme to the themes of death and the role of God. Qoheleth's autobiography (Eccl 1:12–2:26) serves as a lens to read and interpret his teaching on contentment throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. The theme of death informs and permeates Qoheleth's teaching and sets the stage for his exhortations of contentment. The brevity of human life and death as the natural end of life create an urgency to live every moment with vigor and zeal, especially when the possibility of the afterlife is uncertain. According to Qoheleth, the presence and active involvement of God in the existence of humanity brings meaning and fulfillment to life. Even though human beings cannot comprehend the activities of the inscrutable God, they should find contentment and satisfaction in the allotment that God bestows on them as his gift. Qoheleth's autobiography plays a significant role in his teaching. Qoheleth utilizes the genre of royal autobiography to convey his message throughout the book of Ecclesiastes and to connect his personal experiences and observations with his teaching on contentment in the face of death.

Qoheleth teaches that contentment is an attitude that enables people to embrace life as a gift from God which may include both good and bad circumstances. Contentment empowers people to be fully engaged in every living moment in the face of death and the inscrutability of God. Life is full of contradictions and incongruities. This is why it is essential, Qoheleth admonishes, to develop an attitude of contentment which enables a person to find satisfaction in work and accept the allotment given by God. He promotes the need to give up attempts to comprehend God and his actions, and advocates the need to lead a life of generosity and hospitality, table fellowship and meaningful labour, the good life which pleases God.

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List of Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	David N. Freedman, ed., <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> (New York: Doubleday, 1992).
ABR	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
ACCSOT	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament
ACW	<i>Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation</i>
AEL	<i>Ancient Egyptian Literature</i>
AnBib	<i>Analecta Biblica</i>
ANE	<i>The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures</i>
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts</i>
ANETS	Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies
AOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentary
AramBib	The Aramaic Bible
ASTI	<i>Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute</i>
BBR	Bulletin for Biblical Research
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
BDAG	Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, William Gingrich and Frederick Danker, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 3 rd ed., 2000).
BDB	Francis Brown, S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, <i>The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon: With Appendix Containing Biblical Aramaic</i> (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1979).
BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologiarum lovaniensium
BETS	<i>Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
BibInt	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BMECCJ	<i>Bulletin of the Middle Eastern Culture Center in Japan</i>
BSac	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
BSem	The Biblical Seminar
BT	<i>The Bible Translator</i>
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BTCB	Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible
BZAW	Beihefter zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CanJT	<i>Canadian Journal of Theology</i>

CBOTS	Coniectanea Biblica Old Testament Series
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CC	Continental Commentaries
CCEL	Christian Classics Ethereal Library
cf.	Compare
<i>ChrCent</i>	<i>The Christian Century</i>
<i>ChrSR</i>	<i>Christian Scholar's Review</i>
ConC	Concordia Commentary
<i>CQ</i>	<i>Classical Quarterly</i>
<i>DBSJ</i>	<i>Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal</i>
<i>DOTWPW</i>	Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns, eds., <i>Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings</i> (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008).
<i>EDNT</i>	Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., <i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i> (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).
<i>EphThL</i>	<i>Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses</i>
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
FZAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
<i>GTJ</i>	<i>Grace Theological Journal</i>
<i>HALOT</i>	Ludwig Koehler, and Walter Baumgartner, <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (trans. and ed. under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson; 5 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1994-2000).
<i>HAR</i>	<i>Hebrew Annual Review</i>
HAT	Handbuch zum Alten Testament
<i>HS</i>	<i>Hebrew Studies</i>
<i>HTS</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Studies</i>
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
<i>IBS</i>	<i>Irish Bible Studies</i>
ICC	The International Critical Commentary
<i>IEJ</i>	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
IVP	InterVarsity Press
ITC	International Theological Commentary

<i>ITQ</i>	<i>Irish Theological Quarterly</i>
<i>JANES</i>	<i>Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JCS</i>	<i>Journal of Cuneiform Studies</i>
<i>JEA</i>	<i>The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology</i>
<i>JEBS</i>	<i>Journal of European Baptist Studies</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>JNSL</i>	<i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
<i>JOJS</i>	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
<i>JPSBC</i>	The JPS Bible Commentary
<i>JRE</i>	<i>Journal of Religious Ethics</i>
<i>JSem</i>	<i>Journal of Semitics</i>
<i>JSJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism</i>
<i>JSJSup</i>	Journal for the Study of Judaism Supplement Series
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSOTS</i>	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
<i>JSS</i>	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
<i>LSD</i>	H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones, eds., <i>A Greek-English Lexicon with a Revised Supplement</i> (9 th ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).
<i>LV</i>	<i>The Living Pulpit</i>
<i>LXX</i>	Septuagint
<i>MBPS</i>	Mellen Biblical Press Series
<i>NCBC</i>	The New Century Bible Commentary
<i>NEA</i>	<i>Near Eastern Archeology</i>
<i>NICOT</i>	The New International Commentary on the Old Testament
<i>NIDB</i>	Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, ed., <i>The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> (5 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009).
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., <i>New International Dictionary of the Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> (5 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997).
<i>NIVAC</i>	The New International Version Application Commentary
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>OLA</i>	Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta (Uppsala)

<i>OLD</i>	P. G. W. Glare, ed., <i>Oxford Latin Dictionary</i> (2 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
<i>Or</i>	<i>Orientalia</i>
OTL	The Old Testament Library
<i>PEQ</i>	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i>
<i>PHPR</i>	<i>Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses</i>
<i>PSB</i>	<i>Princeton Seminary Bulletin</i>
<i>RBL</i>	<i>Review of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>RHDEL</i>	Jess. Stein, ed., <i>The Random House Dictionary of the English Language</i> (New York: Random House, 1967).
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLSymS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SBLWAW	Society of Biblical Literature Writings from the Ancient World
Sir.	Sirach
<i>SJOT</i>	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>SM</i>	<i>Studia Missionalia</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>Summa Theologica</i>
<i>STRev</i>	<i>Sewanee Theological Review</i>
<i>TD</i>	<i>Theology Digest</i>
<i>TDOT</i>	G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, eds., <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> (trans. J. T. Willis, G. W. Bormiley, and D. E. Green; 15 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974-).
Tg. Q.	Targum Qoheleth
<i>Them</i>	<i>Themelios</i>
THOTC	The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
<i>TWOT</i>	R. Laid Harris,, Gleason L. Archer, Jr. and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., <i>Theological Workbook of the Old Testament</i> (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980).
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>TZ</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>VC</i>	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
<i>VR</i>	<i>Vox reformata</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>

WBC Word Biblical Commentary
ZAW *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*
ZTK *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*

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Chapter 1

Survey of Literature

1. Introduction

The history of interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes proves the point which this work makes: “Of making many books there is no end...” (Eccl 12:12).¹ The enigmatic words of Qoheleth have presented an exciting challenge to scholars. The apparent ambiguity of the language of the book has given rise to a plethora of interpretations and led scholars to offer significantly different ways of understanding Qoheleth’s words. For example, early Jewish and Christian commentators tend to spiritualize the message of Qoheleth and interpret it allegorically. In order to avoid any “wrong” interpretation of Qoheleth’s words and offer a straightforward one, the rabbis choose to reinterpret the perspective of Qoheleth in a way that fits within the rabbinic worldview.² The *Mishnah* interprets Qoheleth’s words “and a threefold cord is not quickly broken” (Eccl 4:12) in terms of one’s knowledge and obedience to the Scripture and the *Mishnah* as well as an appropriate life style.³ The *Koheleth Rabbah* presents Qoheleth’s teaching in terms of emphasizing the worthiness of the Torah and pious behaviour for the Jewish community.⁴ The *Targum of Qoheleth* sees the message of the book of Ecclesiastes to be about the proper study of the word of God in order to receive a good reward after death in the life to come.⁵ In medieval times

¹ All translations are the author’s unless otherwise noted.

² Paul V. M. Flesher, “The Wisdom of the Sages: Rabbinic Rewriting of Qohelet,” in *Aramaic in Postbiblical Judaism and early Christianity: Papers from the 2004 National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar at Duke University* (eds. Eric M. Meyers and Paul V. M. Flesher; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 269-279. See also Michael J. Broyde, “Defilement of the Hand, Canonization of the Bible, and the Special Status of Esther, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs,” *Judaism* 44.1 (1995): 65-79; Marc Hirshman, “Qohelet’s Reception and Interpretation in Early Rabbinic Literature” in *Studies in Ancient Midrash* (ed. James L. Kugel; Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2001), 87-99.

³ Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishing, 2011), 323. The *Mishnah* also understands Qoheleth’s words in Eccl 1:15, “What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is wanting cannot be counted” to speak about one’s inability to make up for lost times and opportunities; namely in the case of missing meals during the Feast of Tabernacles or not offering sacrifices on Feast days. See Danby, *The Mishnah*, 175, 212.

⁴ “*Ecclesiastes*” (transl. by A. Cohen; *The Midrash Rabbah* [3rd ed.; eds. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon; London: Soncino Press, 1983]), 8:4-10. See also Ruth Sandberg, “Qoheleth and the Rabbis,” in *The Words of the Wise are like Goats: Engaging Qoheleth in the 21st Century* (eds. Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III and Christian G. Rata; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 37-54; Mark Hishman, “The Greek Fathers and the Aggada on Ecclesiastes: Formats of Exegesis in Late Antiquity,” *HUCA* 59 (1958): 137-165.

⁵ Peter S. Knobel, *The Targum of Qoheleth Translated, with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus and Notes* (AramBib 15; Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 2.

the rabbis start to pay more attention to the literal reading of the book of Ecclesiastes. Abraham Ibn Ezra approaches Qoheleth's words from a philosophical point of view and suggests that the book is about perfecting one's spirit through the increase of wisdom.⁶ Rashbam advances that acknowledging the limits of humanity's power to comprehend God and living by faith constitute the main theme of the book of Ecclesiastes.⁷

Early Christian interpreters read Qoheleth's message as refuting the meaninglessness of this world. Jerome reinterprets Qoheleth's words in spiritual terms and maintains that the major theme of Qoheleth is a call to ascetic and monastic life completely devoted to God.⁸ He uses 1 Cor 13:12, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known," as an interpretive key to the message of Qoheleth.⁹ Gregory Thaumaturgos following in the tradition of Origen believes that the book of Ecclesiastes speaks allegorically about the vanity of this life and the glory of the eschatological hope.¹⁰ Bonaventure struggles with the tradition passed down from Origen. He does not see the message of Qoheleth to be about instilling contempt for the world because it was created by God.¹¹ Rather, Bonaventure distinguishes between the vanity of the world, the vanity of sin, and the vanity of change and proposes that the main message of the book is to focus on God and to obey his commandments.¹² Thomas á Kempis believes Eccl 1:2, *vanitas vanitatum, omnia*

⁶ Abraham Ibn Ezra, *El Comentario de Abraham Ibn Ezra Al Libro del Ecclesiastes: Introducion, Traducccion y Edicion Critica* (Textos y studios "Cardenal Cisneros" 56; ed. M. Gómez-Aranda; Madrid: Instituto de Filología del CSIC, 1994). See also idem, "The Influence of Isaac Ibn Ghayyat on Abraham Ibn Ezra's Commentary on Ecclesiastes," *JOJS* 63.1 (2012): 84-104; idem, "The Meaning of Qohelet According to Ibn Ezra's Scientific Explanations," *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism* 6 (2006): 339-70 (344); Sandberg, "Qoheleth and the Rabbis," 50-53.

⁷ Rashbam, *The Commentary of R. Samuel Ben Meir Rashbam on Qoheleth* (eds. Sara Japhet and Robert B. Salters; Jerusalem-Leiden: The Magnes Press/Brill, 1985), 68. See also Sandberg, "Qoheleth and the Rabbis," 48-53.

⁸ St. Jerome, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (ACW 66; trans. and eds. Richard J. Goodrich and David J. D. Miller; New York: The Newman Press, 2012), 33. See also Roland E. Murphy, "Qoheleth Interpreted: The Bearing of the Past on the Present," *VT* 32.3 (1982): 331-37.

⁹ St. Jerome, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 7, 36. See also J. Robert Wright (ed.), *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon* (ACCSOT, vol. IX; Downers Grove: IVP, 2005), 282.

¹⁰ Gregory Thaumaturgos, *A Metaphrase of the Book of Ecclesiastes*, (ANF 6: 19-20).

¹¹ St. Bonaventure, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (Vol. 7 of *Works of St. Bonaventure*; transl. Campion Murray and Robert J. Karris; St. Bonaventure: The Franciscan Institute St. Bonaventure University, 2005), 77.

¹² B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (3rd ed; Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 292; Rebecca S. Beal, "Bonaventure as a Reader of Endings: The Commentary on Ecclesiastes," *Franciscan Studies* 65 (2007): 29-62; Eric S. Christianson, "Ecclesiastes in Premodern Reading: Before 1500 C.E." in *The Words of the Wise are like Goats: Engaging Qoheleth in the 21st Century*

vanitas to be an invitation to despise all earthly things and to desire only the otherworldly.”¹³

Over time the literal reading of the book of Ecclesiastes has taken precedence over the allegorical interpretation. Yet, scholars differ even more in their understanding of the message and the main themes of Qoheleth’s teaching. For example, Ogden, along with several commentators who hold a more orthodox understanding of Qoheleth’s work, claims that the thesis of the book is “that life under God must be taken and enjoyed in all its mystery.”¹⁴ A diametrically opposite interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes is offered by Crenshaw, who, among other scholars, believes that Qoheleth has a very negative message to share with his audience. This message speaks about the oppressiveness and absurdity of life, because life is short, joy is meaningless, virtue is not rewarded, and God is distant for he has abandoned humanity to fate and death. Crenshaw even claims that Qoheleth provides a solid biblical foundation for his own scepticism.¹⁵

Such divergence of scholarly opinions about the message of the book of Ecclesiastes proves the fact, as Ingram helpfully points out, that throughout the centuries the interpretive strategy of the reader has defined the ways in which this

(eds. Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III and Christian G. Rata; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 3-36 (15-17).

¹³ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (New York: M. A. Donohue & CO., n.d.), 1-2. See also Norbert Lohfink, *Qoheleth* (trans. Sean McEvenue; CC; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 1.

¹⁴ Graham Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Readings: A New Biblical Commentary; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 14-15. A similar positive interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes can be found in Craig G. Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutical Theory* (AnaBib 139; Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1998); Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (Westminster Bible Companion; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000); Kathleen A. Farmer, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes: Who Knows What Is Good?* (ITC: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); Daniel C. Fredericks, *Coping with Transience: Ecclesiastes on the Brevity of Life* (BSem 18; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993); Lohfink, *Qoheleth*; Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001); Graham S. Ogden and Lynell Zogbo, *A Handbook on Ecclesiastes* (USB Handbook Series; New York: United Bible Societies, 1997); Elza Tamez, *When the Horizon Close: Rereading Ecclesiastes* (Eng. Ed.; Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000).

¹⁵ James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), 53. Other recent works which adopt rather negative approaches are William H. U. Anderson, *Qoheleth and its Pessimistic Theology: Hermeneutical Struggles in Wisdom Literature* (MBPS 54; Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1997); Eric S. Christianson, *A Time to Tell: Narrative Strategies in Ecclesiastes* (JSOTS 280; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) (which is less negative than his previous work, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*); Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Deithelm Michel, *Untersuchungen zur Eigenart des Buches Qoheleth* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989); Dominic Rudman, *Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (JSOTS 316; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); Gary D. Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric: Private Insight and Public Debate in Ecclesiastes* (JSOTS 327; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

biblical book and its main message have been understood.¹⁶ Salters offers a valuable summary of the history of interpretation of this book when he states:

It might be said that the book of Ecclesiastes has divided scholarly opinion throughout its existence, and the controversy which accompanied the inclusion of the book in the Jewish canon (c. 100 A.D.) a summary of which accompanied the inclusion of the book in the Midrashim and Talmud, simply underlines this. This division among the Rabbis throws into relief just where the problems of interpretation lie; in effect one side is saying that the orthodox and pious statements in the book modify and control the unorthodox, while the other side claims that the skepticism is of the essence of Qoheleth and remains over against the pious statements to be found there.¹⁷

Thus, there is no consensus among the scholars on what is considered to be the main themes in Qoheleth's message or the overall purpose of his writing.

This study seeks to argue that the theme of contentment runs through the entire book of Ecclesiastes and intertwines with the themes of death and the role of God in the life of humanity. The genre of royal autobiography which Qoheleth employs to introduce the theme of contentment and its influence on the message of this book are also of great significance to this research. Qoheleth teaches the theme of contentment through the lens of his autobiography as he connects his personal experience with the experiences of his audience. However, before arguing for the thematic development of contentment in Qoheleth's teaching, it is necessary to review the major themes that scholars have already identified in the book of Ecclesiastes.

2. Literature Review

Throughout the history of interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes scholars have recognized that Qoheleth's message is influenced by his understanding of death and its impact on the meaning of life, his view of God and divine activity in the human world and his thoughts on enjoying life under the sun. This section will begin with the overview of the commentators' understanding of the role of death in Qoheleth's work. Next it will look at the interpreters' views on the fear of God and the role of God in Qoheleth's thought. Afterwards, it will focus on what scholars have to say about the themes of futility of life, enjoyment, and

¹⁶ Doug Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes* (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 431; London: T & T Clark, 2006), 36-41.

¹⁷ R. B. Salters, "Exegetical Problems in Qoheleth," *IBS* 10 (1988): 44-59 (44).

contentment in Qoheleth's teaching. Finally, this research will address the interpreters' understanding of the royal autobiography in the book of Ecclesiastes because it undergirds Qoheleth's method of teaching on contentment.

2.1 Death in the Book of Ecclesiastes

There is a consensus that the theme of death plays a significant role in Qoheleth's work. The high frequency of the key word **לבל**, traditionally translated as "vanity" (e.g., NIV, NRSV, NKJ, KJV),¹⁸ put together with Qoheleth's observations about certainty and inescapability of death, create a picture of human existence as brief and passing, on the one hand, and as unavoidably moving towards death, on the other. Scholars differ, however, on how to interpret Qoheleth's concern with death.

Crenshaw believes that death is important to Qoheleth because its arbitrariness is troubling to him. According to Crenshaw, Qoheleth is unable to find correlation between the way of life and the timing of death. Death nullifies any personal achievement and mocks human desires for fame and lasting memory.¹⁹ While Qoheleth seems to suggest that life is better than death, the context of the book speaks to the contrary. The only advantage of the living is the knowledge that they would die, and such knowledge causes only suffering. Furthermore, people die just like animals and this reality renders life completely meaningless and even despicable.²⁰ Shields goes even further and argues that death undermines the meaning of life itself. This situation coupled together with Qoheleth's observations about God overlooking the injustices in the world make human existence painful and absurd.²¹

While Crenshaw and Shields are correct in presenting Qoheleth's view of death as robbing humanity of achievements and lasting significance, they seem to overlook Qoheleth's positive statements about enjoying life and accepting it as a gift from God. Their treatment of Qoheleth's understanding of death is not balanced. The seven exhortations to joy always follow Qoheleth's thoughts on death to cast in sharp

¹⁸ This study chooses to translate **לבל** as "fleeting" and will discuss this term in detail in Chapter 2.1 Images of Fleetingness in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

¹⁹ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 25.

²⁰ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 26.

²¹ Martin A. Shields, *The End of Wisdom: A Reappraisal of the Historical and Canonical Function of the Ecclesiastes* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 146-147, 202-203.

relief the vitality and vibrancy that only exist in this life that is full of meaning and opportunities.²²

Murphy identifies the theme of death to be one of several main themes in the book of Ecclesiastes. He claims that Qoheleth's view of death is startlingly different from the rest of the Old Testament. Qoheleth mentions that there is no lasting memory of the dead (Eccl 1:11) as well as no discernible reason for the righteous to die prematurely while the wicked enjoys a long life and an admiration of the community (Eccl 8:10). Death is more preferable than life to Qoheleth, for the dead are spared the pain and evil of life (Eccl 4:2–3). Yet, what hurts Qoheleth the most about death, according to Murphy, is its unique levelling quality as the wise die just like the fools and in death there is total annihilation (Eccl 2:16). The only difference between the living and the dead is that the living are aware about their coming death!²³

Murphy's analysis is helpful in pointing out Qoheleth's angst concerning death having the same effect on the wise and the foolish especially because Qoheleth understands the value of wisdom. However, Murphy does not take into account the possibility that Qoheleth's observation about lack of enduring memories of the dead offers a critique of this reality. In fact, Qoheleth may be rebuking his audience for not adhering to Moses' words, "Remember the days of old, consider the years long past; ask your father, and he will inform you; your elders, and they will tell you" (Deut 32:7). Murphy also neglects the fact that premature death is an issue that has always troubled people in the Old Testament. Thus, in expressing his lack of understanding about the untimely demise of good people Qoheleth fits right in with King David who is perplexed by Abner's premature and unnecessary death, "Should Abner die as a fool dies? Your hands were not bound, your feet were not fettered; as one falls before the wicked you have fallen" (2 Sam 3:33–34).²⁴

²² 1) Eccl 2:14–22 (thoughts on death) and Eccl 2:24–26 (exhortation to joy);
2) Eccl 3:1–11 (thoughts on death) and Eccl 3:12–13 (exhortation to joy);
3) Eccl 3:18–21 (thoughts on death) and Eccl 3:22 (exhortation to joy);
4) Eccl 5:12–16 [Eng. 5:13–17] (thoughts on death) and Eccl 5:17–19 [Eng. 5:18–20] (exhortation to joy);
5) Eccl 8:10–14 (thoughts on death) and Eccl 8:15 (exhortation to joy);
6) Eccl 9:1–6 (thoughts on death) and Eccl 9:7–10 (exhortation to joy);
7) Eccl 11:7–8 (thoughts on death) and Eccl 11:9–10 (exhortation to joy).

²³ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, lxvii–lxviii.

²⁴ A similar attitude of bewilderment towards premature death is found in 1Kgs 17:18, where in a conversation with Elijah, the widow expresses her belief that her young son died for her sins, while it was not so. Such beliefs reflect the people's understanding about premature death as a punishment for the wicked, not an expected end for the righteous.

Adams believes that a contextual reading of Qoheleth's preoccupation with death, which is a dominant theme in his teachings, reflects his adamant objections to pioneering Hellenistic ideas about human existence in the afterlife when every person will receive his judgment.²⁵ Such concern about death and the afterlife, according to Adams, marks Qoheleth's thought as different from the traditional Israelite wisdom which shows no interest in this subject and presents death as an ethical category in its instruction. The complexity of Qoheleth's view of death reflects his understanding of death as the prism through which he looks at life and which colours every part of human existence in dark shades.²⁶

However, Adams is too quick to conclude that Qoheleth does not believe in the existence of rewards and punishments for humanity at the hand of God or that he has a fatalistic view of life. Qoheleth makes it quite clear that God will judge people according to their deeds (cf. Eccl 3:17; 8:12–13; 11:9). Qoheleth does not argue against the idea of the afterlife. Rather, his teaching remains within the framework of the Old Testament and focuses on the certainty of death. Longenecker states: "The emphasis in the thought of ancient Israel was on the unity of the human personality, with the material and immaterial aspects of human personality being so intertwined that neither was able to exist or function apart from the other."²⁷ The Old Testament presents a person as נפש "a living being" created out of עפר "dust" and possessing רוח "a divine spirit." In Genesis 2:7 Adam is described as becoming נפש, "a living being"; נפש expresses a way to be rather than a thing to possess.²⁸ At death נפש is "breathed out" or "poured out."²⁹ When רוח, "the spirit" of God departs from the body, the person ceases to be alive as can be seen in Ps 146:4, "When their breath

²⁵ Samuel L. Adams, *Wisdom in Transition: Act and Consequence in Second Temple Instructions* (JSJSup 125; ed. John J. Collins; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 133-35.

²⁶ Adams, *Wisdom in Transition*, 133-41.

²⁷ Richard N. Longenecker, ed., *Life in the Face of Death: the Resurrection Message of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 8.

²⁸ Lawson G. Stone, "The Soul: Possession, Part, or Person? The Genesis of Human Nature in Genesis 2:7" in *What About the Soul? Neuroscience and Christian Anthropology* (ed. Joel B. Green; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 47-61. The same idea is present in Ps 39:13, "Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again, before I depart and am no more." On the similar understanding of נפש See also Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 61-65; Robin L. Routledge, "Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament," *JEBS* 9 (2008): 22-39; Edwin Yamauchi, "Life, Death, and the Afterlife in the Ancient Near East," in *Life in the Face of Death: the Resurrection Message of the New Testament* (ed. Richard N. Longenecker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 42-43; Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; translated by J. A. Backer; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 2: 131-145.

²⁹ Cf. Job 11:20; 31:39; Lam 2:12.

(וַיָּחַד) departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.”³⁰ Job 7:21 suggests that death is a complete end of existence, “For now I shall lie in the earth; you will seek me, but I shall not be.” There is no indication in the creation narrative, the narrative of the fall or in the rest of the Old Testament that God’s design was ever for humanity to live eternally.³¹

Burke sees death as a driving concern that dominates Qoheleth’s worldview and “forms the core of the author’s melancholy.”³² She argues that Qoheleth’s preoccupation with death reflects a time of spiritual anguish in the culture that can no longer provide satisfactory answers to pressing issues, with death being one of them. She draws parallels between Qoheleth’s teaching on death and Egyptian biographies that speak to the same issue to argue that these texts deal with a new understanding of death and the afterlife which, unlike the old traditions, does not offer comfort and peace to the living.³³ Burke is correct in emphasizing Qoheleth’s preoccupation with death and his desire to speak openly about death and its implications in human existence. She is also helpful in pointing out that Qoheleth rejects any possibility for people to achieve any form of continuity; namely, descendants, memory, or pervasiveness of wisdom, all of which cannot secure a person’s lasting presence in the community.³⁴

However, Burke goes too far by suggesting that death is an unsolvable problem for Qoheleth. Qoheleth does not try to find a resolution to the problem of death (Eccl 8:8). Rather, he encourages his audience to accept the reality of death and then learn from it while they are still alive. Thus, Qoheleth suggests attending funerals to learn how to live a life of wisdom (Eccl 7:1–4). He also wants his audience to imagine what their existence in Sheol might look like (Eccl 9:5, 6, 10) so that they will learn to appreciate the life they already have (Eccl 3:12–13; 9:7–9).

Fredericks proposes that the theme of death is the underlying theme that runs through the entire book and connects Qoheleth’s teachings on the brevity of human

³⁰ Cf. Ps 90:3, “You turn us back to dust.”

³¹ Kent Harold Richards, “Death, Old Testament,” *ABD* 2: 108-110. See also Knibb, “Life and Death in the Old Testament,” 402-03; Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), 40; John Goldingay, *Israel’s Faith* (Vol.2 of *Old Testament Theology*; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 633-34. For more examples See 1 Kgs 2:2; 2 Sam 14:14; Job 14:1–2.

³² Shannon Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period* (SBLDS 170; Atlanta: SBL, 1999), 1.

³³ Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth*, 1-8.

³⁴ Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth*, 235.

existence with his understanding of the nature of humanity as created beings. Fredericks believes that the brevity of life cannot be ignored because Qoheleth walks through life hand-in-hand with death. Death is not a threat; it is a “necessary consideration in one’s contemplation of life...life cannot be understood apart from sober thinking about its end. The one who is truly serious about life will often reflect on the certainty of death...”³⁵ In light of the inevitability of death and often its unpredictability, there is no certainty in life for the rich or the wise or the righteous.

Fredericks helpfully suggests that a truly wise person is the one who is able to cope with the certainty of death and enjoy the simple pleasures of life because it is a gift of God.³⁶ While Fredericks is correct in indentifying the brevity of human existence as a major element in Qoheleth’s teaching, he is mistaken in suggesting that Qoheleth simply offers “consolations and means of coping” with human transience.³⁷ Rather, Qoheleth advocates actively embracing one’s transience and learning to find satisfaction in the midst of it.

Provan correctly identifies the theme of death in the book of Ecclesiastes as the bottom line to which Qoheleth continuously brings his audience to remind them of their mortality and humanness. Such view of death, according to Provan, is not foreign to the Israelite thought and is grounded in Gen 1–3. The constant reminder about the inevitability of death should encourage a true appreciation of life, which, like breath, is constantly fleeting away. Provan’s understanding of *הבבל* as “breath”, which is elusive and passing, links Qoheleth’s teaching on the brevity of life with the underlining concept of death and creates a possibility to read Qoheleth’s message as a call to life rather than a disappointment with it.³⁸ Yet, Provan’s analysis of the theme of death does not take into account how Qoheleth’s understanding of death in his autobiography (Eccl 1:12–2:26) influences his view of death in the world in general.

Lo also argues that the theme of death is the overarching theme in the book of Ecclesiastes that holds Qoheleth’s argument together from the introductory poem of Eccl 1:4–8 to the concluding poem of Eccl 12:1–7. Lo believes that this theme is needed to set the stage for Qoheleth’s teaching on the enjoyment of life because in his thought life and death mutually define each other. She has helpfully identified strong

³⁵ Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, 33-34. See also Alison Lo, “Death in Qoheleth,” *JANES* 31 (2009), 85-98.

³⁶ Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, 32.

³⁷ Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, 96-97.

³⁸ Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 38-39.

connections between the theme of death and the theme of life that are important in Qoheleth's argument as well as the theme of death and the fleeting nature of human wisdom, work, achievements, and the existence itself.³⁹ She has advanced the discussion further by highlighting the ways in which the theme of death which is first introduced in the opening poem (Eccl 1:4–8) and then finds its climax in the closing poem (Eccl 12:1–7) frames Qoheleth's thoughts on life. However, Lo focuses mostly on the theme of death and how it influences Qoheleth's view of life without looking at the theme of enjoyment of life which is also dominant in Qoheleth's teaching.

The theme of death is acknowledged as very prominent in Qoheleth's exhortation and as one that colours his entire message. Previous research has examined the theme of death in detail, but more can be done to analyze the connections between the impact death has on Qoheleth's personal story and his understanding of death in the rest of the book of Ecclesiastes. This study would like to demonstrate that the reality of death which Qoheleth has experienced in his autobiography serves as a foundation to his encouragement of a full embracement of life and a complete engagement with it. Thus, there is a need for a new interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes which will analyze the ties between Qoheleth's view of death, his autobiography, and his thoughts on a fulfilled life in this world, and which will look at the message of Qoheleth through the lens of his autobiography.

2.2 The Fear of God and the Role of God in the Book of Ecclesiastes

The fact that the book of Ecclesiastes which often speaks in a rather unorthodox way about life, wisdom, and God is included in the canon has often bewildered scholars. Early Jewish and Christian interpreters justify the inclusion of this book in the canon by claiming that the author calls his readers to the life of obedience to God, guided by the fear of God and adherence to asceticism and discipline. They think that the frequent use of the term **הבל** purposes to remind the audience about the relative value of this life as opposed to the immortality of the next. Qoheleth's harsh comments about wisdom, work and God are attributed to those he is in dialogue with. The epilogue presents the main theme of the book: the fear of God coupled with the study of God's word results in a happy life filled with godly wisdom.⁴⁰

³⁹ Lo, "Death in Qoheleth," 85-98.

⁴⁰ Knobel, *The Targum of Qoheleth*, 5. Ginsburg, *Song of Songs and Coheleth*, 109; Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 33-35; Murphy, "Qoheleth Interpreted," 332-35; Fox, *A Time to*

Gregory Thaumaturgus merges literal and allegorical interpretations in his reading of Ecclesiastes. He sees Solomon dialoguing with unbelievers to point out that nothing of this world has ultimate goodness compared to God and only the eschatological hope can bring some relative enjoyment to the emptiness of existence. The fear of God constitutes true happiness in contrast to wealth, and only in righteousness this life could truly be enjoyed.⁴¹ Jerome follows Origen who identifies Qoheleth with Solomon and ultimately with Christ. Jerome's allegorical understanding of the words of Qoheleth impacts the interpretation of Ecclesiastes and the book is spiritualized to accentuate wisdom and required service to God. For example, he interprets the call to eating and drinking, which the *Midrash* understands as a service to God, in terms of the sacraments of the Lord's Supper.⁴²

Early Jewish and Christian commentators struggle with articulating the main message of the book of Ecclesiastes and making it fit into the rest of their sacred canons. They feel compelled to defuse Qoheleth's unorthodox statements and re-interpret them in light of their respectful religious traditions. Unfortunately, such interpretations overlook the literal meaning of the book and read into Qoheleth's words teachings that one is hard-pressed to find in the book of Ecclesiastes. The need to reinterpret Qoheleth's message in order to protect the weak-minded readers from making "wrong" conclusions robs the book of its message that calls its readers to re-evaluate their lives.

More recently commentators continue to believe that the epilogist assembled Qoheleth's instructions together and offered his own observations on them. Therefore,

Tear Down, 1-2; Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth*, 46. Katherine J. Dell offers a helpful overview of the history of canonization of the book of Ecclesiastes. Her analysis comes to the conclusion that Qoheleth's text has been classified as orthodox wisdom due to the use of proverbs, harmonization with the Torah and Solomonic authorship. She believes that these factors have allowed for this skeptical and unorthodox book to be included in the Wisdom Literature. Ecclesiastes is a protest within wisdom, but she argues that the concept of wisdom had changed by the time Ecclesiastes is included in the canon and harmonization with the Torah allows the book a way in. A very pessimistic outlook on the contradictions of life is toned down by the epilogist's admonition to fear God and keep the Torah. See Katherine J. Dell, "Ecclesiastes as Wisdom: Consulting Early Interpreters," *VT* 44 (1994): 301-29. See also Svend Holm-Niesen, "The Book of Ecclesiastes and the interpretation of it in Jewish and Christian Theology," 38-96.

⁴¹ Gregory Thaumaturgus, *A Metaphrase of the Book of Ecclesiastes*, (ANF 6: 19-20). See also Wright, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, 192-200; B. Smalley, *Medieval Exegesis of Wisdom Literature* (ed. R. E. Murphy; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 42-43; Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 18-21.

⁴² See Wright, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, 191. Ginsburg sees Jerome's work as Christianizing the allegories of the Jewish rabbis. See Ginsburg, *Song of Songs and Coheleth*, 34, 102. See also Wright, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, 216; Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 19-20; Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 34, 42.

scholars harmonize the words of Qoheleth with the words of the epilogist. Even though the epilogue is no longer regarded as part of the main composition belonging to Qoheleth, it is still seen as a way to interpret the message of the book of Ecclesiastes.⁴³ Thus, following Jewish and Christian interpreters before him, Shields harmonizes Qoheleth's thoughts with those of the epilogist, whose position represents orthodox wisdom. Shields argues that the main theme of the book of Ecclesiastes is the fear of God and obedience to his commandments which comes to the fore in the epilogue.⁴⁴ Shields does not suggest that the epilogist argues against Qoheleth's views. He believes that the epilogist's goal is to criticize the sages and their teachings in general. This critique demonstrates that the wise men cannot make any sense of the world if they do not obey the Law or live in the fear of God.⁴⁵ Shields acknowledges Qoheleth's mentioning of God and the fear of God (e.g., Eccl 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12–13), yet he sees Qoheleth's understanding of these concepts as different from the epilogist's. Shields believes that Qoheleth advises to fear a distant, non-relational God, while the epilogist encourages his audience to fear the God who has revealed himself to his people through his commandments (Eccl 12:13).⁴⁶

Enns proposes that Qoheleth encourages his audience to enjoy their daily pleasures and to have a sobering picture of death. In addition, he sees the most foundational aspect of Qoheleth's work to be his teaching about the incongruities and limitations of life.⁴⁷ The fear of God, for Qoheleth, is bound up in his frustration over the incomprehensive nature of God and the inevitability of the divine order of events in this world. Enns argues against understanding the epilogue (Eccl 12:9–14) as a refutation of Qoheleth's words in the rest of the text. He suggests that the epilogist puts Qoheleth's personal view of the fear of God into the larger context of every Israelite's duty to fear God and obey his commandments.⁴⁸

⁴³ A. H. McNeile, *An Introduction to Ecclesiastes with Notes and Appendices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904); 24; Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 44. In the middle of the twentieth century there was a shift toward acknowledging basic unity of the book of Ecclesiastes as compared to the beginning of that century. Gordis makes mention of this development in his commentary *Koheleth—The Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 73, 379.

⁴⁴ Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, 37-38. Loader goes even further to suggest that Ecclesiastes is a negative witness to the gospel. See J. A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (Hawthorne: de Gruyter, 1979), 122-23.

⁴⁵ Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, 106-109.

⁴⁶ Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, 95-100.

⁴⁷ Peter Enns, *Ecclesiastes* (THOTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 15.

⁴⁸ Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 7-16.

Bartholomew attempts to reconcile the apparent contradictions of the book of Ecclesiastes. He suggests that these contradictions come from Qoheleth's attempt to contextualize the old wisdom tradition in a new situation. Qoheleth's point of view comes from his Greek reasoning and his Jewish way of life.⁴⁹ Bartholomew argues that Qoheleth purposefully juxtaposes the passages about life enjoyment with the passages about life incongruities to create gaps that the reader has to fill. The epilogue of the book of Ecclesiastes (Eccl 12:9–14) becomes the most important part of the whole book as it provides a way to fill these gaps by remembering one's Creator.⁵⁰ Bartholomew suggests that the book of Ecclesiastes as a whole does not endorse Qoheleth's views but rather deconstructs them in an ironic manner to bring his audience to the conclusion of fearing God and remembering their Creator.⁵¹

Shields, Enns and Bartholomew see Qoheleth as a wisdom teacher who bases his teaching on his personal experience and observations. However, his epistemology cannot provide a satisfactory explanation to the enigma of life which brings disappointment and frustration as well as joy and good gifts from God.⁵² These scholars find the resolution to this paradox in the words of the epilogue. The epilogist speaks of the fear of God that enables a person to maintain a positive outlook on life and God who has created it. It is not quite clear, however, why these scholars read the epilogue as a corrective to Qoheleth's words about God and the fear of God. Qoheleth's teaching about fearing God and obeying his commandments include proper conduct before God (Eccl 5:1–6; cf. Prov 21:3; 1 Sam 15:22; Amos 5:22–24; Hos 6:6), accepting his authority over one's life (Eccl 2:25; 3:14; 7:14; cf. Job 1:21; 2:10; 9:4), and relying on his just judgment at the times appointed by him (Eccl 3:17; 8:5–6, 12–13; 11:9; cf. Ps 10:17–18; 75:2; Ezek 18:30; 24:14). The epilogue should be seen as the final word in the development of the theme of God and the fear of God in Qoheleth's discourse.

There are scholars who argue that Qoheleth does not have a positive view of God at all and views the fear of God as fright of an inscrutable mystery. Perdue asserts that Qoheleth constructs a world of endless repetitive movements characterized by tyranny and injustice. While creation is beautiful, it is separated from

⁴⁹ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (BCOTW; ed. Tremper Longman III, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 58-59.

⁵⁰ Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 263.

⁵¹ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 87.

⁵² Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, 106-107; Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 7-12; Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 93-96;

the goodness and righteousness of God. Humanity leads a tragic life because it is incapable of understanding time and success or reaching harmony with the created order.⁵³ According to Perdue, the Creator has “unchallenged use of power and even capricious disregard for justice. The order that prevails in heaven and on earth rests only on the power, not the justice, of the divine tyrant.”⁵⁴

Crenshaw suggests that Qoheleth does not have faith in either God or knowledge, unlike other wisdom books. For Qoheleth “nothing proved that God looked at the creation with favour.”⁵⁵ The deity is distant and ominous; thus it is only natural to live in fear of such God for nobody knows what the divine response may be to any human action or word.⁵⁶ Longman goes even further and advocates that Qoheleth blames God for creating this world unfair and tragic.⁵⁷ The divine will is final and unchangeable and it is also unknowable, which makes human existence exasperating. Such a God does not create an attitude of awe in a worshipper, but one of suspicion and extreme caution. Qoheleth understands the fear of God as anxiety and dread before the all-powerful but ever-elusive deity.⁵⁸ However, as the scholars before him, Longman situates the meaning of the book of Ecclesiastes in the last few verses of Eccl 12 that counter everything that Qoheleth has said. The epilogue speaks of the fear of God as a proper response of a believer who desires to have a meaningful relationship with God.⁵⁹

When Perdue, Crenshaw and Longman present such a negative view of God and the fear of God in the words of Qoheleth, they fail to acknowledge the complexity of his thought on the subject. Qoheleth pictures God as a giver of good gifts and a provider for human life (cf. Eccl 2:24–26; 3:12–13; 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20]; 9:7) as well as an inscrutable and powerful deity whose work in the world nobody can

⁵³ Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 238-9. Brown offers a similar interpretation of Qoheleth’s view of creation and humanity, when he states that the essence of Qoheleth’s message “is bracketed by cosmos and extinction, by weariness and death.” See Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 15.

⁵⁴ Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 240.

⁵⁵ Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 116. See also Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 36. Ellul, however, disagrees with Crenshaw’s position and calls it an “invention” when he writes: “Qoheleth states that human beings cannot discover all that God has done. Crenshaw’s “example” amounts to mere invention on his part. He has just one end in view: to contrast Qoheleth’s skepticism with all the traditional values of Yahwism. How trite!” See Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: a Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (trans. Joyce Main Hanks; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 26.

⁵⁶ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 24-25.

⁵⁷ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 273.

⁵⁸ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 283-86.

⁵⁹ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 333.

understand (cf. Eccl 3:11, 14; 3:17; 8:17; 11:5).⁶⁰ He also firmly believes in God's righteous and fair judgment (cf. Eccl 3:16–17; 8:12–13) and the necessity of a proper attitude and posture before God (cf. Eccl 4:17–5:6 [Eng. 5:1–7]).

Scholars are in agreement about the significant role God plays in Qoheleth's understanding of the world. While interpreters like Crenshaw and Longman do not see God's involvement as benevolent toward humanity, they still acknowledge the fact that the fear of God is central to Qoheleth's thought. Scholars like Bartholomew and Christianson recognize the centrality of the role of God and the fear of God in Qoheleth's teaching, yet they fail to show how this concept is evident throughout his work instead of becoming prominent only in the epilogue. More needs to be done in analysing the theme of the fear of God and role of God in the book of Ecclesiastes and its influence on Qoheleth's teaching.

2.3 Futility of Life

The prominence of the themes of death and the fear of God in the book of Ecclesiastes causes scholars to view Qoheleth as negative, sceptical and pessimistic, at times even turning the readers away from God.⁶¹ The interrelatedness of these two themes in the message of Qoheleth contributes to the development of the futility of life as a major theme of the book of Ecclesiastes. Crenshaw believes that Qoheleth searches “under the sun” to find meaning in life with the help of his intellect but finds only disillusionment and loss of faith in God.⁶² His commendation to enjoy life is “only a kind of lifeboat ethics” as he inevitably connects the theme of vanity with the theme of pleasure.⁶³ There is no hope. Qoheleth has succumbed to despair even though he

⁶⁰ Murphy is mindful of this tension within the book of Ecclesiastes and tries to harmonize the lack of security that the fear of God could bring with the encouragement of the reverence which it demands. See Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, lxx-lxix.

⁶¹ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 23-28; idem, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 116-28; Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1994), 193-94, 237-42; Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 32-36.

⁶² Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 116. See also Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 36. Anderson argues that “the book reveals a person who was in a great deal of turmoil over the way life is. His pessimism was as a result of life's experiences which he found painful—and a God who is unwilling to aid the plight of humanity in a consistent and fair way. The essence of pessimism lies in a sense that change for the better is impossible—which may indicate a faith crisis on the part of the author.” See William H. U. Anderson, *Qoheleth and its Pessimistic Theology: Hermeneutical Struggles in Wisdom Literature* (MBPS 54; Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 193.

⁶³ Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 126. See also James L. Crenshaw, “The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth,” in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (ed. J.G. Gammie et al., Missoula: Scholars, 1978), 205-16.

has fought it at first.⁶⁴ Crenshaw attributes such negative attitude to life in Qoheleth's teaching to the fact that "Qoheleth bears witness to an intellectual crisis in ancient Israel, at least in the circles among whom he taught."⁶⁵ Shields claims that Qoheleth's goal is to point out the futility of life because even the wisdom teachers like him are helpless in influencing the outcome of their lives.⁶⁶ The task of wisdom is ultimately futile as well because Qoheleth's research has shown that wisdom is not capable of making sense of this world.⁶⁷

Crenshaw and Shields are correct in presenting the message of Qoheleth as offering new insights into the problem of the meaning of life and addressing the limitations of wisdom and the advantages it may bring. Yet, it is problematic to ascertain the kind of crisis of the wisdom tradition that these scholars see in Qoheleth's teaching. The rabbis hardly doubted the inclusion of this book in the canon.⁶⁸ Their concerns focused mainly on the suitability of this work for general use and the possibility to misinterpret Qoheleth's words that would lead to improper actions. The book's multiple contradictions presented the main reason for questioning the book's divine inspiration. The book of Ecclesiastes was eventually accepted by the rabbis as inspired and containing significant religious exhortations that did not contradict the Torah.⁶⁹

Longman draws a clear distinction between the message of Qoheleth and the message of the Epilogist in the book of Ecclesiastes. He argues that the theme of the meaninglessness of life permeates Qoheleth's teaching and sums it up in the following phrase: "Life is full of trouble and then you die."⁷⁰ Longman believes that Qoheleth

⁶⁴ Crenshaw, "The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth," 573-85.

⁶⁵ Crenshaw, "Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth)," 513. See also Hartmut Gese, "The Crisis of Wisdom in Koheleth, in *Theodicy in the Old Testament* (IRT 4; ed. James L. Crenshaw; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 141-53; Anthony R. Ceresko, *Introduction to Old Testament Wisdom: A Spirituality for Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 93; Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 193-94; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 37-40.

⁶⁶ Martin A. Shields, "Ecclesiastes and the End of Wisdom," *TynBul* 50 (1999), 117-39. Shields believes that the book of Ecclesiastes "shows the bankruptcy of a wisdom movement which had sought its own answers and had failed to find them." See Shields, "Ecclesiastes and the End of Wisdom," 139. See also Otto Kaiser, "Qoheleth," in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A. Emerton* (ed. John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and H.G.M. Williamson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 83-93.

⁶⁷ Martin A. Shields, *The End of Wisdom: A Reappraisal of the Historical and Canonical Function of the Ecclesiastes* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 103-109. See also Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 584.

⁶⁸ Ruth N. Sandberg, *Rabbinic Views of Qoheleth* (MBPS 57; Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1999), 19-27; See also idem, "Qoheleth and the Rabbis," 37-41.

⁶⁹ Sandberg, *Rabbinic Views of Qoheleth*, 19-27; idem, "Qoheleth and the Rabbis," 37-41.

⁷⁰ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 34.

shows resignation not affirmation in his speech because he does not consider himself to be blessed by God (cf. Eccl 5:17 [Eng. 18]–6:12). Qoheleth has lost hope. In the gloomy and futile life that has no lasting meaning, Qoheleth calls to enjoy the temporal pleasures to lessen the yoke (cf. Eccl 2:24; 5:18–19; 9:7–10). He advocates the fear of God that is better understood as fright before the all-powerful but ever-elusive deity (Eccl 5:6 [Eng. 7]; 7:15–18; 8:12–13).⁷¹ Longman situates the meaning of the book of Ecclesiastes not in the words of Qoheleth but in the words of the epilogist who counters everything that Qoheleth has said (Eccl 12:8–14).⁷² According to Longman, the epilogist criticizes and corrects the pessimistic and sceptical theology of Qoheleth in order to place it in line with the rest of the Old Testament.⁷³

Longman's analysis of Qoheleth's message about the futility and meaninglessness of life lacks balance as he primarily focuses on the passages that deal with life's limitations and contradictions and attributes joy passages to Qoheleth's resignation. Longman finds the message of the book of Ecclesiastes in the words of the epilogist, but he does not adequately explain how the epilogue and the body of the text fit together. He compares Qoheleth's point of view with the epilogist and finds the latter better fitting into the Old Testament theology; yet he does not demonstrate how both points of view bring out the message of the book of Ecclesiastes.

Murphy offers a more cautious and complex reading of the book of Ecclesiastes that takes into consideration both the *הַבֵּל* passages and the *carpe diem* exhortations. Murphy portrays Qoheleth as being deeply rooted in Israel's wisdom when he searches for answers to complexities and contradictions of life or its security. However, the theme of futility of life dominates Qoheleth's discussion as he is unable to find an unspoiled value in this world and comes to the conclusion that this world is worthless and absurd.⁷⁴ Although at times life seems incomprehensible (cf. Eccl 2:12), toil is burdensome and brings no profit (cf. Eccl 2:22–23; 3:9), Qoheleth resigns himself to believe, according to Murphy, that pleasure can provide a way to deal with contradictions in this world (e.g. Eccl 2:24; 3:12, 22; 8:15). While a

⁷¹ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 36.

⁷² Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 36.

⁷³ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 38–39.

⁷⁴ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, iviii–lix.

personal relationship with God finds no room, but the fear and reverence of the deity are in order (cf. Eccl 3:10–11, 14; 5:6; 7:13, 18; 8:12, 17; 11:5).⁷⁵

Murphy's analysis of Qoheleth's message is helpful as it points out the complexity of Qoheleth's thought on the value of life and its meaning. Whilst Murphy acknowledges Qoheleth's love of life, he sees only resignation in Qoheleth's encouragement to seek joy and pleasure. Yet, to recognize only a mood of resignation in the book's positive statements is not to account for or appreciate their frequency, scope and placement. Qoheleth affirms wisdom, pleasure, and labour Throughout the book he reiterates the importance of enjoying life as a gift given to humanity by God.

Unlike many exegetes before him who have tried to harmonize the incongruities in the book, Fox believes that the book of Ecclesiastes centres on the contradictions Qoheleth sees in the world and their effect on the human condition. These contradictions, Fox suggests, are a way to address the message of the book which is held together with the theme of the meaning of life, "its loss and partial recovery."⁷⁶ For Fox, Qoheleth is disillusioned with life and the world and even joy is not that pleasurable. His intellectual ability has failed him; life is truly absurd due to the contradictions that cannot be resolved; therefore, Qoheleth rebels against God (cf. Eccl 2:15–18; 6:2; 7:13; 8:11).⁷⁷ Yet, Qoheleth is also able to reconstruct the meaning of life, at least partially, and find some good readily available to humanity: pleasure (Eccl 2:24–26), work (Eccl 9:10; 11:1–6), justice (Eccl 3:17; 11:9b), and life (Eccl 11:7–8).⁷⁸ The epilogue builds on Qoheleth's message and offers a fitting conclusion to his work, stating that in the world where everything is absurd, people should still fear God and obey his commandments.⁷⁹

Miller follows Fox's understanding of the centrality of life contradictions in Qoheleth's work which form the unity of the book and become the foci of the book's

⁷⁵ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, lix, lxxviii. Murphy goes on to say: "But it is difficult to find more than the mood of a resigned conclusion in [positive advice] passages. There are not recommendations that Qoheleth truly finds joy in. He can only offer them in a mysterious and incalculable world: What else can one do? So take whatever joy one can find." See *Ecclesiastes*, 27.

⁷⁶ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 3. See also Michael V. Fox, "The Inner Structure of Qoheleth's Thought," in *Qoheleth in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors; BETL 136; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 225-38.

⁷⁷ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 49. See also Edward L. Greenstein, "Sages with a Sense of Humor: The Babylonian Dialogue between the Master and His Servant and the Book of Qoheleth," in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel* (ed. Richard J. Clifford, SBLSS 36; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 55-65. See also Michael Fox, "The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qoheleth," *JBL* 105 (1986), 427.

⁷⁸ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 140-42.

⁷⁹ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 144-45; idem. "Frame Narrative and Composition," 103.

address.⁸⁰ Yet, unlike Fox, Miller believes that Qoheleth's goal in addressing his audience is to destabilize and restabilize their accepted values and beliefs and to demonstrate a different way of living. Although the theme of futility and absurdity of life is important to Qoheleth, Miller suggests that a negative evaluation of life does not turn Qoheleth into a sceptic or a pessimist. Rather, he is able to acknowledge the significance of good gifts that God bestows on humanity (cf. Eccl 1:13; 3:10–11, 14–15; 4:17–5:6 [Eng. 5:1–7]; 6:1–2; 7:13–14; 8:17; 11:5, 9; 12:7), and encourage his audience to change their behaviour to reflect a lifestyle that could embrace both the good and the bad that they face in life (Eccl 5:6 [Eng. 7], 17–18 [Eng. 18–19]).⁸¹

Fox and Miller are correct in highlighting the importance of the contradictions in the message of Qoheleth. Although Fox believes that Qoheleth finds life and everything in it to be absurd and Miller adds an element of foulness to Qoheleth's understanding of life, both Fox and Miller insist that Qoheleth's purpose for writing is to instruct his audience to enjoy what they have and to fear God. Nevertheless, Qoheleth's statements about life's absurdity or foulness in their analysis of his teaching remain problematic as they contradict his overall message of the life's value and importance.

Identifying the theme of futility of life as a major theme in Qoheleth's teaching presupposes an imbalanced treatment of the overall message of the book of Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth does not see life as futile and meaningless. On the contrary, he points out life's goodness (e.g. Eccl 2:24–26; 3:12–13; 9:7–10). Qoheleth's exhortations to embrace life and be fully engaged in it constitute a significant part of his message. He encourages his audience to develop an attitude of contentment which will help them accept circumstances that they cannot understand, as he reiterates his conclusions about the situations in life which are הַבֵּל “fleeting”.

However, the fact that Qoheleth juxtaposes his הַבֵּל sayings with declarations of life's goodness suggests that the theme of enjoyment may be the most prominent theme in the book of Ecclesiastes. There are scholars who suggest that Qoheleth resolves the contradictions he observes in life through his exhortations of joy, because Qoheleth believes that enjoying life brings meaning and significance to it. The

⁸⁰ Douglas B. Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qoheleth's Work*, (Atlanta: SBL, 2002), 160-61.

⁸¹ Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes*, 167.

scholarly position that understands the theme of enjoyment of life to be a major theme of the book of Ecclesiastes will be discussed next.

2.4 Enjoyment of Life

The prominence of the joy passages in the book of Ecclesiastes has given rise to a radically different reading of the book. By the end of the nineteenth century Luzzatto champions the view according to which the book of Ecclesiastes is commonly understood as encouraging carnal pleasures as the only thing which is left for humans in this life.⁸² Gordis argues that Qoheleth is writing Ecclesiastes in his old age while looking back at his life pursuits to share with his audience his lessons about what truly matters in life.⁸³ His deep roots in Hebrew thought moved him to search for wisdom and justice, yet the very fact that the world and the future are utterly unknowable (Eccl 8:17) and justice is impossible to find (Eccl 3:16; 4:1–2; 7:15; 10:6–7) makes him desperate to find some goal for existence. Thus, he articulates the main theme of his composition—the striving after happiness as the purpose of human life and as a divine imperative (Eccl 3:2; 11:8). Gordis argues that Qoheleth desires to achieve wisdom and justice, but fails; therefore, only joy can bring meaning and value to human existence. Joy is the only reason to consider this monotonous and meaningless life a blessing.⁸⁴

Gordis is correct in identifying literary unity in the book of Ecclesiastes which shows that both the negative and the positive statements come from Qoheleth.⁸⁵ However, his treatment of Qoheleth's message is unbalanced. He gives preference to Qoheleth's exhortations of joy over his observations of life's incongruities and limitations instead of holding them closely together to see how both types of his sayings contribute to the overall message of the book.

Whybray identifies Qoheleth as a teacher and a theologian who wishes to point out the erroneous beliefs and teachings of his day in order to help his audience hold on to their Jewish faith. In the face of the new and enticing temptations of the Greek culture and philosophy, such as striving after material gain and administrative power or seeing God as remote and unconcerned with the fate of humanity, Qoheleth

⁸² Ginsburg, *Song of Songs and Coheleth*, 97-99; Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 35.

⁸³ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 78.

⁸⁴ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 51-58, 84. See also Cochrane, "Joy to the World: The Message of Ecclesiastes," 1596-98.

⁸⁵ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 73.

is a “preacher of joy,” who defends his faith.⁸⁶ His seven commendations to enjoy life (Eccl 2:24–26; 3:10–15, 22b; 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20]; 8:14–15; 9:7–10; 11:7–12:1) play a significant role in Qoheleth’s thinking, according to Whybray.⁸⁷ As the theme of enjoyment is developed throughout the book, the emphasis of the *carpe diem* passages gradually increases and the last two passages (Eccl 9:7–10; 11:7–12:1) speak directly to the readers as Qoheleth brings to conclusion his thoughts on how one should live in this world. Qoheleth believes in the Creator who is a benevolent giver of good gifts to his creation. Whybray suggests that Qoheleth finds life “a sorry business” and “a vanity” and uses this conclusion to support his teaching on enjoying one’s life. What God gives in the present far outweighs the brevity of human life (Eccl 5:17b [Eng. 18b]; 9:9b; 11:9; 12:1b), the impossibility to know the future (Eccl 3:11, 22b; 8:14), and the unchanging lot with which one has to live (Eccl 2:26; 3:14, 22b; 5:18; 9:9).⁸⁸

Whybray’s analysis of the book of Ecclesiastes demonstrates the significance of the theme of enjoyment of life in Qoheleth’s thought. His proposition that Qoheleth finds joy to be the answer to life contradictions is intriguing. However, his suggestion that people can transcend the incongruities and problems of human existence through the experience of joy seems to overlook Qoheleth’s sombre attitude to life. Qoheleth encourages his readers to attend funerals and spend time pondering grave things in life because they can learn about a wise way of life from such situations (Eccl 7:3).

Lohfink argues, furthermore, that Qoheleth sees joy as “the supreme good” that God gives humanity under the sun (Eccl 5:19 [Eng. 20]).⁸⁹ Lohfink believes that Qoheleth desires this audience to know that when people experience joy they are able to touch on something that only God can. The joy of the heart (בשמחה לב) is the way for God to provide an answer (מענה) to people by revealing himself to humanity, Lohfink explains (Eccl 5:19 [Eng. 20]). Such joy takes away the necessity

⁸⁶ R.N. Whybray, “Qoheleth as a Theologian,” in *Qoheleth in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors, BETL 136; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 239-45; idem. “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” JSOTS 23 (1982): 87-98. For more on optimistic view of Qoheleth see Graham S. Ogden, “Qoheleth XI 7–XII 8: Qoheleth’s Summons to Enjoyment and Reflection,” VT 34 (1984), 27-38. Ogden asserts that Qoheleth’s thesis is that “the life which God gives is to be taken and enjoyed in all its fullness.” See Ogden, “Qoheleth XI 7–XII 8,” 30. Ellul sums up Qoheleth’s message the following way: “In reality, all is vanity. In truth, everything is a gift of God.” See Ellul, *Reason for Being*, 31.

⁸⁷ Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” 88.

⁸⁸ Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” 88, 92. See also Ardel B. Caneday, “Qoheleth: Enigmatic Pessimist of Godly Sage?” GTJ 7 (1986): 21-56.

⁸⁹ Norbert Lohfink, “Qoheleth 5:17–19—Revelation by Joy,” CBQ 52 (1990): 625-35 (625); idem. *Qoheleth*, 84-85.

of exercising the fear of God and brings humanity closer to God.⁹⁰ This joy also eliminates all thoughts of death in one's mind. According to Lohfink, it is done by transforming the fear of death and absorbing it into joy, not repressing it.⁹¹ The main theme of the book of Ecclesiastes is, thus, the invitation to rejoice and find pleasure in God's gifts and in doing so catch a glimpse of God who chooses to reveal himself to his creation through joy (Eccl 5:19 [Eng. 20]).⁹²

Lohfink's proposition that God reveals himself to humanity through joy is rather daring. Although Qoheleth talks about joy being a gift and a response of God to people's troubles in life, to interpret מַעֲנֶה "answer" or "preoccupation" in Eccl 5:19 [Eng. 20] as a "revelation" would stretch the meaning of this word too far.⁹³

Seow argues that the book of Ecclesiastes should be treated theologically.⁹⁴ Qoheleth describes the situations he has observed always in relation to God and God's involvement therein. The world of Qoheleth is the world in which God is ultimately in control even though he remains a mystery. The two poles of such anthropology, God in heaven and people on earth, are in relationship to each other. The fear of God, then, is the humans' ability to recognize their proper place in this unequal relationship and, thus, find peace and satisfaction in the world.⁹⁵ Seow claims that Qoheleth preaches ethics of enjoyment and freedom. Joy for Qoheleth does not speak of hedonism, but rather it is a responsibility and an answer to the problem of הַבָּל in the world. It is humanity's allotment freely granted by God. Seow argues that Qoheleth does not see enjoyment as obliterating life's problems or as a small concession to life's gloominess. Rather, Qoheleth is able to recognize that both joy and tragedy play a significant part in the world.⁹⁶

Lee develops the importance of the theme of enjoyment in the book of Ecclesiastes further by arguing that Qoheleth "confronts reality both with its tragic and joyous dimensions, and calls his audience to respond faithfully to the mysterious

⁹⁰ Lohfink, "Qoheleth 5:17–19—Revelation by Joy," 634.

⁹¹ Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 85.

⁹² Lohfink, "Qoheleth 5:17–19—Revelation by Joy," 635.

⁹³ See the discussion on the meaning of מַעֲנֶה in Chapter 5.

⁹⁴ Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 18C; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 54-60.

⁹⁵ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 57. See also Choon-Leong Seow, "Theology When Everything is out of Control," *Int* 55 (July 2001), 237-49.

⁹⁶ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 59-60.

activity of God by living life to the full.”⁹⁷ Lee suggests that **הבל** is a thematic word that holds the book together. It speaks of something incomprehensible and includes both good and bad in life.⁹⁸ Commendations of enjoyment are another part of the author’s rhetorical strategy and theological discussion that binds his work together. Lee believes that Qoheleth brings together the theme of enjoyment and the theme of the fear of God to establish his theology of enjoyment. The fear of God is more than an attitude; it is a certain behaviour that reflects human responsibility to God.⁹⁹ At the same time, his theology of enjoyment offers more than a way to cope with life’s difficulties. It proposes a means for human beings to achieve their highest potential in an unstable and unpredictable world.¹⁰⁰

Seow and Lee provide a significant contribution to the scholarship on the book of Ecclesiastes. They are able to bring together two seemingly opposite subject matters of the book, enjoyment and the fear of God, to show that a person would gain a greater appreciation for Qoheleth’s work if he sees them in correlation with each other. While Seow believes that Qoheleth presents “a theology of life before God,” in which enjoyment is a human responsibility,¹⁰¹ Lee claims that Qoheleth’s rhetoric identifies enjoyment in life as a matter of religious duty and, thus, redefines the meaning of enjoyment and piety. She believes that joy provides practical ways to achieve “the greatest human flourishing” in the world beyond mortal grasp.¹⁰²

While the theme of enjoyment is prominent in the book of Ecclesiastes, this study proposes that identifying this theme as the theme of contentment rather than enjoyment is more in line with the overall message of Qoheleth. Contentment is a better term because it embraces enjoyment as well as tragedy and pain and enables a person to have an appropriate attitude of acceptance of life because ultimately God is in control (cf. Eccl 7:14). A person may find it hard to enjoy an oppressive and unjust situation. Qoheleth even says that death is preferable to a life that is lived in

⁹⁷ Eunny P. Lee, *The Enjoyment in Qoheleth’s Theological Rhetoric* (BZAW 353, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 8.

⁹⁸ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 80. See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 47-54.

⁹⁹ Contra Crenshaw’s understanding of Qoheleth’s theology, which is based on the ultimate fear of the divine, rather than love for him. See Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 123-25.

¹⁰⁰ Lee, *The Vitality*, 124-25.

¹⁰¹ Seow, “Theology When Everything is out of Control,” 246.

¹⁰² Lee, *The Vitality*, 125. Tamez explains this concept even further: “The utopia of everyday enjoyment is a viable, humanizing way of repudiating the present but at the same time living it by a contrary logic. That is, to live as human beings who feel that they are alive in a society that does not allow them to live because of its demands for productivity and efficiency.” See Tamez, *When the Horizons Close*, 25.

oppression or injustice, because in death a person can find peace, rest and a final cessation of pain and tyranny (Eccl 4:1–3). However, Qoheleth advocates life (Eccl 9:4). His teaching offers comfort to those who live in oppression by reminding them about the transient nature of unjust circumstances (Eccl 4:4) and calls them to remember God who will one day bring justice to the world (Eccl 8:12–13).

2.5 Contentment

The theme of contentment has been identified in several passages of the book of Ecclesiastes. Rashbam believes that Qoheleth spells out the main theme of his argument in Eccl 1:2–11, which contrasts the permanence of nature with the fleetingness of human life. Therefore, the only response to life, in which a person is hard-pressed to find any advantage, is to be content with small joys and resign to providence, hoping that all the complexities and contradictions of life will be resolved in the future (Eccl 2:24–26).¹⁰³ Rashbam suggests that Qoheleth demonstrates to his audience that in the world that offers no permanence and security joy becomes “man’s contentment with his lot, his satisfaction with what he has and his ability to enjoy the fruits of his work.”¹⁰⁴

Provan maintains that Qoheleth’s teaching is set in the context of reverence and obedience to God who will judge humanity according to their righteousness or wickedness (cf. Eccl 3:14, 16–17; 5:6 [Eng.7]; 7:18; 8:12).¹⁰⁵ This God is a giver of good gifts which should be enjoyed as such because the reality of death makes the simple things like eating and drinking and doing good truly meaningful (Eccl 2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20]; 9:7–10; 11:9–10). According to Provan, Qoheleth purposes to encourage his audience to accept the life as it is instead of trying to make it better through acquisition of wisdom, wealth, or work.¹⁰⁶

Rashbam and Provan have helpfully identified the presence of the theme of contentment in the book of Ecclesiastes. They have pointed out Qoheleth’s faith in God as a good and righteous judge, which is common for a Hebrew sage. They have

¹⁰³ Rashbam, *The Commentary on Qoheleth*, 48-49.

¹⁰⁴ Rashbam, *The Commentary on Qoheleth*, 65. Luther claims that the book condemns “the deprived affection and desire of us men” and believes that the aim of book is “to put us at peace and to give us a quiet mind in everyday affairs and business of this life, so that we may live contentedly in the present without care and yearning about the future.” See Martin Luther, “Notes on Ecclesiastes,” in *Notes on Ecclesiastes, Lectures on the Song of Solomon, Treatise on the Last Words of David* (ed. J. J. Pelikan; vol. 15 of *Luther’s Works*, Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1972), 7-8.

¹⁰⁵ Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 31-39.

¹⁰⁶ Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 39.

acknowledged the fact that Qoheleth speaks of contentment at times (Eccl 2:24–26; 3:22; 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20]; 8:15; 9:7–10),¹⁰⁷ yet they have not demonstrated how this theme is developed throughout Qoheleth’s teaching. They have overlooked the connections between the significance of contentment in Qoheleth’s autobiography and his teaching on contentment in the rest of the book.

In sum, the themes of death, the fear of God and the role of God, the futility of life, and the enjoyment of life are important in the book of Ecclesiastes. This study is proposing that contentment is the central theme that Qoheleth develops throughout his teaching. The analysis of this theme will be the primary focus of this thesis. At this time, it is necessary to investigate the nature and purpose of the royal autobiography in the book of Ecclesiastes because Qoheleth’s autobiography contributes to the development of the theme of contentment in his teaching.

2.6 Royal Autobiography in the Book of Ecclesiastes

The autobiographical narration plays an important part in the book of Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth candidly confesses to his readers about searching for greater good and avoiding the traps of material gain.¹⁰⁸ He refers to himself in the first person throughout the book with the exceptions of Eccl 1:1–2; 7:27; 12:9–14. The main themes of death, the role of God, the meaning of life and enjoyment that Qoheleth develops throughout the book are first addressed in his autobiography (Eccl 1:12–2:26). He uses his autobiography as a basis for his teachings and observations. The style and genre of the royal autobiography significantly influences the message of Qoheleth. Therefore, it is necessary to survey the scholarly literature to get a picture of how Qoheleth’s story has been interpreted. Throughout the ages the commentators have focused on three major issues related to Qoheleth’s autobiography: 1) Solomonic authorship; 2) possible foreign influences on the genre of royal autobiography; and 3) the extent of the royal autobiography, as these issues contribute to a better understanding of the place and purpose of Qoheleth’s life story and its relationship to his message.

¹⁰⁷ Rashbam, *The Commentary on Qoheleth*, 65; Hengstenberg, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 20–22; Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 37–39.

¹⁰⁸ E. H. Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes; or, The Preacher, With Notes and Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1882), 35.

2.6.1 Authorship

When considering the main themes of the book of Ecclesiastes and its overall message, one has to inquire about its author as this knowledge can inform the interpretation of the book's purpose. Yet, the first two chapters of the book of Ecclesiastes present scholars with a significant problem regarding the authorship of this work. Ecclesiastes 1:1 reads: "The words of Qoheleth, the son of David, king in Jerusalem." Later, Ecclesiastes 1:12 states: "I, Qoheleth, was king in Jerusalem." However, the Bible never mentions a son of David by the name of Qoheleth who was ever a king in Jerusalem. Furthermore, the Hebrew word קהלת "Qoheleth", which appears in the book seven times (Eccl 1:1, 2, 12; 7:27; 12:8, 9, 10), is attested twice with the definite article (Eccl 7:27; 12:8). Hence, it makes understanding this word as a proper name problematic.¹⁰⁹

The Greek translation of the Hebrew word קהלת Ἐκκλησιαστής is an interpretation of this appellative "a citizen" or "a member of the citizen's assembly" which is related to the Hebrew קהל "assembly."¹¹⁰ Rashbam interprets the participle קהלת as "gatherer" in order to recognize Qoheleth's profession as a collector of wisdom. Rashbam identifies Solomon with Agur who also collected wisdom sayings (Prov 30:1).¹¹¹ Ibn Ezra understands the feminine form of the Hebrew word קהלת as referring to the collection of sayings contained in the book of Ecclesiastes. He sees Qoheleth as a personified author, which is similar to the concept of wisdom being personified as Lady Wisdom.¹¹² The use of the definite article and the participial form קהלת "Qoheleth" points out the fact that this term identifies an occupation¹¹³ of a person rather than his name. It also suggests that literal associations of Qoheleth with Solomon are not necessary. Rather, Qoheleth should be seen as alluding to Solomon's life and kingship to advance his own message.

Early Jewish and Christian interpreters assume Solomonic authorship and explain Solomon's choice of calling himself "Qoheleth" by pointing out Solomon's

¹⁰⁹ LXX has the definite article in Eccl 1:2 as well.

¹¹⁰ F.-L. Hossfeld-E.-M. Kindl, "קהלת, קהל," *TDOT* 12:546-559.

¹¹¹ Rashbam, *The Commentary on Qoheleth*, 90. The word אגור "Agur" is derived from the verb אגר which means "to gather." See Leonard J. Coppes, "אגר," *TWOT* 1:9.

¹¹² Ibn Ezra, *El Comentario de Abraham Ibn Ezra Al Libro del Ecclesiastes*, 8-9, 188-89.

¹¹³ Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 615.

public speaking and gathering of Israel's assembly: "Solomon assembled (יְקַדְּשׁ) the elders of Israel" (1 Kgs 8:1) and then "Solomon stood...before all of the assembly (כָּל-קְהָל) of Israel" (1 Kgs 8:22).¹¹⁴ Yet, the language of the book of Ecclesiastes point to the date beyond the time of Solomon. Delitzsch notes in his commentary on Ecclesiastes: "If the Book of Koheleth were of old Solomonic origin, then there is no history of the Hebrew language."¹¹⁵ Most scholars agree that the Hebrew represents a rather late state in the development of the language, between the fifth and the third century B. C. E.,¹¹⁶ even though some still adhere to the early date of composition during the reign of Solomon.¹¹⁷ The early Jewish scholars pay more attention to the message of the book of Ecclesiastes and find it fitting to the life and position of Solomon. They place Ecclesiastes within the Solomonic corpus which causes the book to be interpreted from the point of view of piety, wisdom and prophecy.¹¹⁸ Ginsburg summarizes this interpretive approach well when he states: "the Lord inspired Solomon to explain these things, and to teach the right way, to show that all

¹¹⁴ *Ecclesiastes* (A. Cohen, *The Midrash Rabbah* [3rd ed.; eds. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon; London: Soncino Press, 1983], 8: 3-4; Meir Zlotowitz and Nosson Sherman, *The Book of Megillos: A New Translation with Overviews and Annotations Anthologized from Classical Commentators* (Brooklyn: The Mesorah Publishing, Ltd, 1986), 127. See also Sandberg, *Rabbinic Views of Qohelet*, 40-41; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 95; Murphy, "Qoheleth Interpreted," 331-37; idem., *Ecclesiastes*, xlix-1; Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 33-34.

¹¹⁵ Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* (transl. M. G. Easton; Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 190. Delitzsch offers an extensive list of words that he identifies as hapaxlegomena and as words belonging to a later date. For example, Delitzsch points out that Qoheleth uses אָלַס "alas" (Eccl 10:16) and אָלַס "alas" (Eccl 4:10) instead of the older form אָלַס and compares this form to אָלַס in Ezek 2:10. He argues that the word זְמַן "time" is also used in Neh. 2:6, Esth. 9:27, 31 and elsewhere "only in biblical Chaldean, which are used in the Mishnah for *καίρος* and *χρόνος*." See Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 190-96.

¹¹⁶ For a detailed discussion on the date of composition of the book of Ecclesiastes see Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 36-38; Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good?*, 147; Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 189-217; Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 9-11; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 50; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 63-68. Lohfink argues for the 2nd century BCE as a date of composition. See Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 4-6. See also Carolyn J. Sharp, "Ironic Representation, Authorial Voice, and Meaning in Qohelet," *BibInt* 12 (2004): 37-68.

¹¹⁷ Daniel C. Fredericks, *Qoheleth's Language: Re-evaluating its Nature and Date* (ANETS 3; Lewiston: Mellen Press, 1988). Fredericks argues for a Solomonic date of composition in the tenth century BC.

¹¹⁸ Gregory Thaumaturgus, *A Metaphrase of the Book of Ecclesiastes*, (ANF 6: 19-20). See also Wright, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, 192-200; B. Smalley, *Medieval Exegesis of Wisdom Literature* (ed. R. E. Murphy; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 42-43; G. A. Barton, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), 18-21; Murphy, "Qoheleth Interpreted: The Bearing of the Past on the Present," 331-37; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, xlix-1; Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 33-34; Knobel, *The Targum of Qoheleth*, 5. Jerome follows Origen who identifies Ecclesiastes with Solomon and ultimately with Christ. See Wright, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, 191. See also Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 33-35; Murphy, "Qoheleth Interpreted," 332-35; Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 1-2.

the devices of man are vanity, that the fear of God can alone make him happy, and that his fear can only be obtained by the study of wisdom.”¹¹⁹

The problems of authorship and language continue to puzzle the commentators. The Reformers’ interest in what Qoheleth has to say about the earthly life and the duties of human beings and their attention to literal interpretation move them to question previous understandings of the literary structure of the book and its authorship.¹²⁰ Luther denies Solomonic authorship and understands the allusions to the famous king as giving authority and power to an unknown writer to address his audience and speak about important matters.¹²¹ As if to summarize the common scholarly understanding disregarding Solomon as the author of the book of Ecclesiastes, Barton declares: “The fact that Solomon is not the author, but is introduced in a literary figure, has become such an axiom of the present-day interpretation of the book, that no extended argument is necessary to prove it.”¹²² Fox addresses the problem of the Solomonic persona in the text by suggesting that the author bases the created persona of Qoheleth on King Solomon so that the audience would think of Qoheleth’s wisdom, power and wealth in the same way they would think of Solomon; however, the author does not ascribe to Qoheleth the full authority that Solomon possessed.¹²³ As Solomon is no longer considered to be the author of the book, the issue of the genre of royal autobiography and its purpose in the book of Ecclesiastes take an important place in scholarly discussions.

¹¹⁹ Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth*, 46. Ginsburg’s commentary presents a detailed overview of the history of interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes up to 1860. See also Dell, “Ecclesiastes as Wisdom,” 301-29. Svend Holm-Niesen, “The Book of Ecclesiastes and the interpretation of it in Jewish and Christian Theology,” *ASTI* 10 (1976): 38-96.

¹²⁰ Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 37-38. For a detailed analysis of medieval exegesis see Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (1983); idem, *Medieval Exegesis of Wisdom Literature* (1987). See also Svend Holm-Nielsen, “On the Interpretation of Qoheleth in Early Christianity,” *VT* 24 (1974): 168-177.

¹²¹ Luther, “Notes on Ecclesiastes,” 12. See also Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* (trans. M. G. Easton; Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 207-209; Barton, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 49-50; James L. Crenshaw, “Qoheleth’s Understanding of Intellectual Inquiry,” in *Qoheleth in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors, BETL 136; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 205-08.

¹²² Barton, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 58. Fredericks, however, still claims Solomonic authorship of the book of Ecclesiastes, which is definitely a minority position among the scholars. See Daniel C. Fredericks, *Qoheleth’s Language: Re-evaluating its Nature and Date* (ANETS 3; Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988).

¹²³ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 159.

2.6.2 Foreign Influences on the Genre of Royal Autobiography

Qoheleth's self-introduction as **אני קהלת הייתי מלך על ישראל בירושלם** "I, Qoheleth, was king over Israel in Jerusalem" (Eccl 1:12) is intended to impress upon his listeners the royal background of Qoheleth's work. Although scholars agree that Qoheleth assumes a royal persona to convey his message with authority and power, they are divided as to what might have influenced Qoheleth's thinking and his choice of writing his autobiography. Commentators point to the impact of either Hellenistic philosophy or ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature as possible explanations of the genre and content of Qoheleth's life story.

2.6.2.1 Hellenistic Philosophy

Those scholars who argue for Hellenistic influence on Qoheleth's thought focus on those aspects in his teaching that seem to depart from the teachings of the Old Testament. Ranston sees Qoheleth as "an isolated thinker" without "the native Hebrew spirit."¹²⁴ His dark and gloomy way of looking at life contradicts an optimistic approach of the traditional wisdom as well as lacks a personal relationship with God which is so characteristic of the Old Testament saints. The popular Greek philosophy since the time of Homer exhibits an individualistic strife for wisdom and meaning in life which is marked by disappointment and disillusionment. Thus, Ranston, among many others, attributes Qoheleth's ideas to the influences of popular Hellenistic thought.¹²⁵

Whybray suggests that the literary technique of the first-person narrative reflects the impact of the individualistic nature of Greek culture and philosophy. Yet, according to Whybray, Qoheleth is not a systematic philosopher; rather, he attempts to reconcile his personal experience with the teachings of traditional wisdom. As he invites his readers to share in his circumstances, he encourages them to search for

¹²⁴ Harry Ranston, *Ecclesiastes and Early Greek Wisdom Literature* (London: Epworth, 1925), 11-12; See also Harry Ranston, *The Old Testament Wisdom Books and Their Teaching* (London: Epworth, 1930), 252-55.

¹²⁵ Ranston, *Ecclesiastes and Early Greek Wisdom Literature*, 12. See also John G. Gammie, "Stoicism and Anti-Stoicism in Qoheleth," *HAR* 9 (1985): 169-87; Georg Bertram, "Hebräischer und griechischer Qohelet: ein Beitrag zur Theologie der hellenistischen Bibel," *ZAW* 64 (1952): 24-69; C. F. Whitley, *Koheleth: His Language and Thought* (BZAW 148; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979); R. E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (WBC 23A; Dallas: Word, 1992), xli-xlv; Adams, *Wisdom in Transition*; Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Ecclesiastes 3.1-15: Another Interpretation," *JSOT* 66 (1995): 55-64; Rainer Braun, *Kohelet und die fruhhellenistische Popularphilosophie* (BZAW 130; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973).

their own answers in the spirit of Greek philosophy for he has failed to find satisfactory answers in his life.¹²⁶

Lohfink takes for granted the Hellenistic nature of the book and argues that Qoheleth finds his inspiration in popular Greek philosophy and can even represent “the ideal philosopher.”¹²⁷ Similar to Greek wandering philosophers, Qoheleth taught in market places and attracted a following crowd who named him “Qoheleth.”¹²⁸ The purpose of the royal fiction in the first three chapters, according to Lohfink, is to present Qoheleth as a member of high social status, on the one hand, and as a Hebrew philosopher comparable to Solomon, on the other.¹²⁹ Speaking of the first-person narration in the book of Ecclesiastes, Hengel sees it as a sign of “marked ‘*individuality*’ of authorship and is typical of Hellenism.”¹³⁰ He claims that the Greek influence is evident in Ecclesiastes more than any other book in the Old Testament and even connects Qoheleth’s words to the works of certain Greek philosophers.¹³¹

It is problematic, however, to attribute Qoheleth’s first-person narration to the influence of the Hellenistic philosophy. Such theory rests on the assumption that the book of Ecclesiastes was written in the late third to early second century B. C. E.¹³² Though acknowledging the difficulty in dating this work, Hengel, for example, proceeds to assign the mid-third century B.C. E. as the time of composition, grounding his reasons in “the whole milieu of the book,”¹³³ yet he does not offer evidence from the text. The above-mentioned scholars use Hellenistic writings as a starting point and then trace parallels back into Qoheleth’s thought instead of showing how ideas similar to his can be found in Epicurean or Stoic literature.

Qoheleth writes his story in the form of a royal autobiography, a genre which was not normative in ancient Greece. The connection between form and content in the book of Ecclesiastes can be resolved when one considers the background of ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature for Qoheleth’s work. The parallels in genre as well as

¹²⁶ R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 6-19.

¹²⁷ Norbert Lohfink, *Qoheleth. A Continental Commentary* (trans. Sean McEvenue; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 10. For an opposite view See Arthur C. Cochrane, “Joy to the World,” *ChrCent* (1968): 1596-98.

¹²⁸ Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 8-11.

¹²⁹ Lohfink argues that the royal fiction ends at Eccl 3:15 because this verse offers a final answer to Qoheleth’s quest. See Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 44.

¹³⁰ M. Hengel, “Kohheleth and the Beginning of the Crisis in Jewish Religion,” in *Judaism and Hellenism* (trans. J. Bowden; 2 vols.; London: SCM Press, 1974), I: 116-17 (italics Hengel’s).

¹³¹ Hengel, “Kohheleth and the Beginning of the Crisis in Jewish Religion,” I: 126-28.

¹³² Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 4; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 50; Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 4; Gordis, *Kohheleth*, 67.

¹³³ Hengel, “Kohheleth and the Beginning of the Crisis in Jewish Religion,” I: 115.

parallels in the major themes between ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature and the book of Ecclesiastes move one away from the need to look for the influence of the Hellenistic philosophy on Qoheleth's thought.¹³⁴

2.6.2.2 Ancient Near Eastern Wisdom Literature

Qoheleth uses the genre of royal autobiography to create a Solomon-like guise for himself so that his audience may see the continuity of wisdom tradition when wisdom is associated with kingship and think of him as the wisest king worthy of respect and trust. In so doing his autobiography functions in ways similar to ancient Near Eastern royal inscriptions which purposed to establish and reinforce the power and authority of the royal persona.¹³⁵ Ecclesiastes 12:9 uses the term חכם "sage" to describe Qoheleth. A little later we read that he was also among the group called חכמים "wise men" whose words are pointed and should be heard (Eccl 12:11). The designation of Qoheleth as חכם "a wise man" puts his work into the category of wisdom literature that existed in Israel and other ancient Near Eastern cultures. In order to gain helpful insights about the aim and purpose of Qoheleth's autobiography in the book of Ecclesiastes it is necessary to take a closer look at the literary features and the genre of royal autobiographies in the ancient Near Eastern Literature.

A. Egyptian Wisdom Literature

It is believed the similarities between the royal autobiography in the book of Ecclesiastes and royal autobiographies in the Egyptian wisdom literature are so significant that they suggest certain ancient Egyptian literary influence on this biblical book.¹³⁶ In order to examine possible parallels in genre between Qoheleth's autobiographical narration and Egyptian royal autobiographies, this section will first consider Egyptian Royal Instructions and then proceed to survey Egyptian Royal Testaments.

¹³⁴ Martin A. Shields, "Qohelet and Royal Autobiography," in *The Words of The Wise are like Goads: Engaging Qohelet in the 21st Century* (eds. Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman, III and Cristian G. Rata; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 117-36 (125).

¹³⁵ Fredericks disagrees with attempts to align Qoheleth's autobiography with ancient Near Eastern fictional autobiographies, because such parallels overemphasize the extra-biblical material and underestimates biblical parallels. See Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 56.

¹³⁶ Leonidas Kalugila, *The Wise King: Studies in Royal Wisdom as Divine Revelation in the Old Testament and Its Environment* (CB OTS 15; Stockholm: CWK Gleerup, 1980), 117-22. See also Gordis, *Koheleth*, 57. See also Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 198-203.

The corpus of the Egyptian wisdom literature texts which exhibit similarities with the book of Ecclesiastes is Egyptian Royal Instructions.¹³⁷ The Egyptian Royal Instructions, which contain didactic texts, are written as first-person narratives in the name of a king. They are pseudepigraphic and fictional in view of their exaggerated descriptions of kings.¹³⁸ The authors of Egyptian Royal Instructions are concerned with presenting themselves as all-powerful and all-knowing monarchs. Such position enables them to represent the ideological centre of the universe and share their wisdom not just with their immediate subjects, but with humanity in general.¹³⁹ As a result King Amenemhet I speaks of himself in terms superior to others:¹⁴⁰

No one equalled me as a doer of deeds.
I journeyed to Yebu, I returned to Delta...
I was grain-maker, beloved by Nepri...
None hungered in my years...
I had assigned everything to its place...
I built myself a house decked with gold...
Made for eternity, prepared for all time...
I have made the past and arranged the future...

As one examines the autobiographical features of the book of Ecclesiastes, it becomes apparent that Qoheleth finds it essential to establish himself as king (Eccl 1:1, 12), and his allusions to Solomon are unmistakable (Eccl 2:4–9). Enumerating Solomon's deeds and alluding to his great wisdom allow Qoheleth to share his words with his audience in hope that they would listen to the great king.

Other similarities between the Egyptian Royal Instructions and the book of Ecclesiastes include the personal tone of the literary work and the description of the audience.¹⁴¹ Qoheleth addresses his reader as בַּחֹרַר "a youth" in Eccl 11:9 and calls him בְּנִי "my child" in Eccl 12:12. In *The Instruction of Vizier Ptah-hotep* the old vizier Ptah-hotep offers counsel to his son, whom he calls "my child," on a large

¹³⁷ Koh, *Royal Autobiography*, 126-40.

¹³⁸ Considering the texts of the *Instruction of King Merikare* and the *Instruction of Amenemhet I*, Lichtheim argues that they are "pseudepigraphic as far as authorship is concerned but genuine as a work contemporary with the events to which it refers." See Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings* (Vol. I; Berkley: University of California Press, 2006), 9. See also Miriam Lichtheim, "Merikare," (*COS* 1.35: 61-66 [61]). Parkinson suggests that it is quite possible that the existing work has rewritten a much older text describing a historical event and used a certain measure of creativity and freedom in doing so. See R. B. Parkinson, "Types of Literature in the Middle Kingdom," in *Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and Forms* (ed. A. Loprieno; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 297-312 (311).

¹³⁹ Koh, *Royal Autobiography*, 126-28.

¹⁴⁰ "The Instruction of King Amenemhet I for His Son Sesostris I," (*AEL* I: 136-38).

¹⁴¹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 60.

variety of topics.¹⁴² Among his recommendations one finds an admonition to enjoy one's life, "Follow your heart as long as you live."¹⁴³ Qoheleth offers a similar exhortation, "follow the ways of your heart and the desire of your eyes" (Eccl 11:9). This text presents a description of the old age¹⁴⁴ that finds parallels in the final poem in the book of Ecclesiastes (Eccl 12:3–6). The vizier also instructs his son how to act in the time of political unrest and stay away from injustice.¹⁴⁵ Qoheleth speaks to such situations and points out the advantage of wisdom over the social status of a king.¹⁴⁶

These Royal Instructions do not pertain only to the duties of a monarch, but also offer a more general advice on wise and successful living.¹⁴⁷ In *The Instructions of King Merikare* the king touches upon the issues of prudent speech and foolish behaviour; on acquisition and preservation of knowledge; and even on carrying out building projects.¹⁴⁸ Similar themes can be found in the book of Ecclesiastes which mentions the value of wisdom and knowledge,¹⁴⁹ sensible behaviour and speech,¹⁵⁰ and economic enterprises.¹⁵¹ The words of Qoheleth are framed by his self-introduction (Eccl 1:1) and an exhortation to obey and follow the words of the wise in the epilogue (Eccl 12:9–14) in a fashion similar to the style of the Egyptian Royal Instructions. Thus, the Instructions of Ptah-Hotep begins with the vizier self-

¹⁴² "The Instruction of the Vizier Ptah-hotep," translated by John A. Wilson (*ANE*, 343-46).

¹⁴³ "Teaching of Ptah-hotep," ("Digital Egypt for Universities"; n.p. [cited: April 25, 2011; Online: <http://www.digitalegypt.ucl.ac.uk/literature/ptahhotep.html>], 14.7.9-10).

¹⁴⁴ "Old age has struck, age has descended. Feebleness has arrived, weakness is here again. Sleep is upon him in discomfort all day. Eyes are grown small, ears deaf. Mouth silent, unable to speak. Heart emptied, unable to recall yesterday. Bones ache his whole length. Goodness has turned to evil. All taste is gone. What old age does to people is evil in every way. Nose is blocked, unable to breathe, how old (it feels) standing or sitting." See "Teaching of Ptah-hotep," ("Digital Egypt for Universities," 1.4.1-5.1). A very similar sentiment is found in the Late Period Egyptian Papyrus Insinger: "He who has passed sixty years, everything has passed for him./ If his heart loves wine, he cannot drink to drunkenness./ If he desires food, he cannot eat as he used it. If his heart desires a woman, her moment does not come." See "The Instruction of Papyrus Insinger," (*AEL* 3: 184-217 (199)).

¹⁴⁵ "If thou art a leader commanding the affairs of the multitude, seek out for thyself every beneficial deed, until it may be that thy (own) affairs are without wrong. Justice is great and its appropriateness is lasting...Wrongdoing has never brought its undertaking into port. (It may be that) it is fraud that gains riches, (but) the strength of justice is that it lasts..." See "The Instruction of the Vizier Ptah-hotep," (*ANE*, 343).

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Eccl 4:1, 13–16; 5:8–9; 9:13–15; 10:5–7; 16–17, 20.

¹⁴⁷ Ptah-hotep instructs his son on the matters of intimacy with a woman/wife; proper attitude to the poor and the rich alike; leadership and friendship, and obedience and respect of one's father. See "The Instruction of the Vizier Ptah-hotep," (*ANE*, 343-46). See also B. W. Jones, "From Gilgamesh to Qoheleth," in *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III* (ed. W. W. Hallo, B. W. Jones, and G. L. Mattingly: ANETS, 8; Lewiston: Mellen, 1990), 349-79.

¹⁴⁸ "The Instruction of King Merikare," ("Ancient Egyptian Texts"; n.p. [cited: April 26, 2011; Online: http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/merikare_papyrus.htm]).

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Eccl 2:13–14; 9:17–18; 10:1–3.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Eccl 5:1–7; 10:12–14.

¹⁵¹ Cf. Eccl 11:1–6.

introduction, “The teaching of the Overseer of the City and Vizier Ptah-hotep” and concludes with his admonitions for his son to follow his advice, “Do as your master has said for you...”¹⁵²

The survey of the Egyptian Royal Instruction has identified a number of significant thematic parallels between the Egyptian Royal Instructions and the work of Qoheleth including the presence of social turmoil, wise living and admonitions to enjoy life. Moreover, the framing technique and a predominantly first-person narration make the Egyptian influence on the book of Ecclesiastes seem likely. After having discussed the Egyptian Royal Instructions, it is necessary to look at the Egyptian Royal Testaments and the possible affinities between these texts and the book of Ecclesiastes.

The book of Ecclesiastes is often compared to Egyptian Royal Testaments. Von Rad finds similarities between the book of Ecclesiastes and this literary corpus.¹⁵³ These texts were composed to reflect a change in government or the demise of a king and to insure that the successor had the right to power. A new king would proclaim himself as chosen by the gods and advocate his new rule as superior to his predecessor.¹⁵⁴ Perdue argues that Egyptian Royal Testaments were written as autobiographies of the deceased kings, who offered their advice and teachings on a variety of topics to the visitors of their graves. In line with this genre, Qoheleth, a voice of a dead Solomon, shares his life story from the tomb to justify his position and experience to the future generations as meaningful and possessing value which goes beyond his own finitude.¹⁵⁵ In identifying the similarities between Qoheleth’s speech and Egyptian Royal Testaments, Perdue points to the first-person narration of a king (Eccl 1:12–2:26), fretfulness about death and the existence of the dead (Eccl 9:1–6), and emphasis on enjoying one’s life (cf. Eccl 2:24–26; 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20]).¹⁵⁶

However, Koh has convincingly shown that the perfective verb **הָיָה** which Qoheleth uses to introduce himself should be interpreted as “has become” rather than

¹⁵² “Teaching of Ptah-hotep,” (“Digital Egypt for Universities,” 1.4.1, 47.9.3). See also Koh, *Royal Autobiography in the Book of Qoheleth*, 130-32.

¹⁵³ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 226.

¹⁵⁴ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 226. See also Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Sage, Priest, Prophet: Religious and Intellectual Leadership in Ancient Israel* (Library of Ancient Israel, ed. Douglas A. Knight; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 59.

¹⁵⁵ See Leo G. Perdue, “‘I Will Make a Test of Pleasure’: The Tyranny of God and Qoheleth’s Quest for the Good,” in *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Eugene: WIPF & Stock, 1994), 193-242 (202).

¹⁵⁶ Perdue, “I Will Make a Test of Pleasure,” 200-202.

“was” to indicate that his rule has started in the past, yet is still going on at the time of writing.¹⁵⁷ It is not necessary to understand Qoheleth’s words as the advice of the dead king reaching out to posterity from his grave. Also the political motif present in the Egyptian Royal Testaments is absent in the book of Ecclesiastes. There is no indication that Qoheleth’s intent is to claim his kingship or to introduce a new ruling policy. Therefore, a suggestion about the similarities between the book of Ecclesiastes and Egyptian Royal Testaments is not convincing.

While Egyptian Royal Instructions and Egyptian Royal Testaments employ the genre of royal autobiography, Egyptian Royal Instructions share several thematic affinities as well as literary features with the book of Ecclesiastes. However, a general similitude of thoughts and the use of literary devices are not enough to prove sufficiently any dependency of Qoheleth’s work on this body of texts.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, Egyptian wisdom literature does not shed much light on the aim and purpose of the royal autobiography in the book of Ecclesiastes. The common characteristics of Qoheleth’s autobiography and West Semitic royal autobiographies make it necessary to consider them next.

B. West Semitic and Assyrian Royal Autobiographies

Scholars suggest that the genre of royal autobiography which is identified in the West Semitic and Babylonian wisdom literature comes to bear on the autobiographical story in the book of Ecclesiastes. Koh believes that Qoheleth introduces himself with a formula commonly used in Semitic royal inscriptions and uses a rhetorical language reminiscent of ancient Near Eastern royal literature to describe his royal experiment.¹⁵⁹

The work of Qoheleth also exhibits strong similarities with West Semitic and Assyrian royal autobiographies,¹⁶⁰ which were composed not to describe the past, but,

¹⁵⁷ Yee Von Koh, *Royal Autobiography in the Book of Qoheleth*, (BZAW, 369; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 76-78. See also Waltke and O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 483-84.

¹⁵⁸ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 57.

¹⁵⁹ Yee Von Koh, *Royal Autobiography in the Book of Qoheleth* (BZAW 369; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 30. See also Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Mesopotamia and Israel,” in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel* (ed. Richard J. Clifford; SBL Symposium Series 36; Atlanta: SBL, 2007), 67-90.

¹⁶⁰ 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. Longman finds similarities in the tripartite structure of the book of Ecclesiastes and Akkadian Fictional autobiographies. While he is correct in identifying the parallels in genre between the Hebrew and the

rather, to serve certain political agendas. More specifically, their purpose was to ensure the new king's legitimacy to power.¹⁶¹ The autobiographical language is typical of these royal inscriptions which usually begin with the first-person introduction: "I am Idmiri,"¹⁶² "I am Mesha, ruler of Moab from Dibon,"¹⁶³ and "Sargon, the mighty king, the king of Agade, am I,"¹⁶⁴ which parallels Qoheleth's self-introduction: "I am Qoheleth" (Eccl 1:12).¹⁶⁵ These texts are examples of "self-glorification"¹⁶⁶ and "royal propagandistic literature."¹⁶⁷ Seow points out that in identifying himself as king, Qoheleth refers to his present rule rather than alluding to the past, which resembles the style of royal inscriptions.¹⁶⁸

The motif of wisdom as a prerogative of a king is common in the royal ideology, for kings are gods in human form and wisdom is imparted to them by the gods.¹⁶⁹ Consequently, a king is the one who possesses all the knowledge and wisdom and is superior to others. King Azitiwada is quick to establish that "every king considered me his father because of my righteousness and my wisdom and the

Akkadian texts, his analysis of the Akkadian inscriptions seems to be flawed. See Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 17-18. See Walter Farber, Review of T. Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiographies*, *JNES* 56 (1997): 228-30. Longman's analysis of the structure of the book of Ecclesiastes is incorrect as well. His identification of one verse of Eccl 1:12 as the first-person introduction, and the second part (Eccl 1:13-6:9) as "an extended first-person narrative"¹⁶⁰ is unwarranted. The "I" of Qoheleth is present throughout the rest of the book (Eccl 6:1-12:7) and the didactic material can be found in the earlier part of his discourse (Eccl 1:3:1-6:9), and not just toward the end of the book (Eccl 6:9-12:7), as Longman argues.

¹⁶¹ Hayim Tadmor, "Autobiographical Apology in the Royal Assyrian Literature" in *History, Historiography and Interpretation: Studies in Biblical Cuneiform Literature* (ed. H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld; Leiden: Brill, 1984), 36-57. See also Tomoo Ishida, "'Solomon Who Was Greater Than David': Solomon's Succession in 1Kings I-II in the Light of the Inscription of Kilamuwa, King of Y'dy-Sam'al," in *Congress Volume* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 145-53.

¹⁶² "The Story of Idmiri, King of Alalakh," transl. A. Leo Oppenheim (*ANE*, 248).

¹⁶³ "Annals of Mesha," in *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East* (Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin; revised and expanded ed.; New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 157.

¹⁶⁴ "The Legend of Sargon," (*ANE*, 82).

¹⁶⁵ Michael V. Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions* (JSOTSup 71; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 174.

¹⁶⁶ Green, "I Undertook Great Works," 35.

¹⁶⁷ C. L. Seow, "Qoheleth's Autobiography," in *Fortunate the Eyes that See* (Fr. David Noel Freedman; ed. Astrid B. Beck et al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 275-87 (281).

¹⁶⁸ Seow, "Qoheleth's Autobiography," 280. Koh argues: "Read against the background of West Semitic royal inscriptions, the verb ׀׀׀׀׀ in Qoheleth's opening self-introduction should be understood to indicate a present state which has its beginning in the past." See Koh, *Royal Autobiography in the Book of Qoheleth*, 78. See also Seow, Ecclesiastes, 119; Bo Isaksson, "The Syntax of the Narrative Discourse in Qohelet," in *The Language of Qohelet in Its Context* (Fs. A. Schoors; OLA 164; ed. A. Berlejung and P. Van Hecke; Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 35-46.

¹⁶⁹ Kalugila, *The Wise King*, 62-68. See also Koh, *Royal Autobiography in the Book of Qoheleth*, 86-87, 101-103; Seow, "Qoheleth's Autobiography," 281.

kindness of my heart.”¹⁷⁰ Ashurnasirpal II credits his wisdom and knowledge as means of his magnificent rule: “I took over again the city of Calah in that wisdom of mine, the knowledge which Ea...has bestowed upon me...”¹⁷¹ Qoheleth uses an analogous language when he speaks of his explorations of everything “under the sun” with his unsurpassed wisdom (Eccl 1:12–16). Koh argues that like the West Semitic Royal Inscriptions where wisdom is seen in the great works of a king, Qoheleth’s narrative is permeated by the theme of wisdom.¹⁷²

Another important trait of the West Semitic inscriptions is the boasting of deeds and unsurpassed achievements. In the *Karatepe* inscription Azitawadda evaluates his successes in building projects, accumulation of wealth and power against the failures of the kings who were before him to highlight his superiority. The repetition of the phrase “in my days” emphasizes the king’s accomplishments as compared to the situation in the kingdom in the former days.¹⁷³ Kilamuwa paints the undertakings of his predecessors as fruitless when compared to his own: “There was my father Hayya but he was ineffective...But I, Kilamuwa,.. what I achieved, the former (kings) did not achieve.”¹⁷⁴ The boasting of deeds is part of the royal propaganda which is needed to ensure the greatness of the king for his subjects and for posterity.¹⁷⁵

The reference to the former kings’ failures and boasting about great deeds parallels a similar trend in Qoheleth’s narrative. He itemizes his achievements in Eccl 2:4–8 to show that he has “surpassed those who were before” him (Eccl 2:9). Qoheleth’s accomplishments include building projects, planting of gardens, accumulation of wealth, slaves and singers (Eccl 2:4–8) which correspond to the lists of deeds found in West Semitic and Assyrian royal inscriptions. Possibly imitating the

¹⁷⁰“Azitiwadda of Adana,” transl. Franz Rosental (*ANE*, 295). See also “Karatepe Annals of Azitiwadda,” in *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East* (Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin; revised and expanded ed.; New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 162-65. This book offers a different but complementary translation: “My deeds caused me to be held in high esteem by other rulers. My righteous and blameless actions were the outgrowth of my wisdom and my listening heart” 165.

¹⁷¹ “The Banquet of Ashurnasirpal II,” transl. A. Leo Oppenheim (*ANE*, 251).

¹⁷² Koh, *Royal Autobiography in the Book of Qoheleth*, 87.

¹⁷³ “Azitiwadda of Adana,” (*ANE*, 295). See also Koh, *Royal Autobiography in the Book of Qoheleth*, 78-81; Seow, “Qoheleth’s Autobiography,” 282-83.

¹⁷⁴ “Kilamuwa of *Y’dy-Sam’al*,” transl. A. Leo Oppenheim (*ANE*, 297). See also Ishida, “Solomon Who Was Greater Than David,” 147.

¹⁷⁵ Tadmor, “Autobiographical Apology,” 36-37. In “The Banquet of Ashurnasirpal II,” (*ANE*, 251) the king exclaims: “Ashurnasirpal is the king whose fame is power!” See also Seow, “Qoheleth’s Autobiography,” 281; Koh, *Royal Autobiography*, 76-85, 91-100.

genre of these inscriptions Qoheleth legitimizes his right to power and emphasizes his personal achievements as king.

Seow suggests that the book of Ecclesiastes exhibits noticeable affinities with the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*.¹⁷⁶ Qoheleth's endeavour is reminiscent of the undertaking of the great Babylonian hero, king Gilgamesh, who builds the walls of Uruk to insure his immortality and keeps a record of his mighty deeds: "All his works he engraved on a stone stela."¹⁷⁷ These deeds include building projects, digging of wells, and the opening of mountain passes.¹⁷⁸ Yet, in the end Gilgamesh understands that his accomplishments only highlight the brevity and the passing nature of human existence: "[For] whom ... have my hands toiled? For whom is being spent the blood of my heart? I have not obtained a [flower of youth] for myself."¹⁷⁹ Seow suggests that in adopting the style of royal propaganda Qoheleth also attempts to preserve his success through his written work for posterity (Eccl 1:12–2:26). However Qoheleth just as Gilgamesh realizes that he, the greatest and wisest king will die like a commoner and even his royal deeds will not be remembered due to the transient nature of life and the imminence of death (Eccl 2:16).¹⁸⁰

The book of Ecclesiastes relates closer in language and style to the West Semitic and Assyrian royal inscriptions than Egyptian wisdom literature. A self-introductory formula, boasting of great deeds, surpassing the king's predecessors in accomplishments, and a first-person narration suggest that Qoheleth might have been familiar with and followed the genre of fictional royal autobiographies.¹⁸¹ There is also a similarity of purpose between Qoheleth's autobiography and the West Semitic and Assyrian royal autobiographies. His choice of genre helps him to identify himself as a famous king and to bring authenticity to his royal Solomon-like persona. Qoheleth needs this royal guise to validate the authority and the legitimacy of his

¹⁷⁶ Seow, "Qoheleth's Autobiography," in *Fortunate the Eyes that See* (Fr. David Noel Freedman; ed. Astrid B. Beck et al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 285-87. See also B. W. Jones, "From Gilgamesh to Qoheleth," in *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III* (ed. W. W. Hallo, B. W. Jones, and G. L. Mattingly; ANETS 8; Lewiston: Mellen, 1990), 351; J. de Savignac, "La sages du Qohéléth et l'épopée de Gilgamesh," *VT* 28 (197): 318-23.

¹⁷⁷ "The Gilgamesh Epic," transl. by E. A. Speiser (*ANE*, 39).

¹⁷⁸ "The Gilgamesh Epic," transl. by E. A. Speiser (*ANE*, 39-40); Seow, "Qoheleth's Autobiography," 286.

¹⁷⁹ "The Gilgamesh Epic," transl. by E. A. Speiser (*ANE*, 71). See also Jones, "From Gilgamesh to Qoheleth," 349-79; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 65.

¹⁸⁰ Seow avers: "Against that background, Qoheleth's imitation of the genre is poignant in its irony. In the end the text makes the point that none of the deeds—even the royal deeds that he assiduously preserved in memorials—really matters." See Seow, "Qoheleth's Autobiography," 284.

¹⁸¹ Seow, "Qoheleth's Autobiography," 284.

message, which is similar to the purpose of the West Semitic and Assyrian royal autobiographies. While it is impossible to argue for or against the dependency of the book of Ecclesiastes on these instructions, the similarities between this book and the West Semitic and Assyrian royal autobiographies cannot be denied. Moreover, these similarities help us better understand the message of Qoheleth.

2.6.3 The Purpose of the Royal Guise

Scholars agree that Qoheleth's first-person narration which is rather common in the ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature serves an important role in the book. Salyer suggests that first-person narratives engage readers on a very personal level drawing them into the text and humanizing the narrator which limits his knowledge and objectivity. The persuasive power of I-narration is strong enough to establish and maintain the credibility of the narrator and to draw the readers into the narration to the point of full personal involvement.¹⁸² Salyer finds the message of the book not in the words of Qoheleth, but in the dialogue between Qoheleth and the implied author/Epilogist. The words of the epilogue contain public knowledge, according to Salyer, against which Qoheleth's private insight is judged. Thus the adequacy of Qoheleth's personal experience has to be validated by the public knowledge of the religious community.¹⁸³

Salyer is correct in pointing out the significance of the first-person narration in the book of Ecclesiastes and the rapport that Qoheleth is able to build with his audience by the means of his personal story. However, Salyer presents Qoheleth as protesting against an established wisdom tradition expressed in the words of the Epilogist. Such view of Qoheleth's position significantly limits the influence of his teaching.

According to Christianson, Qoheleth chooses to use the royal guise to deconstruct and critique the kingship through self-criticism and satire.¹⁸⁴ Qoheleth undermines the power and authority of the king to show that true power rests with

¹⁸² Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 122-23.

¹⁸³ Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 15-19.

¹⁸⁴ Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 146-48. Moreover, Christianson sees Eccl 4:1; 5:8-9; 8:2-5 which speak of wide-spread oppression, absence of a comforter to alleviate such conditions, and inability of a sage and a king to change the fate of humanity as examples of Qoheleth's royal persona. He suggests that "it is *imperative* to regard Qoheleth's voice as the king's" in these passages because they bring to the fore the limitations and even question the power of a monarch. See Christianson, *A Time To Tell*, 136-39.

God for he is the one who decides whether a person would be able to enjoy life or suffer through it.¹⁸⁵ While Christianson is correct in suggesting that the Solomonic persona gives Qoheleth authority and power to address his readers, Christianson is too quick to conclude that the purpose of the autobiographical narration is to establish a basis for an attack on the monarchy and the traditional way of life.¹⁸⁶ The genre of royal autobiographies strengthens the authority of the king and his claims to the kingdom and even presents the king as an ideal figure who is worthy to rule his kingdom as divinely anointed.¹⁸⁷ In Israel the king is perceived as the one who is enthroned by God and endowed with wisdom and authority (cf. Deut 17:14–20; 1Kgs 3:3–14). The Hittite King Azitiwadda presents himself as “the blessed of Ba‘l, the servant of Ba‘l... Ba‘l made me a father and a mother to the Danunites.”¹⁸⁸ Therefore, it is more in line with the genre of royal autobiographies to see the purpose of Qoheleth’s narration in strengthening the power of a king and his authority to institute change among his subjects.

Koh argues for the positive view of Qoheleth’s royal guise and suggests that the author purposefully takes on a royal persona to strengthen the royal connections of the book, which is common in the genre of fictional royal autobiographies of ANE wisdom literature.¹⁸⁹ Qoheleth intentionally uses the genre of royal autobiography to affirm the tradition of kingly wisdom instead of subverting monarchy and the values it represents. She claims that “Qoheleth discovers and acknowledges his own vulnerability in life as a king, in that rulers too are exposed and affected by the absurd realities of reversed social conventions and political oppression.”¹⁹⁰ In sharing his life experiences with his audience, Qoheleth exhibits his courtly wisdom and assumes his didactic role as he is the most qualified to speak on the issues pertaining to wisdom.

Koh is to be commended for her detailed research in comparing Qoheleth’s work with inscriptions from the ancient Near East and identifying the significance of

¹⁸⁵ Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 134.

¹⁸⁶ Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 133. Shields supports this point of view and claims that the purpose of implicit identification with King Solomon is needed to give Qoheleth necessary authority to launch his attack on traditional wisdom and provide a foundation to offer an official corrective from within this tradition. See Martin A. Shields, *The End of Wisdom: A Reappraisal of the Historical and Canonical Function of the Ecclesiastes* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 111-12. See also Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM, 1979), 64-65.

¹⁸⁷ Leonidas Kalugila, *The Wise King*, 102-104. See also Ivan Enginell, *Studies in Diving Kingship in the Ancient Near East* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), 174-75.

¹⁸⁸ “Azitiwadda of Adana,” (*ANE*, 295).

¹⁸⁹ Koh, *Royal Autobiography*, 18, 78-79.

¹⁹⁰ Koh, *Royal Autobiography*, 49.

the royal voice in the book of Ecclesiastes. However, in her desire to argue against the satirical presentation of the kingship and to present the institute of monarchy as positive, she minimizes Qoheleth's critique of injustice and oppression that he has observed. She attributes it to the helplessness of the king to initiate change or to have authority over his administration. Such view of his power contradicts Qoheleth's own description of his mighty works and his ability to do what he pleases (cf. Eccl 2:4–10).¹⁹¹

Seow also investigates the literary background of the book of Ecclesiastes and correctly points out that Qoheleth's purpose in presenting his autobiography is to make his audience “think of Solomon, the consummate king who had everything. The inspiration for the fiction was Solomon, and the author clearly drew on various traditions about the king's wisdom, wealth, and many accomplishments.”¹⁹² The royal Solomonic persona that Qoheleth assumes enables him to be identified with the wise king *par excellence*, King Solomon, and with great kings of old from Egypt and Mesopotamia. Such position empowers Qoheleth to address his audience with authority and influence and gives him the right to speak about the wise way of life.¹⁹³

Seow has significantly contributed to the discussion of the ancient Near Eastern influences on the genre of the fictional royal autobiography present in the book of Ecclesiastes and has provided helpful analysis of the parallels between Qoheleth's thought and the wisdom literature of the ancient Near East. However, Seow does not see Qoheleth's autobiography have a significant impact on the rest of the book due to his belief that the autobiographical narration does not go beyond chapter two and thus is not relevant to the rest of the book of Ecclesiastes.¹⁹⁴ At this point it would be helpful to look at the scholarly positions on the extent of Qoheleth's autobiography and the implications of such positions.

¹⁹¹ Koh, *Royal Autobiography*, 51.

¹⁹² Seow, “Qohelet's Autobiography,” 277-79.

¹⁹³ Seow, “Qohelet's Autobiography,” 277-87. See also Hayim Tadmor, “Autobiographical Apology in the Royal Assyrian Literature” in *History, Historiography and Interpretation: Studies in Biblical Cuneiform Literature* (ed. H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld; Leiden: Brill, 1984), 36-57; Tomoo Ishida, “Solomon Who Was Greater Than David’: Solomon's Succession in 1Kings I-II in the Light of the Inscription of Kilamuwa, King of Y'dy-Sam'al,” in *Congress Volume* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 145-53; Kalugila, *The Wise King*, 68.

¹⁹⁴ Seow, “Qohelet's Autobiography,” 275.

2.6.4 The Extent of the Royal Autobiography

It has been suggested that Qoheleth's experience is limited to chapters one and two.¹⁹⁵ Crenshaw argues that Qoheleth's royal guise is used only temporarily and then abandoned after he has established his authority as a king. He suggests that the royal fiction is limited to Eccl 1:12–2:16 and the results of it in Eccl 2:17–26.¹⁹⁶ Seow presents a similar argument and adds that the temporary Solomonic guise in Eccl 1:12–2:11 is needed to enhance the element of irony in the book, for not even the wisest of kings is able to escape the absurdities of life.¹⁹⁷ He further argues that Qoheleth's observations about the absence of justice (Eccl 3:16; 4:1–2; 5:7 [Eng.8]) present him as a critic of the royal court rather than a king. His description of the king portrays him as a subject of the monarchy rather than the monarch himself (Eccl 8:2–4; 10:4, 16–17, 20).¹⁹⁸ A similar position is held by Brown who sees the royal persona as a guise and a foil which Qoheleth disposes of after Eccl 2:12 to judge the futility of living for the sake of a material profit. In his monologue, Qoheleth moves from being a king to a commoner critically re-evaluating the accepted norms of his time, including the monarchy itself.¹⁹⁹

Crenshaw, Seow and Brown are correct in pointing out the contradictions in Qoheleth's representation of himself as king in his autobiography (Eccl 1:12–2:26) and as the one who often critiques the monarchy in the rest of the book. In order to solve these difficulties these scholars choose to see the royal fiction conclude at the end of Eccl 2. However, they fail to take into consideration the thematic connection between Qoheleth's autobiography and his teachings throughout the rest of the book. Qoheleth first addresses the theme of death in narrating his story (Eccl 1:4; 2:15–17) and then develops it further later on (e.g. Eccl 3:18–21; 4:2–3; 7:1–4; 9:1–6; 12:1–7). Qoheleth begins his quest to find profit and good in his own life (Eccl 1:3; 2:3, 11, 24–26) and extends his investigation to the life of humanity in general (Eccl 3:9, 19;

¹⁹⁵ Lohfink argues that the royal masquerade ends only in Eccl 3:15 because Solomon's undertaking in Eccl 1:3 receives its initial answer in Eccl 3:10 and the final one comes in Eccl 3:15. See Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 44.

¹⁹⁶ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 29, 33. See also Otto Kaiser, "Qoheleth," in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel* (Fr. J. Emerton; eds. John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and H. G. M. Williamson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 83-93.

¹⁹⁷ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 98.

¹⁹⁸ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 98. See also N. Kamano, "Character and Cosmology: Rhetoric of Ecclesiastes 1:3–3:9" in *Qoheleth in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors; BETL, 136; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 419-24.

¹⁹⁹ William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes* (IBC, Louisville: John Knox, 2000), 11. See also Gordis, *Koheleth*, 40-41;

5:11 [Eng. 12], 16 [Eng. 17]; 6:8; 7:11–12). Qoheleth mentions the idea of an allotment that God gives to his people in his autobiography (Eccl 2:10) and then expands this idea in his teaching (Eccl 3:22; 5:17–18 [Eng. 18–19]; 9:9). Qoheleth's autobiography serves as an interpretive lens for his instructions in the book of Ecclesiastes which will be dealt with in later chapters.

Koh argues for the pervasiveness of the royal guise throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. She believes that during his all-encompassing quest for the meaning of life, Qoheleth comes to recognize his own limitations and weaknesses as a king and acknowledges the vulnerability of all rulers who are impacted by the absurdity of life and political injustice.²⁰⁰ According to her, Qoheleth does not critique the ruling class and the institution of kingship; instead he merely shares “the pessimistic musings of a royal personage who sees his position and authority as being subject to the same vicissitudes of life as his subjects, only on a grander scale.”²⁰¹ Qoheleth's pessimism is a result of his inability even as a king to control the events in his life and ultimately his future destiny. He finds himself to be an ineffectual king because his royal wisdom has failed at comprehending God and his work in the universe (Eccl 3:11; 6:10; 7:13, 23, 24; 8:17). Therefore, with a note of resignation Qoheleth the king advises his audience to accept their life that God has given them and surrender their ambitions to contend with God (Eccl 2:24, 26; 3:22; 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20]; 9:7–10).²⁰² While one may disagree with Koh's view of Qoheleth as a pessimist whose advice to find satisfaction in life comes because of his failure to understand God or control his life, her treatment of the autobiographical section of the book of Ecclesiastes (Eccl 1:12–2:26) and the ways it permeates the rest of the book is very helpful.

Isaksson proposes a different understanding of the royal guise which is evidenced throughout the book. He suggests that the book of Ecclesiastes is written by a person assuming a Solomonic persona but without making serious claims to kingship as he also appears to be a sage offering a sad commentary on the injustice and oppression of his society.²⁰³ The speaker tells the story of his own life and experiences, which have influenced his philosophy, in “a *resumé*-type of

²⁰⁰ Koh, *Royal Autobiography in the Book of Qoheleth*, 48. See also Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 220-21. Unlike Koh, Perdue presents an extremely negative view of the royal guise.

²⁰¹ Koh, *Royal Autobiography in the Book of Qoheleth*, 49.

²⁰² Koh, *Royal Autobiography in the Book of Qoheleth*, 187-95.

²⁰³ Isaksson, “The Syntax of the Narrative Discourse in Qoheleth,” 35-46.

narration.”²⁰⁴ Qoheleth’s language underscores the fact that the events he describes should be understood in a general sense as having occurred at some point in his life without defining a specific moment.²⁰⁵ The book of Ecclesiastes presents the story of Qoheleth which is developed not only in the autobiographical part of the work (Eccl 1:12–2:26) but throughout the whole book. Isaksson correctly identifies Qoheleth’s autobiography as “one of the striking and fascinating characteristics of the book of Qoheleth.”²⁰⁶ He offers helpful insight into the interrelatedness of the autobiography in Eccl 1:12–2:26 and the rest of the book.

Christianson reaches a conclusion similar to that of Isaksson. He believes that the book of Ecclesiastes narrates the story of Qoheleth.²⁰⁷ He argues that the ambiguous royal persona is present throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. At times the reader is quasi-unaware of its presence; at other times the royal voice can be distinctly heard through Qoheleth’s words.²⁰⁸ Christianson contends that allusions to the Solomonic persona are found in Qoheleth’s admonitions to eat, drink and enjoy life (cf. Eccl 2:24–26; 3:13, 22; 5:17 [Eng. 18]; 8:15) which echo Solomon’s abundant provision in 1 Kgs 4:20. Solomon’s attitude to women (1 Kgs 11:1–8) parallels Qoheleth’s negative attitude towards women in Eccl 7:25–29.²⁰⁹ Christianson sees another reference to Solomon in the phrase “he has placed eternity in their hearts” (Eccl 3:11) which he believes describes Solomon’s experience of God when “God had placed [wisdom] his heart” (1 Kgs 10:24; 2 Chr. 9:23).²¹⁰ He argues that Qoheleth chooses not to take sides, but simply observes life, which makes it hard to determine whether he belongs to the oppressors or the oppressed.²¹¹ In this respect his “royal” character is not impacted by his lack of power. At the same time there is no need to see him as a commoner afraid of the royal authority.

Christianson’s treatment of the book of Ecclesiastes as a story of Qoheleth’s life is helpful because it reflects the cohesive nature of Qoheleth’s words and highlights the connection between the autobiographical narration and the rest of the

²⁰⁴ Isaksson, “The Syntax of the Narrative Discourse in Qoheleth,” 38.

²⁰⁵ Koh argues that Qoheleth presents his kingship as existing in the present, not a recounting of some past experiences. See Koh, *Royal Autobiography in the Book of Qoheleth*, 77-78.

²⁰⁶ Isaksson, “The Syntax of the Narrative Discourse in Qoheleth,” 45.

²⁰⁷ Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 25.

²⁰⁸ Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 78.

²⁰⁹ Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 144-45. Christianson further admits that Qoheleth’s negative attitude to women presents a problem to the Solomonic persona in the book of Ecclesiastes.

²¹⁰ Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 163.

²¹¹ Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 130-34.

book through the repetition of certain motifs that first appear in Qoheleth's telling of his life story in Eccl 1:12–2:26.²¹² However, his suggestion that the revelation of character constitutes the narrative development of the plot is not without limitations. The development of Qoheleth's character is not readily apparent through the things that he has observed but might not have necessarily experienced. The lack of other characters and relationships between them and Qoheleth, which would significantly contribute to the revelation and development of the main character of Qoheleth, makes this development even harder to examine. Furthermore, one is hard-pressed to notice any "dynamic narrative motion" in the didactic sayings of Qoheleth (Eccl 7, 8, 9).

The Solomonic guise is considered to be essential to Qoheleth's autobiography and functions as a means to convey his message in the book of Ecclesiastes. However, the scholarly treatment of the royal fiction is unsatisfactory because it falls short of seeing the royal autobiography as an interpretive lens for Qoheleth's message. The attempts to explain the presence of the royal persona in the text lack textual evidence. Instead the ambiguity of the royal fiction should be allowed to remain and impact even more the message of the book of Ecclesiastes.

2.7 Conclusion

The scholarly analysis of the book of Ecclesiastes focuses on analysing the major themes of this work; they highlight the fear of God, death, the futility of life, or the enjoyment of life. However, there is a lack of analysis of the interrelatedness of these themes and their influence on the message of Qoheleth. There is a consensus about the importance of Qoheleth's autobiography in the book of Ecclesiastes; yet more can be done to demonstrate how Qoheleth's life story impacts his message and serves as lens to read the rest of the book. Therefore, a new approach is needed.

3. The Approach of This Study

This study aims to examine through the lens of Qoheleth's autobiography the thematic development of his teaching on contentment which focuses on embracing life given by God and learning to be content in the face of the unpredictability of death. Consequently, this study will analyze how the genre of Qoheleth's royal

²¹² Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 147.

autobiography, the theme of death and the role of God influence, inform and interrelate with each other to offer a multidimensional understanding of Qoheleth's message of contentment in the book of Ecclesiastes.

Even though the word "contentment" does not appear in the book, the concept of contentment is clearly attested in Qoheleth's. In crafting his message, Qoheleth brings together the words יִתְרוֹן "profit" (Eccl 3:9; 5:15 [Eng. 16]; 6:8; 11) and חֶלֶק "allotment"²¹³ (Eccl 2:10; 21; 3:22; 5:17–18 [Eng. 18–19]; 9:6, 9) to show that true profit in life can be found only in the acceptance of the allotment given to one by God. Qoheleth also uses such terms as שָׂבַע "satisfy", מָלֵא "fill", אָכַל "eat", שָׁתָה "drink", רָאָה טוֹב בְּעֵמְלוֹ "see good in one's labour", and שָׁנָה "sleep" to show that contentment is found in enjoying simple pleasures in life like eating, drinking, and finding rest and satisfaction in one's labour (Eccl 2:24–26; 5:11 [Eng. 12]). Contentment also means to be willing to accept the good with the bad which comes from the hand of God as a sign of trust in him (Eccl 7:14; 8:12–13; 12:14).

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible defines contentment as "the acceptance of 'things as they are,' as the wise and loving providence of God who knows what is good for us, who so loves us as always to seek our good, and whose power is adequate to his love."²¹⁴ In the Old Testament such contentment is seen in the attitude of the Psalmist who is able to be content even "in the valley of the shadow of death" because God is with him (Ps 23:4). The prophet Habakkuk summarizes the biblical understanding of contentment, without using the word itself, in his poetic declaration in Hab 3:17–18,

Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation.

Contentment is also seen in the person's ability to find satisfaction in his possessions without becoming obsessed with riches or being guided by greed. Such attitude is expressed in the prayer which is recorded in Prov 30:7–9,

Two things I ask of you, do not withhold them from me before I die;
Put away from me deceit and lies,
Give me neither poverty nor riches,
Provide me with bread that is my portion,

²¹³ This preferred translation will be discussed in Chapter 3.3.1.2 Royal Accomplishments.

²¹⁴ J. Marsh, "Contentment," *IDB* 1: 677-78.

Lest I be full and deny [you] and say: “Who is the Lord?”
Or lest I be impoverished and steal and profane the name of my God.

Thus, “contentment entails freedom from anxiety over one’s circumstances in life. It is an attitude of faith and trust in God in every circumstance” no matter whether good or bad.²¹⁵ This study seeks to demonstrate that the concept of contentment is evident in the message of Qoheleth by studying the key terms **יִתְרוֹן** “profit,” **טוֹב** “good” and **חֶלֶק** “allotment” from a thematic and a theological perspectives in the book of Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth uses these terms at important junctures throughout his message and every new occurrence adds fresh insights and perspectives to Qoheleth’s thought. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the thematic contribution of the key terms to the message of Qoheleth.

In addition, this thesis purports to show that the message of Qoheleth is designed to produce a holistic attitude to life, which is full of unresolved tensions and contradictions. Qoheleth purposefully brings together the themes of death and the role of God to point out that the presence of God and his participation in human life should create an attitude of contentment in people which would help them deal with uncertainties and the ever-present reality of death in this world. To this end, this study accepts Frederick’s interpretation of the key term **הַבֵּל**. As this study will demonstrate in Chapter Two, Fredericks’ treatment of this term as “transient” allows for a more balanced presentation of Qoheleth’s message where the fleetingness of life is offset by the simple joys of everyday existence.²¹⁶ By highlighting Qoheleth’s acceptance of the brevity of life and certainty of death, Fredericks brings out Qoheleth’s realism in dealing with life. Building on the understanding of **הַבֵּל** as “transitory” and “fleeting,” to follow Fredericks’s definition, this study suggests that Qoheleth values life and desires to encourage his audience to live their lives to the fullest.²¹⁷ As “transitory” and “fleeting,” **הַבֵּל** underscores life’s inconsistency and unpredictability without assigning a negative value to different experiences and provides a way for Qoheleth to be appreciative of the good and godly things in this world. Untimely but certain death highlights and intensifies the significance of daily life in his teaching. Qoheleth builds his theology on accepting life and everything in it as a gift from God, which makes

²¹⁵ Kathleen Farmer, “Contentment,” *NIDB* 1: 728.

²¹⁶ See Chapter 2.2.1 Images of Fleetingness in Ecclesiastes.

²¹⁷ See also Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 28; Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes*, 173-74.

life worth living for what it is, not what it may bring.²¹⁸ This study also examines the theme of death to determine how it underlines and permeates Qoheleth's message and sets the stage for the theme of contentment in his teaching. It also analyzes how death impacts a person's acceptance of his allotment and his learning to live with it in the face of death.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that Qoheleth has a high view of God as the Creator and Sustainer of the world he has created. As such, God plays a very active role in human life and desires his people to live in a righteous and wise way. Acknowledging God's ultimate control over human existence and accepting everything that comes from his hand as his gifts instils in a person an attitude of contentment with his life. This study pays special attention to the limitations imposed by inscrutability of God and the need to embrace one's allotment and find satisfaction in one's work.

Methodologically, this study does not rest solely on one particular interpretive approach. Rather, this work takes seriously Qoheleth's view of God and the theological and practical implications of living in obedience to God, on the one hand, and Qoheleth's way of formulating his teaching, on the other hand. Qoheleth stays true to the Old Testament understanding of the importance of the wise and good life before God. His teaching on contentment arises from a theology which is inherently practical in its outworking. In order to persuade his readers to embrace his message Qoheleth uses his royal autobiography as a rhetorical strategy where he narrates his personal experience. There one gets an initial glimpse of how his view of God, death, and contentment are brought together to shape the principal message of the book.

Presenting life as full of contradictions without offering an immediate solution is part of Qoheleth's rhetorical strategy which is needed to engage his audience in order 1) to make them aware of the flow of his argument and 2) to cause them to change their behaviour according to his advice. It is through the rhetoric of the text the readers of the book of Ecclesiastes are able to recapture the message that it holds.²¹⁹ Hence this study seeks to examine how Qoheleth brings together the

²¹⁸ Provan suggests that Qoheleth encourages accepting life for what it is, rather than trying to make it into what one wants it to be. See Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 41.

²¹⁹ Dale Patrick and Allen Scult, *Rhetoric and Biblical Interpretation* (JSOTSup 82; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 13. For more information on Rhetorical Criticism see J. Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism* (ed. Paul R. House; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 49-69; T. B. Dozeman, "Old Testament Rhetorical Criticism," *ABD* 5 (ed. D. N. Freeman et al.; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 712-15; B. Fiore, "New

contradicting statements about brevity of human life and inevitability and finality of death, on the one hand, and the significance of the allotment that God has given humanity to be embraced and find contentment in a daily life and his active role in their existence, on the other hand, as part of Qoheleth's rhetorical strategy to communicate his message in this book.

Before considering the impact that the message of Qoheleth could have on his intended audience, it is crucial to understand the ways in which Qoheleth builds his argument because the text serves as a means of communication between him and his readers.²²⁰ In order to trace the flow of Qoheleth's argument, this study follows the development of the themes of death, the role of God, and contentment, and the interplay between all three throughout the book of Ecclesiastes in its canonical form. Therefore, this thesis first considers the Qoheleth's life story in Eccl 1:12–2:26. The royal autobiography of Eccl 1:12–2:26 is a rhetorical device that Qoheleth uses to convey his message. His autobiography allows Qoheleth to have a significant impact on his audience. Qoheleth uses his autobiography as a means of persuasion. He does not simply narrate his story; rather, he intends to impact the will and behaviour of his readers through his words.²²¹

Building on Seow's and Koh's work, which identifies the similarities between Qoheleth's story and royal autobiographies of ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature, this research advances their work by exploring further the function of Qoheleth's autobiography and its rhetorical impact on the overall message of the book of Ecclesiastes. The present study explores how Qoheleth's autobiography connects his personal experience of abundance and limitations with his outlook on life and his teaching on contentment in the face of death. His personal story has the most far-reaching effect, for he is able to transform common knowledge into a personal experience and then present his personal experience as a rhetorical strategy to persuade his audience to adopt his point of view.

Next, this research investigates how the autobiographical narration of Qoheleth's life (Eccl 1:12–2:26) serves as an interpretive key, a lens to read his

Testament Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism," *ABD* 5 (ed. D. N. Freeman et al.; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 716-18.

²²⁰ See also Alison Lo, *Job 28 as Rhetoric: An Analysis of Job 28 in the Context of Job 22-31* (VTSup 97; Atlanta: SBL, 2003), 16.

²²¹ See also Lo, *Job 28 as Rhetoric*, 16.

message in the rest of the book (Eccl 3:1–12:14).²²² As a matter of convenience, Qoheleth's teaching on living with one's limitations is discussed first, and his thoughts on living with one's allotment are examined last. In particular, this thesis explores Eccl 3:1–15 and 9:1–12 in order to determine how Qoheleth develops his teaching on contentment in life, paying special attention to the limitations imposed by impossibility to control time, inscrutability of God, and unpredictability of death. Qoheleth's rhetoric, "that quality in discourse by which a speaker or a writer seeks to accomplish his purpose"²²³ and the ways in which his audience might perceive it are at the center of this research. In analyzing these passages, this study primarily focuses on the persuasive power of Qoheleth's words in bringing forth a transformed attitude, behaviour, and worldview on the part of his readers.²²⁴

In addition, this work analyzes Eccl 5:7–6:9 and 11:1–6 in order to demonstrate how Qoheleth presents his message of embracing one's allotment and finding satisfaction in one's labour as a way of learning to live with this allotment. Investigating the ways in which Qoheleth uses his royal autobiography as a lens for his readers to interpret their lives and to adopt his point of view is the focal point of the rhetorical analysis of these passages. Furthermore, this study explores these texts to demonstrate how Qoheleth brings the themes of death and the role of God to bear upon developing an attitude of contentment in one's work that leads to a godly life of hospitality and generosity. Finally, this thesis considers how the rhetoric of Qoheleth's argument enables him to re-interpret the concept of true profit in life and persuade his audience to embrace his message of contentment and live it out in their daily circumstances.

In order to achieve this, Chapter Two will explore the theme of death in the book of Ecclesiastes. It will demonstrate how Qoheleth uses this theme as the main background for his teaching of contentment. The theme of death will be discussed first as a proper view of death will inform and influence the understanding of Qoheleth's personal story and his teaching in the book of Ecclesiastes. This chapter will analyze the development of the theme of death throughout Qoheleth's work from the opening poem in Eccl 1:4–11 to the concluding poem in Eccl 12:1–7, because

²²² Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 210. Whybray claims: "All the principle themes of the book are treated here and are specifically related to Qoheleth's main purpose." See Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 47. See also S. Walton, "Rhetorical Criticism: An Introduction," *Themelios* 21 (1996): 4-9.

²²³ G. A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 3.

²²⁴ See also Lo, *Job as Rhetoric*, 18.

Survey of Literature

Qoheleth begins and ends his teaching with very evocative images of death. In order to articulate a better understanding of Qoheleth's view of death, this chapter will examine the ways death is perceived in the Old Testament and in the wider context of the ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature. Special attention will be given to Qoheleth's concern for the brevity of human life, his understanding of death as a natural end of human existence, his thoughts on death and suffering, and the afterlife.

Chapter Three will investigate Qoheleth's royal autobiography (Eccl 1:12–2:26) and its impact on the message of contentment in his teaching. The "I" of the speaker is very prominent in the book and requires a thorough examination to understand its purpose in Qoheleth's thought and its significance in the ways Qoheleth chooses to convey his message. Further, this chapter will consider the apparent contradictions between abundance, focusing on his views on wisdom, and achievements, and limitations, especially inscrutability of God and inevitability of death, which Qoheleth has observed and experienced in his life. This chapter will also examine how Qoheleth's life experience of abundance and limitations moves him to accept his allotment and choose contentment as the answer to life's contradictions. In order to do this, the meaning of the words "profit" and "good" will be analyzed. This analysis will demonstrate that for Qoheleth "profit" lies in living a "good" life in the eyes of God and finding contentment in the simple things like enjoying one's daily provisions and the fruit of one's labour.

Chapter Four will trace further the development of the theme of contentment in Qoheleth's teaching. Looking through the lens of Qoheleth's autobiography it will examine his exhortations of contentment in the midst of limitations imposed by humanity's impossibility to control time, the inscrutability of God and the inevitability of death. It will look at Eccl 3:1–8 to analyze Qoheleth's understanding of time and humanity's lack of control over time. It will also examine Eccl 3:9–15 to see how Qoheleth encourages his audience to consider life's limitations and mysteries concerning God and the future and to replace their illusive hopes of mastering providence with a well-established confidence in God's gifts which they have been given already. This chapter will then move to study Eccl 9:1–12 to demonstrate how Qoheleth continues to develop the theme of contentment in the face of death and to encourage his audience to come to grips with the reality of death and admit its certainty and then to learn to celebrate life one day at a time.

Survey of Literature

Chapter Five will continue tracing the development of the theme of contentment in the book of Ecclesiastes. Using Qoheleth's autobiography as lens for his teaching, it will focus on Qoheleth's advice on living a life of contentment with the allotment that has been given by God, paying particular attention to Eccl 5:7–16 [Eng. 8–17] and 6:1–9. These passages will shed light on what a life consumed with material gain and void of contentment looks like, according to Qoheleth, and what constitutes true profit in his mind. It will then investigate Qoheleth's teaching on learning to embrace one's allotment in Eccl 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20] and 6:10–12. This chapter will conclude with the analysis of what Qoheleth has to say about finding satisfaction in one's work in Eccl 11:1–6. It will consider his practical advice on embracing life laced with the unknown and the unpredictable, and yet empowered by God, and looking at the process of work as a basis of one's satisfaction rather than treating one's job as a source of material gain only.

Chapter Six will offer an overview of the entire study, especially as it relates to the development of the theme of contentment throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. It will highlight the main contributions of this study to the scholarship on the book of Ecclesiastes and consider the implications of reading the book of Ecclesiastes as it teaches its audience to live content lives in the face of death and the inscrutability of God. The final chapter will also offer some avenues for further research and discussion on the subject. We will now turn to the analysis of the theme of death in the book of Ecclesiastes.

Chapter 2

The Theme of Death in the Book of Ecclesiastes

1. Introduction

Death is a very important theme in the book of Ecclesiastes and sets the stage for Qoheleth's message of contentment. In fact, Qoheleth begins and ends his instruction with the theme of death. The introductory poem in Eccl 1:4–11 and the concluding poem in Eccl 12:1–7 speak of death in very clear and evocative terms. This chapter seeks to explore the meaning of this theme and its significance for the book of Ecclesiastes. It will look at the ways death is viewed in the Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature to formulate a fuller understanding of death in Qoheleth's thought. Qoheleth approaches the issue of death from two different vantage points. First, life is extremely brief and passing like a puff of air. Second, death is a natural end of every human being and there is no escaping it. This chapter will begin by looking at Qoheleth's concern for the brevity of human life. Then it will discuss death as the natural end of human existence and Qoheleth's view of the relationship between death and suffering. Finally, the notion of the afterlife in Qoheleth's thought will be examined.

2. Concern for the Brevity of Human Existence

The theme of the transient nature and brevity of life permeates the book of Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth is concerned about the fact that human existence is passing swiftly as wind or breath (e.g. Eccl 1:14; 2:11; 4:4; 6:9) and that it lasts only a short number of days (e.g. Eccl 2:3; 5:17 [Eng. 18]). Qoheleth uses this concern as an important tool in his teaching on the value of life that should be appreciated exactly because it is so brief. In order to help his audience get a better grasp of the concept for the transient nature of their lives, Qoheleth uses such key words as הַבֵּל “fleeting”,¹ רְעוּת רוּחַ “pursuit of wind”, צֶלַל “shadow”, and מִסְפָּר “short number” to create evocative images of the quickly fleeting human life. This section will examine the use of these words in the book of Ecclesiastes and in the Old Testament as a whole to expound on Qoheleth's view on the brevity of human existence. It will also look at the

¹ This preferred translation of the term הַבֵּל will be discussed in the following section.

wider context of ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature to demonstrate that the concern for the brevity of life is not unique to Qoheleth's teaching.

2.1 Images of Fleetingness in the Book of Ecclesiastes

Qoheleth introduces and concludes his discourse with the words: הַבַּל הַכֹּל (Ecc 1:2; 12:8), which some English versions (e.g. NASB, NJKV, NRSV, ESV) translate as “vanity of vanities.” The noun הַבַּל is used in the book of Ecclesiastes thirty eight times² and is one of the key terms in this work. Antoon Schoors states: “It 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.”³ The Hebrew word הַבַּל means “breath”, “vapour”, “mist”, “smoke”.⁴ However, it is the metaphorical interpretation of this word that divides scholarly opinions about the meaning of this term in the book of Ecclesiastes. LXX translates הַבַּל as ματαιότης which denotes “nothingness, vanity, and transitoriness.”⁵ Jerome translates this word as *vanitas* which in Latin means “unsubstantial”, “empty”, or “illusory”.⁶

The Hebrew word הַבַּל presents a difficult interpretive problem. On the one hand, the literal meaning of “breath” or “puff of air” does not fit the context of the book. On the other hand, translating הַבַּל as “vanity” does not adequately capture the meaning conveyed by Qoheleth's use of the word. In order to solve this issue, scholars offer several interpretations of this word. Fox suggests “absurd” to underscore the irrationality and the senselessness of human existence.⁷ Crenshaw proposes “futile” and “ephemeral” to emphasize the complete lack of profit of any human toil.⁸ Sneed offers “futility” or “illusion” to signify that reality does not

² Ecc 1:2 (x5), 14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:19; 4:4, 7, 8, 16; 5:6 [Eng. 7], 9 [Eng. 10]; 6:2, 4, 9, 11, 12; 7:6, 15; 8:10, 14 (x2); 9:9 (x2); 11:8, 10; 12:8 (x3).

³ Antoon Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words: A Study of the Language of Qoheleth, Part II Vocabulary*, (LA, 143; Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 119.

⁴ Klauss Seybold, “הַבַּל,” *TDOT* 3: 313-20; Daniel C, Fredericks, “הַבַּל,” *NIDOTTE* 1: 1005-1006; Nancy Declaissé-Walford, “Vanity,” *NIDB* 5: 729.

⁵ Horst Balz, “ματαιότης,” *EDNT* 2: 396-97.

⁶ St. Jerome, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 35.

⁷ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 30-32.

⁸ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 57-58.

function as one expects or desires.⁹ Longman argues that “meaningless” is the best translation of הבל because it reflects the absence of value that Qoheleth finds in different areas of life.¹⁰ Shields proposes “senseless” as a more adequate interpretation of this term than “meaningless.”¹¹ Gordis chooses “short-lived” as the foundation for the metaphorical meaning of הבל to reflect the quickly passing nature of human life.¹² Lohfink opts for the literal meaning of “a puff of breath” to express Qoheleth’s understanding of the brevity of life and fruitlessness of effort.¹³ Ogden suggests “enigma”, “mystery” to reflect the human inability to know and comprehend life.¹⁴ Bartholomew also offers “enigmatic” as the best metaphorical meaning of הבל.¹⁵ Seow understands this key term to define the lack of human control to hold on to anything in this world and suggests the translation “beyond mortal grasp” to reflect such connotation of the word.¹⁶ Miller acknowledges the richness of the metaphorical use of הבל and suggests a spectrum of meanings such as “foul”, “insubstantial”, and “transient.”¹⁷ Fredericks offers the translation of “transient” and “fleeting” to emphasize the brief and short lifespan of a human being.¹⁸

There is consensus among the scholars about the notion of transience and brevity inherent in the metaphorical rendering of הבל in Qoheleth’s thought. However, it is not necessary to assume that this notion of transience implies futility, absurdity or meaninglessness. Taking into account the significance of the theme of death in the book of Ecclesiastes, it is possible to suggest that transience has to do with impermanence of the human existence rather than its meaning. The metaphorical understanding of the term הבל as “temporary”, “fleeting” or “brief”¹⁹ accentuates the

⁹ Mark R. Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes: A Social-Science Perspective* (SBL Ancient Israel and Its Literature 12; Atlanta: SBL, 2012), 162.

¹⁰ Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 32, 64-65.

¹¹ Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, 121.

¹² Gordis, *Koheleth*, 205.

¹³ Lohfink, Qoheleth, 36; idem., “Ist Kohelet הבל-Aussage erkenntnistheoretisch gemeint?” in *Qoheleth in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors; Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 41-59.

¹⁴ Graham S. Ogden, “‘Vanity’ It Certainly Is Not,” *BT* 38:3 (1987): 301-307.

¹⁵ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 93.

¹⁶ C. L. Seow, “Beyond Mortal Grasp: The Usage of *Hebel* in Ecclesiastes,” *ABR* 48 (2000): 1-16; idem, *Ecclesiastes*, 101-102.

¹⁷ Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes*, 152-54.

¹⁸ Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, 22-26.

¹⁹ Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, 22-26. See also Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good?* 143-46.

theme of mortality in Qoheleth's teaching.²⁰ Qoheleth seems to be concerned with the fact that everything in life and even life itself is brief.²¹ By employing the term הבל he paints a vivid picture of the fleetingness of human existence. The close association of הבל with רעות רוח "pursuit of wind" (Eccl 1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 6:9) in Qoheleth's speech creates an evocative image of life's transient nature.²² As it is impossible to hold a puff of air in one's hand, so it is impossible to direct the wind. A breath and a wind are gone before one can even realize what has happened. The link between הבל and רוח connects the existence of humanity and animals to the breath of life, while at the same time encompasses both the primary and the metaphorical meanings of these words.²³ Life is הבל because it passes just like a breath.²⁴ Everything that has breath in it is destined to die (Eccl 3:19).²⁵

Besides הבל and רוח as images of fleetingness, Qoheleth employs two more terms: צל and מספר. Throughout his discourse Qoheleth compares humanity's lifespan to צל "shadow",²⁶ for it cannot be kept or even grasped, and underscores מספר "short number"²⁷ of days of a person's life: "For who knows what is good for a human being among the living during the short number (מספר) of days of his fleeting (הבל) life? And he spends them like a shadow (צל)" (Eccl 6:12).²⁸ By using the word צל, 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 the human life always moves forward and ultimately runs out. Qoheleth uses the term מספר to create a vivid picture of life passing very swiftly in Eccl 2:3, "...what was good for human beings to do ... the short number (מספר) of days of

²⁰ Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good?* 145.

²¹ Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs* (AOTC 16, eds. David W. Baker and Gordon J. Wenham; Downers Grove: IVP, 2010), 23.

²² Laird R. Harris, "רעה," *TWOT*, 853. See also Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words*, 439-42.

²³ Seybold, "הבל," *TDOT* 3:318.

²⁴ Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, 24.

²⁵ Seybold, "הבל," *TDOT* 3:317.

²⁶ George M. Schwab, "צל," *TDOT* 12:372-82; James D. Price, "צלל," *NIDOTTE* 3:807-810.

²⁷ Edgar Conrad, "מספר," *TDOT* 12:308-18; P. P. Jenson, "מספר," *NIDOTTE* 2:1008-1009; L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, "מספר," *HALOT* 2:607. See also Gen 34:30; Num 9:20; Deut 4:27; 33:6; Ezek 12:16; Hos 2:1 [Eng. 1:10]; Ps 105:12; Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 24-25.

²⁸ See also Eccl 7:15; 9:9; 11:10.

their life” and Eccl 5:17 [Eng. 18]: “...it is appropriate to eat and drink and see the good ... a short number (מספר) of days of his life.” This word helps Qoheleth to define the human lifetime which proceeds unavoidably to its end.

Qoheleth’s use of the four terms הבל “fleeting”, רעות רוח “pursuit of wind”, צל “shadow”, and מספר “short number” paints very dramatic pictures of human life as something that cannot be grasped and held in place. In his teaching Qoheleth purposefully employs these words to present the transient nature of human life as a concern to his audience to help them realize the value and meaningfulness of their existence under the sun. Qoheleth purposefully employs the vocabulary that describes the transient nature of life in the Old Testament. The following section will analyze the most pertinent examples of the Old Testament passages that employ הבל, צל, and מספר as images of fleetingness of human existence to demonstrate Qoheleth’s close ties to the Old Testament picture of death.

2.2 Images of Fleetingness in the Old Testament

Qoheleth’s concern for the brevity of human life is similar to that of other writers in the Old Testament. The psalmist inquires about the connection between the significance of an individual and his brief existence in this world in Ps 144:3–4,

O LORD, what is a human being that you know him,
or a son of man that you think of him?
A human being is like a breath (הבל);
his days pass like a shadow (צל).

The simile “like a shadow (צל)” suggests the quick and passing nature of human life and the parallelism between the similes “like a breath (הבל)” and “like a shadow (צל)” suggests that life is short and constantly moving ahead and away. The psalmist’s lament about his fleeting existence on earth, however, does not diminish the value of life because God is in control of his subsistence. On the contrary, his grief is caused by the fact that this life ends too soon,²⁹

²⁹ When speaking about the nation of Israel, the Psalmist states: “So he made their days vanish like a breath (הבל) ... a passing wind (רוח) that does not return” (Ps 78:33, 39). This thought is elaborated upon in Psalm 103: “A human being is like grass; his days are like a flower of the field; in the same way he blooms. As the wind passes over him, he is gone, and his place does not recognize him again” (Ps 103:15–16). The author of Psalm 90 also compares the length of human life to grass that blooms in the morning and fades by evening: “You sweep [the people] away; they are like a

Oh Lord, declare to me my end and what the measure of my days is,
So I should know how fleeting I am.
You have set my days a few handbreadths,
and my duration is like nothing in your sight.
Surely everyone stands as a breath (הבל).
Surely everyone goes about like a shadow (צל). (Ps 39:4–6)

Further the psalmist speaks about a human life that constantly moves towards its end like an evening shadow, “My days are like a lengthened shadow (צל), And I dry up like grass” (Ps 102:12 [Eng. 11]).³⁰ In addition, the psalmist finds the reason for transience in God’s ordering of the world (Ps 90:3, 5, 6, 10, 12). He believes that God’s discernment is needed to guide people in accepting this fact in order to live wisely, even if briefly,

You turn people back to dust and say, “Come back, o mortals.”
You sweep them away with sleep;
in the morning they are like renewed grass,
In the morning it sprouts and grows;
by the evening it withers and dries.
The days of our lives are seventy year, eighty, if we are strong...
They pass away in haste and we fly away.
Teach us to count our days so that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

Job also recognizes the transient nature of human existence and mentions it several times in his speech and even makes use of the same vocabulary as Qoheleth. Job declares that a person’s days are short-lived, for he goes through life like a shadow (צל),

My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle...
Remember that my life is but breath;
my eyes will never again see good... (Job 7:6–7)
A man, born of a woman, few are his day and full of trouble,
like a flower which comes up and withers,
and flees like a shadow (צל) and does not stand. (Job 14:1–2)

Earlier on Job enquires: “Are not my days few?” (Job 10:20) and even poses a question similar to that of the psalmist in Ps 144:3–4, “Leave me alone, for breath (הבל) like are my days. What is a human being that you set your mind to honour him?” (Job 7:16–17) He goes on to say that God has determined the span of people’s

dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers” (Ps 90:5–6). While this passage speaks of a human life in terms of blossoming and withering grass rather than a shadow or a breath, the picture is still the same: life passes too swiftly. See also Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 24–26.

³⁰ See also Ps 109:23, “I am gone like a stretching shadow (צל); I am shaken like a locust.”

life of just a short number (מספר) of months (Job 14:5). Further he affirms that after a short number (מספר) of years he will be gone never to return (Job 16:22).

The short span and fragility of human existence of which Job speaks is an accepted fact in the Old Testament. God himself promises to bless and sustain his people during מספר “short number” of years he has allotted to them (Exod. 23:26). King David expresses his acknowledgment of the transient nature of human life and its impermanence when he describes the duration of human life as inextricably short and yet determined by God to be such,

For we are sojourners before you and passing visitors,
as all our ancestors were;
our days on the earth are like a shadow (צל),
and there is no hope. (1 Chr 29:15)

When King Hezekiah prays to God to spare his life during his illness (2 Kgs 20:1–11), the king asks for his shadow to move backward as a sign of God’s favour, “It is easy for the shadow (צל) to stretch forward ten steps; No, let the shadow (צל) return backwards ten steps” (2 Kgs 20:10). Hezekiah understands that human beings can never control their shadow and the way it is constantly moving ahead.³¹ In the same way people lack control over their life and its passing nature.

There is great affinity between the language used by Qoheleth and other Old Testament writers, who express their concern for the brevity of human life. They recognize and accept the fact that God has arranged the world in such a way that human existence is brief, transient and often is gone without leaving a memory. Qoheleth’s concern for the transiency of human existence is not particular to the Hebrew thought. Ancient Near Eastern wisdom writers share a similar concern in their texts and use a similar terms to describe the brevity of life. Images of fleeting of life used in the ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature will be discussed in the following section.

2.3 Images of Fleetingness in the Ancient Near Eastern Wisdom Literature

When one considers what ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature says about the problem of the transient nature of human existence, one can see that the same concern

³¹ Cf. Josh 10:12–14.

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for the brevity of life in the Akkadian wisdom text “I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom,”³²

Where have humans learned the way of a god?
He who was alive yesterday is dead today.

A Mesopotamian text *Counsels of a Pessimist* teaches about the fleeting nature of human life and activity,³³

Whatever men do does not last for ever,
mankind and their achievements alike come to an end.

In the Babylonian myth *The Epic of Gilgamesh* Gilgamesh, the main hero of this literary work, speaks of the brevity of life and compares any human achievement to a wind, signifying an elusive nature of any accomplishment or gain,³⁴

Only the gods [live] forever under the sun.
As for mankind, numbered are their days;
whatever they achieve is but the wind!”

Gilgamesh uses the word “wind” to demonstrate the illusion of material success. The epic hero employs vocabulary similar to Qoheleth’s use of רוח in the expression רעות רוח “pursuit of wind” (cf. Eccl 1:14; 2:11; 4:4; 6:9) and synonymous to הבל “breath” or “fleeting” (cf. Eccl 2:11, 17, 21; 4:8; 9:1–2) to emphasize the impermanence of any kind of human achievements.³⁵

The ancient writer of “The Man Who Was Tired of Life,” an Egyptian composition that presents a dialogue between a man and his soul on the topic of suicide, seems to be aware of the problem of the brevity of life and its swift passing, as he states: “life is a transitory state, and even trees fall.”³⁶ Williams in his translation of this Egyptian text proposes “life is a set portion; (even) trees fall” to express the lament of the main character about the human condition and the certainty of death that everybody has to face.³⁷ *The Song from the Tomb of King Intef*, another Egyptian

³² “Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi, ‘I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom,’” translated by Robert D. Biggs (ANE, 368).

³³ “Counsels of a Pessimist” (Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 109).

³⁴ “The Epic of Gilgamesh,” translated by E.A. Speiser (ANE, 50).

³⁵ Seybold, “הבל,” TDOT 3:315. See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 64. In a similar fashion Hosea calls the activities of Ephraim “pursuing the wind” and “chasing the eastwind,” in Hos. 12:1 because Israel’s trust in foreign powers is only an illusion. A similar idea is present in Sir 34:1–2 where the author speaks of a fool as the one who puts hope in illusions and “pursues wind.” See C. L. Seow, “Hosea 14:10 and the Foolish People Motif,” *CBQ* 44 (1982): 212–24.

³⁶ R. O. Faulkner, “The Man Who Was Tired of Life,” *JEA* 42 (1956): 21–40 (27).

³⁷ R. J. Williams, “Reflections on the *Lebensmüde*,” *JEA* 48 (1962): 49–56 (54).

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wisdom text, refers to one generation passing another in a set order, which also attests to the notion of the transience of life as a woeful human stipulation, “Death is a kindly fate. A generation passes, another stays, since the time of the ancestors.”³⁸

The transience and fragility of human condition is also portrayed in *The Instruction of Amen-em-Opet*, one more text from the Egyptian Royal Instructions, “For man is clay and straw, and the god is his builder. He is tearing down and building up every day.”³⁹

A brief look at the extra-biblical material has shown that the theme of the transitory nature of life is a primary concern in several texts of ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature. These texts employ images that are similar to the ones which are found in the Hebrew Scriptures. These images convey a common understanding of the brevity of life and a limited duration of all human effort; yet they do not intend to empty human life of its true meaning and value.

The concern for the brevity of human life is not unique to Qoheleth’s thinking. The wider context of the ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature and the Old Testament material attest to the common notion of the transient nature of human existence, which is perceived as a necessary reflection in considering life and death. In order to express his concern for the brevity of life, Qoheleth chooses to employ the images *הבל*, *רוח*, *צל*, and *מספר* which are already familiar to his audience as these terms are frequently used in the Old Testament to speak of the lack of permanence in life. With the help of these images Qoheleth reminds his readers that life is ephemeral, fleeting and breath-like; it is not something that people can hang on for a long time, for death can cut it short at any time.⁴⁰ However, this transience does not define the essence of life for Qoheleth. He believes and desires his audience to believe as well that life is a gift of God and should be treated as a blessing.

While Qoheleth is concerned with the brevity of human life, he understands that death is a natural end of life and should be expected to happen to every living person. The following section will investigate Qoheleth’s thoughts on death as a natural end of life in his own autobiography first. Then it will look at several Old Testament examples that speak of death as an expected ending of human existence, and, finally, several examples from ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature that view

³⁸ “The Song from the Tomb of King Intef,” (*AEL* 1:194).

³⁹ “The Instruction of Amen-em-Opet,” (*ANE*, 351).

⁴⁰ Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good?* 145.

life as inevitably ending in end will be considered in order to present a more complete understanding of Qoheleth's view of death as a natural end of life.

3. Death as a Natural End of Life

In pursuing a thorough investigation of life and looking for profit in it, Qoheleth has to address the issue of death as a natural end of life. Death presents the most significant obstacle to life which cannot be ignored. The theme of death in Qoheleth's teaching needs to be investigated because it plays such a crucial role in his teaching of contentment. It is also important to study the theme of death in the context of the Old Testament to demonstrate that Qoheleth's view of death as a natural end of life follows the Old Testament understanding of death as an expected ending of human existence. A consideration of the context a wider ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature will prove helpful as well as it will show that the belief that life always ends in death is common in the ancient Near Eastern cultures. The following section will examine first the theme of death as a natural end of life in Qoheleth's teaching, then it will study this theme in the wider context of the Old Testament, and, finally, in several texts from ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature.

3.1 Death as a Natural End of Life in the Book of Ecclesiastes

Qoheleth believes that death must be considered in one's contemplation of life as life cannot be fully comprehended without its sobering end.⁴¹ Anyone who is concerned about life often reflects on the inevitability and normativity of death. Qoheleth sees death walking along in his pursuit of profit, guiding his observations of life, and influencing his teaching on contentment.⁴² His words begin with the constant changing of generations (Eccl 1:4) and end with the passing of an individual (Eccl 12:1–7). These passages emphasize the notion of the brevity of human existence and present death as a natural end of human life. While Qoheleth's teaching is focused on life rather than death, he advocates that life cannot be understood without its expected end. Qoheleth first describes the innate flow of death and life in the introductory poem (Eccl 1:4–11).

⁴¹ See also Gese, "The Crisis of Wisdom in Kohelet," in *Theodicy in the Old Testament (IRT 4*; ed. James L. Crenshaw; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 141-53;

⁴² See also Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*, 33-34.

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1:4	דור הלך דור בא והארץ לעולם עמדת	A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.
1:5	וזרח שמש ובא השמש ואל־מקומו שואף זורח הוא שם	And the sun rises and the sun sets and to its place it hastens, where it rises.
1:6	הולך אל־דרום וסובב אל־צפון וסובב סבב הולך הרוח ועל־סביבתיו שב הרוח	The wind goes to the south and turns to the north and turns, turning as it goes; and upon its course the wind returns.
1:7	כל־הנחלים הלכים אל־הים והים איננו מלא אל־מקום שהנחלים הלכים שם הם שבים ללכת	All the streams run to the sea, but the sea is never full; to the place to which the streams run, there they will turn to run.
1:8	כל־הדברים יגעים לא־יוכל איש לדבר לא־תשבע עין לראות ולא־תמלא אذن משמע	All things are wearisome; A man is not able to speak [it]: An eye is not satisfied with seeing, and ear is not filled with hearing.
1:9	מה־שהיה הוא שיהיה ומה־נעשה הוא שיעשה ואין כל־חדש תחת השמש	What has been, that will be, And what has been done, that will be done; And there is nothing new under the sun.
1:10	יש דבר שיאמר ראה־זה חדש הוא כבר היה לעלמים אשר היה מלפננו	There is a matter about which it is said: “See, this is new!” Already it has been for ages before us.
1:11	אין זכרין לראשנים וגם לאחרנים שיהיו לא־יהיה להם זכרון עם שיהיו לאחרנה	There is no remembrance of people of old And of those who are after them; There will be no remembrance about them With those who will come [later] after them.

Qoheleth speaks of the transient nature of human existence in this poem and compares it to the permanence of nature. To highlight the theme of death he makes use of the terms **הלך** and **בוא**. The term **הלך** refers to “death” (cf. Eccl 3:20; 5:14–15; 6:6, 9; 7:2; 9:10; 12:5),⁴³ and the term **בוא** refers to “birth” (cf. Eccl 5:14–15; 6:4).⁴⁴ Alison Lo suggests that this poem introduces the theme of death in the book.

⁴³ F. J. Helfmeyer, “הלך,” *TDOT* 5:388-403; Koehler, Baumgartner, “הלך,” *HALOT* 1:246-48; Eugene H. Merrill, “הלך,” *NIDOTTE* 1:1032-35.

⁴⁴ Horst Dietrich Preuss, “בוא,” *TDOT* 2:20-49; Elmer A. Martens, “בוא,” *TWOT* 1:93-95. Martens suggests that **בוא** means “death” rather than birth, but he does not offer any reasons for his suggestions.

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The words הָלַךְ and בָּוֵא do not speak of the continuity of the generations; rather they “reveal the stark reality of human transitoriness.”⁴⁵ Qoheleth starts his first poem with the thought of people dying (דָּוָר הָלַךְ) to set the background for his discourse—death happens to everybody; death defines life for Qoheleth.

Qoheleth uses the terms הָלַךְ five times in Eccl 1:6–7 and בָּוֵא once in Eccl 1:5 to demonstrate the swiftness with which things change and pass in the world in which people live; and yet, nature does not come to its end. Although the sun sets (בָּוֵא), it does so only to rise again (Eccl 1:5). The wind and the streams go back (הָלַךְ) to their beginning to continue on their chosen courses (Eccl 1:5–7). Therefore, Qoheleth masterfully employs the two key terms הָלַךְ and בָּוֵא in Eccl 1:4–7 to emphasize the brevity and mortality of humanity, on the one hand, and the permanence of nature, on the other hand.

The observations of the transient nature of human life are spelled out further in the next section Eccl 1:9–11. Qoheleth points out that there is nothing new that can be done on earth (Eccl 1:9), and there is no remembrance of people who lived before (Eccl 1:10), a thought that he will reiterate later in the book (cf. Eccl 2:16; 9:5, 15).⁴⁶ Death obliterates one’s deeds and one’s life. Seow suggests that for Qoheleth death eliminates any hope of immortality or a possibility of living on in the memories of one’s descendants.⁴⁷ While Seow is correct, it is quite possible for Qoheleth to offer

⁴⁵ Lo, “Death in Qoheleth,” 85-98. See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 106. Good proposes to read Eccl 1:4 as speaking of the same generation’s career, “A generation walks (its way of life) and a generation enters (like the sun into death).” See E. M. Good, “The Unfilled Sea: Style and Meaning in Ecclesiastes 1:2–11,” in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (eds. John G. Gammie et al.; Missoula: Scholars, 1978), 59-73. While poetic, Good’s translation requires words to be added to complete both parts of the sentence. Besides, it does not reflect the contrast between the permanence of nature and the transience of human life that Qoheleth speaks about in the opening poem, because Good understands Qoheleth to address only one generation rather than a continuous flow of generations.

⁴⁶ The idea of remembrance appears again in the latter part of the book, where Qoheleth encourages his audience to be active at remembering the coming death and their Creator (Eccl 11:8; 12:1). He is not the only one, who stresses the lack of remembrance of the past. The obliging servant in the Akkadian composition the *Dialogue of Pessimism* is quick to identify human forgetfulness of the people of old regardless whether they were benefactors of the society or not. See E. A. Speiser, “The Case of the Obliging Servant,” *JCS* 8 (1954): 98-105. See also Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, “An Allusion to the Shamash Hymn in Dialogue of Pessimism,” in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel* (SBLSymS 36, ed. Richard J. Clifford; Atlanta: SBL, 2007), 33-36.

⁴⁷ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 117. See also Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 7-9; Lo, “Death in Qoheleth,” 88. Perdue goes even further to portray Qoheleth as an absolute pessimist for whom death completely obliterates life: “For Qoheleth the end, i.e. death, is better than the beginning, since it is human destiny to be born to suffer in ignorance and darkness only to die in the blackness of oblivion and to be erased from human memory.” See Leo G. Perdue, “Wisdom and Apocalyptic: The Case of Qoheleth,” in

an indictment to the present generation who chooses not to remember the deeds of those who have gone before, who have not to learn from past examples, and thus have not changed their behaviour.

Remembering is often associated with acting in a certain way; for example, in Ps 109:16 when the psalmist speaks of people not remembering to show kindness to the poor, he points out the people's disregard to do so.⁴⁸ Therefore, Qoheleth's comment on the lack of remembrance (Eccl 1:11) is a possible allusion to Moses' admonition to remember which is found in the book of Deuteronomy. Throughout his speeches Moses admonishes the Israelites to remember; remember what God has done for them (Deut 5:15; 7:18); remember who they were in Egypt and who they have become after the exile (Deut 9:7; 15:15; 24:18); remember that everything that they have now is God's gift to them (Deut 8:18; 32:7–9). Yet, instead of remembering and living according to God's decrees, people are willing to spend their extremely short lives trying out new things only to learn that it has already been done. Qoheleth connects the theme of remembering with the theme of death to make his audience aware of the fact that death as a natural ending of life has the power to eradicate memory if people choose not to remember.

The introductory poem of Eccl 1:4–11 finds its echoes in the final poem of Eccl 12:1–7. This inclusio emphasizes the importance of the theme of death in the book of Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth's exhortation to remember the Creator (Eccl 12:1) brings back the indictment of failing to remember the past (Eccl 1:11). For Qoheleth, the end is connected to the beginning; therefore, "to remember the Creator" does not refer to the primordial past but calls attention to the end of time when the spirit given in the beginning returns to the one who has given it.⁴⁹

12:1	זָכַר אֶת־בּוֹרְאֵיךְ בְּיָמֶיךָ בְּחֹרְתֶיךָ עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָבֹאוּ יְמֵי הָרָעָה וְהִגִּיעוּ שָׁנִים	Remember your Creator in the days of your youth before come near the days of evil and approach the years when
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Wisdom and Apocalyptic in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Biblical Tradition (ed. F. Garcia Martinez; Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 231-58.

⁴⁸ In Amos 1:9 Tyre does not remember its treaty with Israel, which means that it has broken the treaty. In Isa 17:10 the prophet states that to forget God as Savior is substitute him for other gods. In Mal 3:22 [Eng. 4:4] the prophet admonishes to remember God which means to obey him. Cf. Isa 64:4 [Eng. 5]; Exod 20:8; Esth 9:28; Josh 1:13; Deut 3:18–20. See also Andrew Bowling, "זָכַר," *TWOT*, 241-43; Leslie C. Allen, "זָכַר," *NIDOTTE* 1:1100-1106.

⁴⁹ Maurice Gilbert, "La Description de la Vieillesse en Qoheleth XII 1–7 Est-Elle Allégorique?" in *Congress Volume, Vienna 1980* (VTSup 32; ed. J. A. Emerton; Leiden: Brill, 1981), 96-109.

	אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵינֶנִּי לֵי בָהֶם חֶפְזָן	you say, “there is no pleasure in them for me.”
12:2	עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תִחְשַׁךְ הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וְהָאוֹר וְהַיָּרֵחַ וְהַכּוֹכָבִים וְשָׁבוּ הָעַבִּים אַחֲרֵי הַגֶּשֶׁם	Before the sun is darkened, and the light, and the moon, and the stars, and the clouds return after the rain.
12:3	בְּיוֹם שִׁיזְעוּ שֹׁמְרֵי הַבַּיִת וְהִתְעוּתוֹ אַנְשֵׁי הַחַיִל וּבִמְלֹחַ הַמַּחְנִית כִּי מְעַמּוֹ וַחֲשָׁכוּ הָרְאוֹת בְּאַרְבּוֹת	In the day when the watchmen of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop, and the grinders cease for they are few, and those looking through the window darken,
12:4	וּסְגְרוּ דְלֹתַיִם בְּשׁוֹק בְּשֹׁפֵל קוֹל הַמַּחְנָה וַיִּקְוּ לְקוֹל הַצִּפּוֹר וַיִּשְׁחוּ כָּל־בָּנוֹת הַשִּׁיר	When the doors to the street are shut, low is the voice of the mill, when one rises up at the sound of the bird, and when all the daughters of the song grow faint,
12:5	גַּם מִגְבַּה יִרְאוּ וַחֲתָחִתִּים בְּדֶרֶךְ וַיִּנְאַץ הַשֶּׁקֶד וַיִּסְתַּבֵּל הַחֲגַב וַתִּפַּר הָאֲבִיוֹנָה כִּי־הִלֵּךְ הָאָרֶם אֶל־בַּיִת עוֹלָמוֹ וּסְבָבוּ בְּשׁוֹק הַסְּפָדִים	when one is afraid of heights, when terrors are in the road, when the almond tree repulses ⁵⁰ , when the locust tree droops, and caper tree breaks, because a human being walks to his house of eternity, and the mourners return to the streets.
12:6	עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִרְתַּק חֶבֶל הַכֶּסֶף וְתִרְץ נֶלֶת הַזָּהָב וְתִשָּׁבַר כַּדְעֵל־הַמְּבוּעַ וְנִרְץ הַגִּלְגָּל אֶל־הַבּוֹר	Before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is crushed, and the jar is broken at the fountain, and the wheel is broken at the well.
12:7	וַיָּשָׁב הָעֹפָר עַל־הָאָרֶץ כַּשֶּׁהִיָּה וְהָרוּחַ תָּשׁוּב אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר נָתַןָּהּ	And the dust returns to the earth from which it came, and the breath returns to God who has given it.

The poems of Ecclesiastes 1:4–11 and 12:1–7 form a frame in which the latter reverses the direction of the former.⁵¹ If the introductory poem emphasizes the circular routine of natural processes in the world, the concluding poem focuses on the finality of human life and nature itself. There is consensus among the scholars that Qoheleth speaks about the end of life in Eccl 12:1–7 even though interpretations of

⁵⁰ I read נִנְאַץ as hiphil imperfect of נִנְאַץ “repulse”, “spurn”, which makes a purposeful word play with נִצָּץ “blossom.” See also Seow, “Qohelet’s Eschatological Poem,” 221-23; idem, *Ecclesiastes*, 361-62; Lo, “Death in Qohelet,” 97.

⁵¹ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 332.

this passage vary.⁵² Alison Lo highlights the rhetorical repetition of the עַד אֲשֶׁר “before” phrases in Eccl 12:1, 2, 6 which connect the poem to the theme of death and finality of the world.⁵³ The first time the עַד אֲשֶׁר “before” statement is used, Qoheleth admonishes his readers to “remember” their Creator before death makes it impossible (Eccl 12:1).⁵⁴ In Eccl 1:11 Qoheleth contemplates the fact that nobody is remembered by subsequent generations. In the poem of Eccl 12:1–8 Qoheleth changes the object of remembering. He commends his audience to remember God in the days of one’s youth (cf. Eccl 11:9) so that a person could learn to live out God’s imperative of enjoying life from the beginning of life. Death is a complete end of existence (cf. “the days of darkness” Eccl 11:8); therefore, only the living have the opportunity to be mindful of their God.

Qoheleth employs the phrase עַד אֲשֶׁר “before” for the second time in Eccl 12:2 as he continues his instructions on remembering the Creator. However, this time he emphasizes the urgency to do so before the world ceases to exist,⁵⁵ “before the sun is darkened, and the light, and the moon, and the stars, and the clouds return after the rain.” At first sight it seems as if Qoheleth addresses the end of human life in this verse. He has used the term “light” and “sun” in his teaching previously (e.g. Eccl 1:3; 2:13–24; 5:17 [Eng. 18]; 11:7) to define life. He has even affirmed life a few sentences earlier, in Eccl 11:7 “Life is sweet, and it is good for the eyes to see the sun.” At this juncture Qoheleth considers the end of the entire world as all of the luminaries are darkened. Seow points out that the description of the darkening of the

⁵² There are three interpretive approaches to Eccl 12:1–7—allegorical, eschatological, and literal. For a detailed discussion of the history of interpretation of Eccl 12:1–7 see Fox, “Aging and Death in Qohelet 12,” *JSOT* 42 (1988): 55-77; idem, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 281-98. The allegorical interpretation cannot be consistently applied to the entire passage. For example, the allegory works in Eccl 12:3 but breaks down in Eccl 12:5. However, there is no consensus on the meaning of the allegory. For more details on allegorical interpretations, see Gordis, *Koheleth*, 338-449 and Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 181-189. Fox, Seow, and Provan understand Eccl 12:1–7 to speak about the end of the world, rather than an individual. See Fox, “Aging and Death in Qohelet,” 64-67; Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 214; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 376; idem, “Qohelet’s Eschatological Poem,” *JBL* 118 (1999): 209-34. Scholars who take a literal approach do not agree on the meaning of the passage because of the symbolism present there. Thus, Sawyer believes Qoheleth to describe a broken house. See J. F. Sawyer, “The Ruined House in Ecclesiastes 12: A Reconstruction of the Original Parable,” *JBL* 94 (1976): 519-31. Yet, Ginsburg suggests that the poem describes a thunderstorm. See Ginsburg, *Coheleth*, 457-69.

⁵³ Lo, “Death in Qohelet,” 96.

⁵⁴ Lo, “Death in Qohelet,” 96.

⁵⁵ Provan points out that the sun, the moon, and the stars grow dark only as a sign of the end of times; e.g. Isa 13:9–10; Ezek 32:7–8; Joel 2:31; Amos 5:18; Zeph. 1:14–15. See Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 213. See also Lo, “Death in Qohelet,” 96.

heavenly luminaries and the light of the day are eschatological in nature.⁵⁶ In the introductory poem the sun keeps going on its course even though “there is nothing new under the sun” (cf. Eccl 1:5). In the concluding poem the sun is darkened (Eccl 12:2). The absence of light makes it impossible for people to see the good in life or life itself. Thus, Qoheleth calls his audience to remember the Creator who has reversed the order of creation.⁵⁷

Qoheleth continues to describe the advance of death which, in turn, intensifies the need to remember the Creator in Eccl 12:3–7. The phrase **בַּיּוֹם שֶׁ** “in the day when” (Eccl 12:3) connects Qoheleth’s words to the **עַד אֲשֶׁר** phrases and furthers the theme of remembrance before the coming of death.⁵⁸ The metaphorical darkness mentioned in Eccl 12:2 ruptures the circular nature of things (cf. Eccl 1:4–8) and brings about reactions of fear and trepidation from different people. Those who stay inside their houses tremble and stoop; they have to stop their daily work because their number has diminished (Eccl 12:3). The daily rhythm is broken further when the doors to the street are closed (Eccl 12:4), “leading to the cessation of economic and social activities. The desperate situation is reinforced by the silencing of the mill—the cessation of the domestic activities (baking daily bread). The sound of the mill is the sound of human life.”⁵⁹ In addition, singing can no longer be heard (Eccl 12:4), which points to the interruption of the established continuous routines.

As Qoheleth moves along the description of the end times, he makes it clear that terrors will abound on the road in the days of darkness (Eccl 12:5a). Moreover, nature itself will experience death, as the three dying trees indicate (Eccl 12:5b). The almond tree (**הַשִּׁקְדָּה**) repulses those who look at it because of a possible disease and rot of the tree. Seow suggests that an unpleasantly looking almond tree, which is a beautiful sight even without blossoms, is “evidence of a cosmic catastrophe.”⁶⁰ The locust tree (**הַחֲגֹב**) droops under the weight of its heavy pods. And the caper tree (**הַסַּבְבִּיב**) breaks unable to arouse desire for food or sex.⁶¹ In depicting these trees which are very common in Israel, Qoheleth speaks of a foreboding disaster that has

⁵⁶ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 353, 376. Cf. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 322.

⁵⁷ Seow, “Qoheleth’s Eschatological Poem,” 214.

⁵⁸ Lo, “Death in Qoheleth,” 97; Seow, “Qoheleth’s Eschatological Poem,” 214.

⁵⁹ Lo, “Death in Qoheleth,” 97.

⁶⁰ Seow, “Qoheleth’s Eschatological Poem,” 223. See also Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 216-17.

⁶¹ Seow, “Qoheleth’s Eschatological Poem,” 222-23; Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 217.

already started to affect the entire land.⁶² Death will not only claim the life of every individual, but of the nature as well.

Qoheleth brings this portrayal of gloom to its climax when he provides the reason for this fright—“because a human being walks to his house of eternity” (Eccl 12:5c). In the introductory poem Qoheleth speaks of endless generations walking (הולך) the same road while the earth remains לעולם “forever” (Eccl 1:4).⁶³ The transient nature of human life has no affect on the unchanging nature of the world.⁶⁴ In the concluding poem a human being הולך “goes” to בית עולם “his house of eternity” (Eccl 12:5)⁶⁵ The phrase בית עולם “his house of eternity” designates for Qoheleth a person’s grave, one’s final destination.⁶⁶ In the introductory poem Qoheleth emphasizes the idea of the restlessness of the wind that is turning (סבב) and returning (סבב) to its original place only to start blowing again (Eccl 1:6). Now, Qoheleth shows that it is the mourners who סבב “return” to go around the town in the final bereavement ritual (Eccl 12:5c).

Qoheleth uses the phrase ער אֲשֶׁר “before” for the third time in Eccl 12:6 to remind his readers about the need to remember their Creator before the ultimate moment of death.⁶⁷ In order to paint a very vivid picture of humanity’s demise, Qoheleth employs the images, which in other biblical passages represent life—the lampstand (cf. 2 Sam 21:17; 1 Kgs 11:36; 2 Kgs 8:19; Ps 119:105; Prov 6:23; 13:9), as well as the fountain and well (Numb 21:16; Ps 36:9; Prov 5:15; 10:11; 14:27; Jer 2:13). Here, however, the silver cord is snapped and the golden bowl is crushed (Eccl

⁶² Similar images of dying nature are used in other books of the Bible to portray the disaster and destruction that God’s enemies will experience at his coming (e.g. Isa 34:4; Amos 1:2; Joel 2:12; Hab 3:17; Nah 1:4).

⁶³ H. D. Preuss, “עולם,” *TDOT* 10:535. Preuss states that the presence of the lexeme דור “generation” intensifies the meaning of עולם to indicate a time stretching very far into the future. See also Tomasino, “עולם,” *NIDOTTE* 3:347-48. Tomasino states that עולם together with the preposition ל means “forever” which is longer than the length of one’s life. Cf. Gen 3:22; 6:3; Ps 9:6; 72:17; 78:69; 79:13; 100:5; 148:6; Isa 34:10; 40:8; 60:21; Jer 3:5; 17:25; Lam 5:19; Micah 4:2, 5. So also, Seow, “Qoheleth’s Eschatological Poem,” 209-34; idem, *Ecclesiastes*, 381; Lo, “Death in Qoheleth,” 97.

⁶⁴ M. V. Fox, “Qoheleth 1:4,” *JSOT* 40 (1988): 109; idem, *A Time to Tear Down*, 166.

⁶⁵ H. D. Preuss, “עולם,” *TDOT* 10:530-45 (542); Anthony Tomasino, “עולם,” *NIDOTTE* 3:345-51.

⁶⁶ Preuss argues that Eccl 12:5 is the only time in the Old Testament that עולם means “grave.” See Preuss, “עולם,” *TDOT* 10:542. However, it is the combination of the words בית “house” and עולם “eternity” that together denotes a “grave.” Cf. Job speaks of one’s grave as a “house of Sheol” (Job 17:13) or a “house of meeting of all the living” (Job 30:23).

⁶⁷ Lo, “Death in Qoheleth,” 98.

12:6a). The jar to bring the water up from the fountain is smashed and the wheel of the well is broken (Eccl 12:6b). The broken pieces that used to represent life portray the irrevocability of death.⁶⁸

Qoheleth completes the reversal of the original creation in Eccl 12:7: “And the dust returns to the earth from which it came, and the breath returns to God who has given it.” In the concluding poem Qoheleth does not mention the possibility of a new birth; rather הַרְרוּחַ “the wind” that always returns (בָּשׁוּב) to blow again (Eccl 1:6) is now הַרְרוּחַ “the breath” that returns (בָּשׁוּב) to God to stay (Eccl 12:7).⁶⁹ There is no more activity anticipated after that. The return of the spirit to the Lord and the dust to the ground from which it came signify the final and ultimate death. In this respect Qoheleth is mindful of God’s words to Adam in Gen 3:19, “you are dust and to dust you shall return”. Without God-given breath or spirit the human body is only dust.

Qoheleth introduces the theme of death in the opening poem (Eccl 1:4–11) and brings it full circle in the concluding poem (Eccl 12:1–7). If in the readers’ mind there was any doubt about the certainty of death, the long description of human demise makes a clear point—human life will come to end. Qoheleth also makes it clear to his readers that not only their lives will come to an end, but eventually the world will be overcome by death. Qoheleth believes that death should be accepted as a natural ending to life “that was never conceived of as other than limited from the start.”⁷⁰ After the analysis of the frame (Eccl 1:4–11 and 12:1–7) there comes an overview of the theme of death within the frame (Eccl 2–11).

The theme of death permeates the teaching of Qoheleth. In contemplating his life achievements and his great wisdom in his autobiography (Eccl 1:12–2:26), Qoheleth realizes that these are incapable of changing the natural order of things—he will die just as any other human being (Eccl 2:15). Death will obliterate the memory of him among those who will come after him (Eccl 12:16), and he will join the ranks of all those generations who have gone before (cf. Eccl 1:11). Qoheleth understands that he is expected to leave his possessions to his successor (Eccl 2:18), because he will not be able to take pleasure in them indefinitely. And while Qoheleth

⁶⁸ See also Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 120; Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 217-18.

⁶⁹ So also Seow, “Qoheleth’s Eschatological Poem,” 233; idem, *Ecclesiastes*, 382; Lo, “Death in Qoheleth,” 98.

⁷⁰ Dermot Cox, “‘As Water Spilt on the Ground’: Death in the Old Testament,” *SM* 31 (1982): 1-17.

acknowledges death as the ultimate limitation to life, he also recognizes it as a definitive and natural end of his life (Eccl 12:15).

In Ecclesiastes 3:18–20 Qoheleth likens humanity to animals for in death they both lose their breath given by God and turn to dust. Their very constitution speaks of death. Qoheleth alludes to the Creation story and recognizes that what makes the animals and humans alike is their common destiny that begins at creation: both are made of dust and both are fragile and mortal (cf. Gen 2:7; 2:19).⁷¹ It is not necessary to see Qoheleth's comparison of humanity and animals as reflective of his pessimism or scepticism⁷² or as "a hideous caricature" of the idea of God testing his people.⁷³ Rather, Qoheleth bases his discussion on the foundation of a theology of creation. He underscores the physical origin of human beings that stresses their frailty and vulnerability.⁷⁴ At the same time, he says that the quality of life makes humanity and animals different: humanity is endowed with the gift of enjoying life and having a relationship with God, which they can benefit from only during their lifetime (Eccl 3:22).

Qoheleth further develops the theme of death in Eccl 4:1–4 as he discusses the situations of oppression and injustice. He praises the dead because they have already found rest and comfort from tyranny and unfairness, while the living still look for a comforter in this life (Eccl 4:1–2). Yet, Qoheleth finds the circumstances of the unborn child, who is not able to experience life at all, preferable to the circumstances of the dead, because it will never experience oppression or injustice (Eccl 4:4). Qoheleth suggests that jealousy causes people to mistreat each other (Eccl 4:4). Moreover, there are people who will strive after wealth and accomplishments to the

⁷¹ David M. Clemens, "The Law of Sin and Death: Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1–3," *Themelios* 19 (1994): 5-8. See also William H. U. Anderson, "The Curse of Work in Qoheleth: An Exposé of Genesis 3:17–19 in Ecclesiastes," *EvQ* 70 (1998): 99-113. Shields suggests that Qoheleth shows no knowledge of the Genesis material (*The End of Wisdom*, 147). See also Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 129-30.

⁷² Gordis, *Koheleth*, 235, 349; Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 34; Crenshaw, "The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth," 581.

⁷³ Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 202 n. 10. Von Rad argues that Qoheleth twists the idea of being tested by God to demonstrate that any trial or test only proves that everything in life is futile.

⁷⁴ See also Lawson G. Stone, "The Soul: Possession, Part, or Person? The Genesis of Human Nature in Genesis 2:7," in *What About the Soul? Neuroscience and Christian Anthropology* (ed. Joel B. Green; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 47-61; Robert K. Johnston, "'Confessions of a Workaholic': A Reappraisal of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 38 (1976): 14-28; Vittoria D'Alario, "Liberté de Dieu or Destin? Un Autre Dilemme dans L'interprétation du Qohélet," in *Qoheleth in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors; Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 457-63; Walther Zimmerli, "The Place and Limit of the Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology," *SJT* 17 (1964): 146-58.

point of hurting themselves and turning their life and the lives of those around them into a living death (Eccl 5:12–16 [Eng. 13–17]).⁷⁵

Qoheleth admonishes his readers that there is no need to worry about death while they are alive; they should treasure the gifts of their present life: wealth, long life, and numerous heirs (Eccl 6:3). However, Qoheleth believes that life is a time to learn about death. He encourages attending funerals rather than feasts because funerals are symbolic of the natural end of life (Eccl 7:1–4). Delitzsch observes an attitude of sobriety and reflection in Qoheleth's words: "Sorrow penetrates the heart, draws the thoughts upwards, purifies, transforms."⁷⁶ Qoheleth is confident that Sheol is a place of non-existence (cf. Eccl 9:5–6, 10b). His advice to attend funerals and contemplate death is based on the great value of life and the desire to live here and now (Eccl 7:1–2).

For Qoheleth, the moment of death offers opportunities to gain wisdom (Eccl 7:4). It is also a time to see the real value and worth of a person and to recognize what he has left behind. Qoheleth encourages people to attend funerals to understand better the power of death, its inevitability and its grip on humanity (Eccl 7:1–2). He also wants them to value their own life even more after attending a funeral. Qoheleth desires his audience to realize that life is a gift and death should compel people to see life as extremely precious and dear (cf. Eccl 3:12–13; 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20]; 8:15; 9:7–10).⁷⁷ Further, Qoheleth states that "the living have hope...the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing" (Eccl 9:4–5). The hope then is to align one's life with what is important, with what God wants his people to experience in life—a contented life filled with peace and joy of every moment.

At this point it is necessary to consider what other Old Testament writers say about death as a natural end of life in order to situate Qoheleth's view of death within the broader Old Testament understanding of death as an expected ending to human existence.

3.2 Death as a Natural End of Life in the Old Testament

The Old Testament views death as a normal end of life which should be expected and

⁷⁵ See Chapter 5.2.3 Life in Darkness (Eccl 5:12–16 [Eng. 13–17] and 6:3–6) for a detailed discussion of Eccl 5:12–16 [Eng. 13–17].

⁷⁶ Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Songs of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 315.

⁷⁷ Ogden, "'Vanity' It Certainly is Not," 306.

fully accepted.⁷⁸ God predicts the natural end of all humanity in his conversation with Adam, “For you are dust, and to dust you will return” (Gen 3:19). When the spirit of God (רוח) departs from the body, the dust which the person is made of returns to its origin, and the person ceases to be alive as can be seen in Ps 146:4, “When their breath (רוח) departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish” and in Ps 90:3, “You turn us back to dust.” Job 7:21 suggests that death is a complete end of existence, “For now I shall lie in the earth; you will seek me, but I shall not be.” The same idea is present in Ps 39:13, “Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again, before I depart and am no more.”

Death and Sheol are ordinary part of everyday’s life just as birth and familial relationships. Joseph is very realistic about his death when he tells his brothers: “I am about to die” (Gen 50:23). Joshua knows that he will “go the way of all the earth” (Josh 23:14). David’s words to his son Solomon are very simple when he talks about dying: “I am about to go the way of all the earth” (1 Kgs 2:2). In conversation with King David the wise woman of Tekoa compares human life to “water spilled on the ground which cannot be gathered up” (2 Sam 14:14). Job understands that God will bring him to death, “to the house appointed for all the living” (Job 30:23). Even the prophets looking far ahead into the future and envisioning new world of peace and unity still talk about the old age and death. In describing the “new heavens and the new earth” Isaiah proclaims a long and fulfilled life for everybody that still ends one day, “for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth...” (Isa 65:20). This idea is also expressed in the book of *Sirach* which counsels his readers,

Fear not death, it is your destiny. Remember that the former and the latter share it with you. This is the portion of all flesh from God, and how can you withstand the decree of the Most High! Be it for a thousand years, for a hundred, or for ten that you live, in Sheol there are no reproaches concerning life. (*Sirach* 41:3–4)⁷⁹

For a person to live a long life and to die being mature in years and surrounded by family was a natural flow of existence.⁸⁰ God promises Abraham that he will go to his ancestors in peace and will be buried in a good old age (Gen 15:15). Thus,

⁷⁸ Theodore J. Lewis, “Death, Old Testament,” *NIBD* 2:68. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2:214.

⁷⁹ Cf. *Sirach* 17:22–23; *Tobit* 3:10; 13:2.

⁸⁰ Paolo Xella, “Death and the Afterlife in Canaanite and Hebrew Thought,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* (ed. Jack M. Sasson; vols. 3 & 4; Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 2059-70. See also John Goldingay, *Israel’s Faith* (vol. 2 of *Old Testament Theology*, Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 633-34.

Abraham is viewed to die a “good” death for, “he died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people” (Gen 25:8). Jacob is ready to die when he has found his long-lost son Joseph and his family is taken care of in Egypt; he is willing to leave the world of the living for he has fulfilled his responsibilities to his family (Gen 46:30). Gideon also is said to die “at a good old age” (Judg 8:32). The fact that death is a natural end of life is also seen in the description of old age as a stage of weakening and fading away. King David grows frail and feeble in his old age (1 Kgs 1:1–4) and Eli’s eyesight diminishes as he becomes very old (1 Sam 3:2).

Death becomes a problem when it comes prematurely and drives people to question God’s design for the world and human life. In such situations death is a hostile and unwelcome reality.⁸¹ In the encounter with Elijah the widow whose son dies believes that God punishes her sin by taking away her son (1 Kgs 17:18). Premature death, not mortality, is seen as a punishment from God both for the whole people of Israel and for individuals.⁸² Those involved in Korah’s rebellion were punished by death (Num 16:29–30); David wanted Joab killed for a natural death would not constitute a retribution for his violence (1 Kgs 2:6).⁸³ Hezekiah petitions God to deliver him from the untimely death and grounds his plea of escaping death in the fact that he has led a righteous life before his Creator (2 Kgs 20:3). “In all these cases it is the immediacy of death rather than the fact of death which is the punishment. It is the specific sin of specific individuals or groups which leads to their death, not the sin of humanity as a whole.”⁸⁴ Psalm 90 closely associates human sin and human death as a consequence of rebellion.

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that the Israelites view death as an expected end of life. Premature and violent death is seen as a punishment from God for disobedience. Death brings uncleanness because it causes separation from God, who is the God of life. At times the Old Testament writers find themselves in death-like circumstances. In such situations, distress or a grave illness are in sight, not the event of the death itself, for the writers are able to testify about having escaped it.

⁸¹ Routledge, “Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament,” 22.

⁸² Moses’ pronouncement of the curses in his address to Israel includes famine, drought, different illnesses and defeat by enemies as examples of premature death of a nation (Lev 26: 14–39; Deut. 28:20–26). The historical and prophetic books offer numerous examples of untimely death being a punishment for personal disobedience (1 Kgs 21:20–24; 2 Kgs 9:8; Jer 28:16; Ezek 28:12–19; Amos 7:11).

⁸³ Routledge, “Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament,” 22.

⁸⁴ Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 43.

Death and Sheol cannot be avoided.⁸⁵ The Old Testament presents death a natural end of life which is common to all humanity. It cannot be avoided or escaped, but a life of obedience to God preserves a person from a bad and premature death. The Old Testament does not discuss death in its own right. Rather, death is connected to the issues of righteous living, finding God's help in difficult circumstances, and aligning one's life with God's degrees in order to die a good death at the old age.⁸⁶

Having established that the Old Testament writers perceive death as a natural end of life, it is necessary to consider that the ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature presents death as an expected ending of life in order to gain a fuller picture of Qoheleth's view of death as a natural end of human life.

3.3 Death as a Natural End of Life in the Ancient Near Eastern Literature

A view of death as a natural end of human life is also present in the wider context of the ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature. Due to the time and space, I will pick out only the most prominent texts. As the ambitious hero of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* searches all over the earth for the cure of human mortality after witnessing the death of his best friend, Gilgamesh realizes that his friend Enkidu "has now gone to the fate of mankind!"⁸⁷ He is also reminded that, "When the gods created mankind, death for mankind they set aside, life in their own hand retaining."⁸⁸ The issue of human transience is important to the Babylonian hero, who in the end has to accept his own mortality.⁸⁹ Gilgamesh's realization that human days are numbered and only the gods with the sun live forever reflects his understanding of death as the expected end of human existence.

A similar notion of death is found in the Ugaritic myth of Aqhat. In response to the offer of eternal life from the goddess Anat, Aqhat declares that death is a common destiny of all humans. He will die as everybody else because only gods do not have to face death,

"In the end a man gets what? A man gets what as his fate?..
The death of all I shall die. I too shall die and be dead."⁹⁰

⁸⁵ See also Longenecker, *Life in the Face of Death*, 9.

⁸⁶ See also Burke, *Death in Qoheleth*, 17.

⁸⁷ "The Epic of Gilgamesh," translated by E.A. Speiser (*ANE*, 61).

⁸⁸ "The Epic of Gilgamesh," (*ANE*, 62).

⁸⁹ "The Epic of Gilgamesh," (*ANE*, 62).

⁹⁰ "Aqhat," (Simon B. Parker, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, [ed. Simon B. Parker; SBLWAW 9; Atlanta: SBL, 1997], 6:25-38 [35-36, 38]).

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Later in the myth the poet described the hero's death by using the poetic image of life-breath departing his body,

[His] life went off like a breath,
His soul [like a sneeze](?),
From [his nose] like smoke.⁹¹

In the Ugaritic story of Kirta,⁹² the issue of death is addressed in relation to a king, a recipient of divine blessing and favour. Kirta's children bemoan his fatal illness while struggling with a question of how a king, who should possess immortality as the divinely appointed mediator between the gods and his subjects, can be so vulnerable and mortal,⁹³

How can you, father, die like a mortal?
Or your grave—will it pass into dirges—
To a woman's song, Father of Heights?
Gods, after all—do they die? The Gentle One's Son—won't he live?

Ancient Near Eastern texts also contain different geriatric complaints, because their authors are fully aware of their old age being a sure sign of coming death. In the autobiographical story of the Egyptian official Si-nuhe, Si-nuhe speaks of his aging as a precursor of his demise,⁹⁴

For old age has come; feebleness has overtaken me.
My eyes are heavy, my arms weak; my legs fail to follow.
The heart is weary; death is near.

In *The Instruction of Ptah-hotep*, the visier describes his failing health as a natural step toward death which is now even closer than ever,⁹⁵

Old age has struck, age has descended,
Feebleness has arrived, weakness is here again.
Sleep is upon him in discomfort all day.
Eyes are grown small, ears deaf, mouth silent, unable to speak,
Heart emptied, unable to recall yesterday.
Bones ache his whole length.
Goodness has turned to evil, All taste is gone.
What old age does to people is evil in every way.

⁹¹ "Aqhat," (CAT 1.18 IV: 36-37; Simon B. Parker, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, [ed. Simon B. Parker; SBLWAW 9; Atlanta: SBL, 1997]).

⁹² "Kirta," (*Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 9-48). This Ugaritic name can also be spelled Keret. See Matthews and Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*, 76-81. See also Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends*, 19-23.

⁹³ "Kirta," (*Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 3:1.17-19, 22-23).

⁹⁴ "The Story of Si-nuhe," (transl. by John A. Wilson; *ANET* 21).

⁹⁵ "Teaching of Ptah-hotep," ("Digital Egypt for Universities"; n.p. [cited: April 25, 2011; Online: <http://www.digitalegypt.ucl.ac.uk/literature/ptahhotep.html>],

In the *Instruction of Papyrus Insigner* the readers are warned about the old age as a time of unpleasant days and diminished activities as the human body is slowing down in expectation of its natural end, “He who has passed sixty years, everything has passed for him.”⁹⁶

These examples from the ancient Near Eastern literature demonstrate that old age and death are unavoidable facts of nature. Ancient writers teach their readers that death is “to be accepted by men with as good a grace as they could muster.”⁹⁷ However, there exist texts that question the accepted notion of death and encourage suicide in order to bring to a close this worldly existence. In the *Dialogue of Pessimism* the master considers suicide as the end to his meaningless life only to find full support from his servant.⁹⁸ In the *Dispute between a Man and his Ba*, the sufferer entreats his soul (*ba*) to join him in his search for death, for life is so transitory and full of misery, “Do not withhold the mercy of dying from me. Open the door of death for me.”⁹⁹ And yet, human beings have no alternative to death, even if it is brought about by suicide, and, as the story of Kirta reveals, even kings are expected to die just like commoners. The universally held notion about the destiny of all humanity is the certainty of dying as the final act that brings to a close one’s existence on this earth.¹⁰⁰

Qoheleth’s understanding of death as an expected end of human existence fits well within the context of the Old Testament and the larger context of the ancient Near Eastern literature. Qoheleth views death as a conclusion of life that should be embraced with sobriety and respect. However, he does not succumb to despair or reject all meaning and purpose of human existence. Qoheleth embraces death as a natural and unavoidable part of life and encourages his audience to develop the same attitude toward the reality of death. He speaks of death often not because he is a melancholic who is completely dissatisfied with life or because the problem of mortality has become larger than life.¹⁰¹ Rather, he keeps the thought of death in the background of his discourse to help his audience remember that “the days of darkness will be many” (Eccl 11:8). When they die their love, hate and envy will perish; “never

⁹⁶ “Instruction of Papyrus Insigner,” (AEL 3:199).

⁹⁷ J. C. L. Gibson, “The Last Enemy,” *SJT* 32 (1979): 151-169.

⁹⁸ Speiser, “The Case of the Obliging Servant,” 100. See also Edward L. Greenstein, “Sages with a Sense of Humor: The Babylonian Dialogue between a Master and His Servant and the Book of Qoheleth,” in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel* (SBLSymS 36; ed. Richard j. Clifford; Atlanta: SBL, 2007), 55-65.

⁹⁹ Matthews and Benjamin, “The Sufferer and the Soul in Egypt,” 209.

¹⁰⁰ Xella, “Death and the Afterlife in Canaanite and Hebrew Thought,” 2059-70.

¹⁰¹ Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period*, 1-5, 35.

again will they have any share in all that happens under the sun” (Eccl 9:6). Only in this life do they have a chance to embrace life and live it to the fullest. Only while they are alive, they are able to find joy and contentment in every moment God has granted them: “for whoever is joined with the living has hope” (Eccl 9:4).

The analysis of Qoheleth’s view of death and its influence on human life will not be complete without discussing his understanding of the relationship between suffering and death, and his thoughts on the afterlife, which will be addressed in the following sections.

4. Death and Suffering

Qoheleth stays true to the Old Testament concept of death throughout his speech except for his treatment of oppression and suffering in this life. He parts ways with the tradition of supplication and prayer addressed heavenward for deliverance and restoration. In the Old Testament distress or sickness are recognized often as death.¹⁰² This poetic image is used to portray an individual’s lament for having lost a connection with God; otherwise, this unwanted circumstance should not have happened. When Hezekiah becomes sick, he is seen to be almost dead (2 Kgs 20:1). The psalmist compares himself to “those who go down to the Pit” when he is unable to communicate with the Lord (Ps 28:1).

While individuals in distress do not see themselves as dead, at times they do perceive themselves to be in the realm of death while in difficult circumstances. For example, the psalmist praises the Lord for having rescued him from his enemies and healing him, which in the psalmist’s mind is similar to being rescued from the very grips of death, when he states,¹⁰³

I will exalt you, O Lord for you have drawn me up
And has not allowed my enemies to rejoice over me.
O Lord, my God, I cried to you for help and you healed me.
O Lord, you brought my soul up from Sheol and revived me... (Ps 30:1b–3a)

Whereas the psalmist seems to have faced death directly, he is confident that God has allowed him to enjoy further life on earth.¹⁰⁴ Such attitude of confidence in God to

¹⁰² H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 111.

¹⁰³ Knibb, “Life and Death in the Old Testament,” 406-407. See also Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 86-97; Godlingay, *Israel’s Faith*, 628-29.

¹⁰⁴ Philip S. Johnston, “‘Left in Hell’? Psalm 16, Sheol and the Holy One,” in *The Lord’s Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts* (ed. Philip E. Satterthwaite et al.; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995), 215.

spare a righteous one from death comes from the Old Testament belief in God's power over death. The psalmist expresses it best when he says, "Though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me" (Ps 23:4).¹⁰⁵

The ideal life is free of oppression and injustice, so Qoheleth urges his readers to strive to live in such a way as to make the world a better place. However, he observes that the oppressive and unjust circumstances rob people of the ideal life (Eccl 3:16; 4:1; 8:10–14). Therefore, Qoheleth offers a different solution to the problem of distress and oppression—death. He has observed that oppression exists in the world, but what seems the most grievous to him is that neither the oppressed nor their oppressors have a comforter who can help them rectify the situation (Eccl 4:1–3). Qoheleth believes that the life of the oppressors is as troublesome and miserable as is the life of those they lord over. It is an "indictment of the community at large ... a confession of powerlessness in the face of the reality of the human situation."¹⁰⁶ Such existence is so wretched that Qoheleth sees the dead as "fortunate" (Eccl 4:2). For Qoheleth, the deceased have already found rest and comfort from the oppression and injustice. They are free from pain and suffering. Yet the unborn child is in the most fortunate position, because it never gets to experience the pain of tyranny. Qoheleth suggests that it is better not to live at all than to live in suffering. (Eccl 4:3). His words resonate with Job's wish to undo the day of his birth to experience the fate of the stillborn or unborn child, who never gets to experience pain in this life (Job 3:3–16). Death framed with rest, peace and absence of any kind of strife is much more preferable than a life filled with jealousy and envy of another human being (Eccl 4:4).

Remarkably, Qoheleth never encourages the shortening of life intentionally or unintentionally in spite of the seeming allure of death. In this regard the book of Ecclesiastes differs from other ancient Near Eastern wisdom texts like the *Dialogue of Pessimism* or the *Dispute between a Man and his Ba*, which consider suicide as a welcoming end of the miserable and fleeting life.¹⁰⁷ Qoheleth finds life worth living for "a living dog is better than a dead lion" (Eccl 9:4). Furthermore, Qoheleth shuns away from suggesting taking human life or causing premature death. He urges his

¹⁰⁵ Lewis, "Death, Old Testament," *NIDB* 2: 68.

¹⁰⁶ Graham S. Ogden, "The 'Better'-Proverb (Tov-Spruch), Rhetorical Criticism, and Qoheleth," *JBL* 96 (1977): 489-505. See also Crenshaw, "The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth," 577-78.

¹⁰⁷ Speiser, "The Case of the Obliging Servant," 100. See also Edward L. Greenstein, "Sages with a Sense of Humor: The Babylonian Dialogue between a Master and His Servant and the Book of Qoheleth," in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel* (SBLSymS 36; ed. Richard J. Clifford; Atlanta: SBL, 2007), 55-65; Matthews and Benjamin, "The Sufferer and the Soul in Egypt," 209.

audience to stay away from wickedness and foolishness which can hasten death:

“Why should you destroy yourself? Why should you die prematurely?” (Eccl 7:16–17)¹⁰⁸ He also encourages them to refrain from foolish behaviour in the house of the

Lord for God may bring an abrupt end to a fool’s life (Eccl 5:6). Qoheleth

understands that death might look preferable to life only in limited circumstances.

Yet, he definitely prefers life to death or nonexistence. In the powerful message of the

final poem in Eccl 12:1–7 Qoheleth hardly advocates the day of darkness to

anyone.¹⁰⁹ D’Alario helpfully observes that for Qoheleth a person’s role in life has to

do with what happens in the now. The present is the only reality that justifies

existence.¹¹⁰

Qoheleth coaches his audience to follow the way of wisdom and accept every

day as a gift from God that should be lived to the fullest. He comforts them in their sufferings by pointing out the transient nature of injustice and oppression (Eccl 4:4).

Acknowledging the gravity of tyranny and unfairness (Eccl 4:1–3), Qoheleth shows

his readers that poverty with wisdom is better than riches with folly. It is better to

have a handful with tranquillity than two handfuls with oppressive labour (Eccl 4:6).

It is better to live in community and cherish relationships (Eccl 4:9). Striving after

gain and advancement, envy and jealousy of another person bring about oppression and injustice (Eccl 4:4). Such behaviour results in the loss of one’s identity as the

person forgets where he has come from (Eccl 4:13–14). Qoheleth demonstrates to his

readers that even kingship is a lonely and thankless task that brings great labour no lasting reward (Eccl 2:20–23; 4:15–16; 8:9).¹¹¹

In the world where there is injustice and the wicked are honoured over the righteous (Eccl 7:17; 8:10), Qoheleth still advocates wisdom and righteous living

(Eccl 7:19). Wisdom will always remind the person that God has created this world,

even when being wise fails to change the person’s circumstances (Eccl 7:13). Thus,

Qoheleth admonishes his readers to accept both the good and the bad that comes from

God, knowing that either can be encountered in the future, “When times are good, be

well, but when the times are evil, consider: God has made the one as well as the other.

Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future” (Eccl 7:14). He implores

¹⁰⁸ Barry C. Davis, “Ecclesiastes 12:1–8—Death, an Impetus for Life,” *BSac* 148 (1991): 298–318.

¹⁰⁹ Crenshaw, “The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth,” 579.

¹¹⁰ D’Alario, “Liberté de Dieu ou Destin?” 458.

¹¹¹ Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 102–108.

them to remember that God will one day offer justice to the world, because God is in control of time (Eccl 3:17). While people are awaiting the time of judgment, they should learn to accept the limitations that God has placed on their lives (Eccl 7:16–17). Qoheleth's thoughts on the timing of the divine judgment will be examined next.

5. The Concept of the Afterlife

If there is any doubt that Qoheleth accepts the reality and the power of death in a human life, it is quite hard to determine his outlook on the possibility of the afterlife. Several times Qoheleth mentions what awaits a person after this brief life without suggesting or negating a possibility of the afterlife (Eccl 2:12, 18; 3:22; 6:12; 7:14; 10:14).¹¹² Early on in his speech he poses the question about the final destiny of human and animal spirit without providing any answer (Eccl 3:21). Gordis suggests that Qoheleth is aware of a theory of immortality but sceptically rejects it.¹¹³ Sanders believes that Qoheleth simply cannot accept a possibility of immortality¹¹⁴ and Crenshaw points out that Qoheleth “denies any pertinence” to the existence after death.¹¹⁵ Longman goes even further and avers that “Qoheleth did not have a conception of the afterlife.”¹¹⁶ These scholars are correct in stating that Qoheleth does not accept the idea of immortality, if immortality is understood as living forever.¹¹⁷

Qoheleth stays true to the Old Testament's stance on the matter of immortality. In Genesis 2:17 God sets a choice before Adam according to which defiance of God's words leads to death, and then in Gen 3:19 death seems to come into the world as a punishment of God for human disobedience.¹¹⁸ However, there is no indication in the creation narrative, the narrative of the fall or in the rest of the Old Testament that God's design was ever for humanity to live eternally.¹¹⁹ Death mentioned in Gen 3:19 marks the end of a person's hard labour in this world. The Old

¹¹² Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*, 30.

¹¹³ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 235. See also Fischer, “Kohelet und die Frühe Apokalypitik,” 356.

¹¹⁴ Sanders, “The Evolution of Intellectual Tradition,” 270.

¹¹⁵ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 105. See also Frank Crusemann, “The Unchangeable World: The ‘Crisis of Wisdom’ in Koheleth,” in *God of the Lowly: Socio-Historical Interpretations of the Bible* (eds. Willy Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann; trans. Matthew J. O’Connell; New York: Maryknoll, 1984), 57-77.

¹¹⁶ Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 128.

¹¹⁷ Alan F. Segal, “Immortality,” *NIBD* 3:25-28.

¹¹⁸ Silke, “The Afterlife: A Historical Enquiry,” 99-114. See also Routledge, *Old Testament Theology*, 302.

¹¹⁹ Richards, *ABD* 2: 108-110.

Testament is consistent in presenting death as an inevitable destiny of all people.¹²⁰ Thus, Qoheleth only follows this teaching without an added despair or frustration about such situation.

However, Qoheleth leaves open a possibility of the afterlife, which entails being bodily present at the divine judgment a certain time in the distant future, beyond death (cf. Eccl 3:17; 8:13; 11:9; 12:14).¹²¹ Qoheleth offers no information on whether he envisions this event happening in terms of individual resurrection similar to what one reads in Daniel 12, or whether he refers to a picture of a new and restored society analogous to the prophetic visions of “new heavens and new earth” (cf. Isa 65:20; Zech 8:4; Hos 6:1–2).¹²² The notion of the bodily resurrection is marginal in the Old Testament and appears at the end of the Old Testament period to produce any significant impact on other writers.¹²³ Historically the notion of the individual resurrection of the righteous as well as the wicked found in the book of Daniel is seen as a theological response to the outrageous persecution and martyrdom of faithful Jewish believers at the hands of the Antiochen regime in the second century B.C.E., which comes after the book of Ecclesiastes was written.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Knibb, “Life and Death in the Old Testament,” 402-403. For more examples see 1Kgs 2:2; 2 Sam 14:14; Job 14:1–2. See also Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 40; Goldingay, *Israel's Faith*, 633-34.

¹²¹ See also Jaime Clark-Soles, “Backgrounds” in *Death and the Afterlife in the New Testament* (New York: T & T Clark), 9-59, especially 9-35, where she discusses the issue of the afterlife in Ancient Judaism.

¹²² Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 45, 221-22, 224-27.

¹²³ Besides Daniel 12:12, Isa 26:19 and Ezek 37:1–14 are the other two main passages which speak of individual resurrection. There is no scholarly consensus on the date of composition of these passages as well as the nature of the resurrection they refer to, be it physical or metaphorical. For more detailed information on these texts See Segal, “Immortality in Early Judaism,” *NIBD* 3:28-29; Gerhard F. Hasel, “Resurrection in the Theology of the Old Testament Apocalyptic,” *ZAW* 92.2 (1980): 267-84; J. N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah 1–39*, (NICOT; ed. R. K. Harrison; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 289-302; idem, “Recent Studies in Old Testament Eschatology and Apocalyptic,” *JETS* 24 (1981): 289-301; R. J. Coggins, “The Problem of Isa 24–27,” *ExpTim* 90 (1978-79): 329-33; J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah*, (TOTC 20; ed. Donald J. Wiseman; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009); 182-205; John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, (WBC 24; rev. ed.; eds. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker; Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2005), 395-404; M. V. Fox, “The Rhetoric of Ezekiel’s Vision of the Valley of the Bones,” *HUCA* 51 (1980): 1-15 (5); Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25–48*, (NICOT; eds. R. K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 383-92; idem, “Beyond the Grave: Ezekiel’s Vision of Death and Afterlife,” *BBR* 2 (1992): 113-41; Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 20–48*, (WBC 29; eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker; Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 181-88; Walter Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel Chapters 25–48*, (Hermeneia; eds. Paul D. Hanson and Leonard Jay Greenspoon; trans. James D. Martin; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 253-66.

¹²⁴ Segal, “Immortality in Early Judaism,” *NIBD* 3:28-29; John J. Collins, “Daniel, Book of,” *ABD* 2: 29-36 (31); John E. Goldingay, *Daniel*, (WBC 30; eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker; Dallas: Word Books, 1989), xxv-xi, 310-19; John J. Collins, *Daniel*, (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 25-38; James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, (ICC; eds. S. R. Driver, A. Plummer, and A. A. Briggs; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), 96-109; George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in*

Qoheleth makes it very clear that death is the ultimate end of life and that everybody goes to Sheol. What is not clear from his speech is whether he believes in the possibility of the afterlife or not. He poses questions about such likelihood in Eccl 3:19–21 and 9:2–6, suggesting that this issue is of some importance to his audience but provides no definite answer.¹²⁵ Perdue believes that Qoheleth’s speech exhibits no evidence of a judgment in the end of time or a life after death.¹²⁶ He assigns the verses that speak of judgment (Eccl 3:17; 11:9; 12:14) to the final redactor/editor rather than Qoheleth himself.¹²⁷ Perdue does not see the work of an editor/redactor in Eccl 8:13: “but it will not be well with the wicked, neither will they prolong their days like a shadow, because they do not stand in fear before God.” Yet, this verse presents the same thought as Eccl 3:17, 11:9 and 12:14 that speak of God’s judgment on humanity.¹²⁸ Qoheleth has already established that humanity has no power over life because God has control over the universe. When Qoheleth points out that the wicked will not fare well he alludes to their standing before God in the final judgment. Qoheleth purposefully refers to God’s control over human life and his intent to render judgment to humanity in order to encourage an attitude of contentment in his readers even though in their present life they may still live in suffering and oppression.

While the focus of Qoheleth’s teaching is life in the present, he is convinced that his readers need to be mindful of the afterlife, because such concern will affect their present circumstances. The context of Qoheleth’s teaching does not make the idea of the afterlife explicit, which suggests that Qoheleth and his audience might be uncertain about it. This uncertainty, in turn, makes the urgency of a good life before God even more pronounced. The realization and acceptance of death, as well as the person’s awareness of the afterlife determine, for Qoheleth, the quality of the person’s life under the sun.

Intertestamental Judaism and Early Christianity, (HTS 56; Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2006), 1-223; Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 227; Yamauchi, “Life, Death and the Afterlife in the Ancient Near East,” 46-49. For more details on the date of composition of the book of Ecclesiastes See Chapter 1.2.6.1 Authorship.

¹²⁵ Knibb, “Life and Death in the Old Testament,” 408.

¹²⁶ Perdue, “Wisdom and Apocalyptic: The Case of Qoheleth,” 251.

¹²⁷ Perdue, “Wisdom and Apocalyptic: The Case of Qoheleth,” 256.

¹²⁸ Ecclesiastes 8:13 does not mention the word “judgment”; however, Qoheleth alludes to God’s judgment by stating: “it will not go well for the wicked.” The impersonal construction points to God as the true subject of deciding what will befall a wicked person.

6. Conclusion

Qoheleth is able to state with confidence that everything in this life is הבל “fleeting.” Qoheleth starts his discourse by introducing the theme of the brevity of life in Eccl 1:2 הכל הבל “everything is fleeting.” Life is swiftly passing and death is sure to come; when compared to the lasting effects of death, life is extremely brief. He concludes his investigation by restating: הכל הבל “everything is fleeting.” (Eccl 12:8). Qoheleth has come full circle in his examination of human circumstances and in the conclusion his readers are able to relate on a very personal level to his declaration on the shortness of life, especially after the description of aging and dying. Thus, Eccl 1:2 and 12:8 provide the framework for Qoheleth’s teaching. Life is brief when death is taken into consideration.¹²⁹ Qoheleth perceives death as a natural end of life that should not be feared, but rather it should be constantly kept in mind to ensure a fulfilled life. The awareness of death brings even more vitality and zeal into one’s existence, for it causes a person to enjoy and treasure every moment.

Death is a major presupposition in Qoheleth’s thinking that overshadows every moment of life and inspires him to live life to the fullest.¹³⁰ In considering death Qoheleth never offers it as a choice people can make; rather he sees it as inevitable, as something that people have no control over (Eccl 8:8). In this light he offers a comforting thought, a way to accept the reality of death and learn to live with it. Death provides rest from labour and oppression (Eccl 4:1–3; 6:3–7). It brings an end to all pain and suffering. Yet death is not the answer to suffering and oppression; it can only cut them short. Qoheleth points to God for answers to these problems, for final judgment will come from him (Eccl 11:9; 12:14). He also affirms that the only response to the certainty of death is the fear of God and contentment in life. Even though death is surely coming, life frustrations should be replaced with

¹²⁹ Fischer mentions, “Whenever death steps into the horizon of Qoheleth’s reflection, wisdom and justice, possessions and progeny prove to be transitory good things. People cannot secure a permanent gain over death in principle.” See A. A. Fischer, “Kohelet und die frühe Apokalypik Eine Auslegung von Koh 3, 16–21,” in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors; Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 339–56.

¹³⁰ Von Rad believes that death does not allow Qoheleth to find meaning in life while it inspires him to live life to the fullest. See Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 228. However, it is not necessary to see Qoheleth as struggling to find meaning in life to accept his somber treatment of death’s impact on life.

contentment.¹³¹ The truth remains: life is often enigmatic and puzzling; it is fleeting and transient, but God makes it worth living.

Qoheleth's view of death as inevitable and inescapable transforms his perception of events and situations in life and even impacts the view of life itself. The following chapters will demonstrate how death permeates every level of Qoheleth's teaching and is intertwined with other elements in his thought. Chapter 3 will discuss the ways in which Qoheleth's views of the fleeting and transient nature of life as well as the certainty of death influence Qoheleth's personal experience. Chapter 4 will analyze death as the ultimate limitation of human existence that Qoheleth addresses in his teaching. Chapter 5 will consider the influence death has on accepting life's allotment and learning to be content with it. His view on death moves him to develop a particular attitude to his existence under the sun.

¹³¹ Roy B. Zuck, "God and Man in Ecclesiastes," *BSac* 148 (1991): 46-56.

Chapter 3

The Theme of Contentment in Qoheleth's Autobiography

1. Introduction

The previous chapter has looked at the theme of death in the book of Ecclesiastes and discussed how Qoheleth uses it as a background for his teaching. In what follows, this study will investigate Qoheleth's autobiography, paying special attention to the interplay between Qoheleth's experience and his understanding of death. The first person narrative element is very prominent in the book of Ecclesiastes and requires an in-depth examination. This chapter will take a closer look at the autobiographical narration found in Eccl 1:12–2:26 to highlight the ways in which Qoheleth's view of death and his understanding of the role of God have influenced his experience and moved him to develop an attitude of contentment as a way to live a life pleasing to God.

To achieve this purpose, this chapter will discuss the nature and purpose of Qoheleth's royal persona; then, it will examine how Qoheleth's life experience of abundance and limitation leads him to choose contentment as the answer to life's contradictions in the face of death. Qoheleth, the wise king *par excellence*, calls his audience to embrace the brevity of human existence and urges them to lead a contented life in the present, submitting their lives into the hand of God.

2. Royal Persona in Qoheleth's Autobiography¹

Qoheleth understands the importance of assuming a Solomonic persona to carry across his own message.² By entering into the royal persona of Solomon, Qoheleth is able to transmit to his audience his beliefs about God, the world and human life.³ The Solomonic guise allows Qoheleth to speak as a renowned patron of wisdom who shares his teachings on the values of life with his audience. Following along similar

¹ For the purpose of this study "an autobiography is a text in which the author retrospectively related select events and experiences from his or her own life from the perspective of the author's present." See Martin A. Shields, "Autobiography," *DOTWPW* 27-31; idem. "Qohelet and Royal Autobiography," in *The Words of the Wise Are like Goats: Engaging Qohelet in the 21st Century* (eds. Mark J. Boda, Tremper Longman III, and Cristian G. Rata; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013); 117-36 (119).

² See the discussion on the authorship of the book of Ecclesiastes in Chapter 1.

³ Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 237-42. See also Kalugila, *The Wise King*, 47.

lines of reasoning, Gordis believes that Qoheleth adopts “the role of King Solomon...to use the career of the great king to emphasize his conclusions as to the inadequacy of wealth and wisdom as absolute goals.”⁴

As mentioned in Chapter 1, allusions to Solomon are purposefully employed by Qoheleth to create a guise of the famous king to establish his own ethos and gain the trust of his audience in a way similar to the royal ideological literature of West Semitic and Assyrian royal autobiographies.⁵ By using these allusions to Solomon, Qoheleth builds literary bridges between the historical events during the reign of Solomon and his own life time and lays down the ground work to the legitimacy of his experience and his coming admonitions to the readers.⁶

From the beginning of his narration, Qoheleth claims to be “a king over Israel in Jerusalem” (Eccl 1:12). Only David and Solomon are said to have ruled “in Jerusalem.”⁷ Qoheleth's desire to investigate the matters of this world with his wise heart calls to mind Solomon's request for such a heart mentioned in his dream at Gibeon (1 Kgs 3:3–15; 2 Chr 1:1–13), and the great works of Qoheleth are reminiscent of Solomon's exorbitant activities (1 Kgs 5:9–14; 2 Chr 1:1).⁸ At Gibeon Solomon asks only for wisdom but God grants him honour, wealth, and greatness to surpass everybody who has been before him or will be after him (2 Chr 1:12). Thus, when Qoheleth summarizes his achievements by stating: “So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem” (Eccl 2:9), this language echoes the evaluation of Solomon's life, “Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom” (1 Kgs 10:23).⁹ Qoheleth's increase in wisdom and

⁴ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 76.

⁵ See Chapter 1.2.6 Royal Autobiography in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

⁶ By calling any reference to King Solomon in Qoheleth's narrative an allusion, I admit that there is a tension between the historical events ascribed to Solomon and a late date of composition. See also Seow, “Qoheleth's Autobiography,” 275. Tadmor points out the fact that fictional Assyrian autobiographies, which are close in genre to Qoheleth's autobiography, usually have apologetic nature “to serve certain imminent political aims in the present or some particular design for the future.” See Tadmor, “Autobiographical Apology in the Royal Assyrian Literature,” 37.

⁷ 1 Sam 23:17; 2 Sam 5:2–5, 11, 17; 1:34; 3:28. Kings from the Northern Kingdom are also called “king over Israel” (1 Kgs 14:13–14; 15:25; 16:29; 22:52; 2 Kgs 2:25), while those who ruled in the Southern Kingdom are never identified to be “in Jerusalem.” The expression “son of David” (Eccl 1:1), taken together with “king over Israel,” makes the reference to Solomon complete. See also Seow, “Qoheleth's Autobiography,” 277.

⁸ Seow, “Qoheleth's Autobiography,” 277.

⁹ The expressions such as “I, Qoheleth, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem” (Eccl 1:12) and “all who were before me in Jerusalem” (Eccl 2:9) are textual markers that help the readers to identify Qoheleth as alluding to the persona of the great King Solomon, rather than claiming to be Solomon.

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knowledge (Eccl 1:16) recalls the queen of Sheba's comment on Solomon's increase in wisdom (cf. 1 Kgs 10:7).

Moreover, the autobiographical narrative in Eccl 1:12–2:26 is replete with allusions to Solomon's life and rule which suggest that Qoheleth might have known about different Solomonic traditions, which spoke of his wealth, wisdom and accomplishments (cf. 1 Kgs 4–11).¹⁰ Qoheleth purposefully utilizes this information to create an image of a wise and powerful king whose words should be listened to and followed. Fox is correct in pointing out that the Solomonic fiction is “a rhetorical device, rather than an attempt to claim Solomon as the author of the book.”¹¹ Qoheleth finds a creative way to discuss the issues that he considers important by associating himself with Solomon; yet he does not identify himself with Solomon unambiguously.¹² He puts on a mask that presents him as a king whose main characteristics are wisdom and wealth. This mask also allows him to draw on the ethos of his character.¹³

Qoheleth employs the style of autobiography to draw emphasis to his experience first, then to his observations, and, finally, to his conclusions.¹⁴ The concentration of the first-person pronominal forms is so significant in the book of Ecclesiastes that it is necessary to see Qoheleth's experience as the subject of his work.¹⁵ Qoheleth presents his experience and its evaluation throughout his speech:¹⁶

¹⁰ Seow, “Qoheleth's Autobiography,” 278.

¹¹ Michael V. Fox, “Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qoheleth,” *HUCA* 48 (1977): 83-106. R. B. Salters in his article “Qoheleth and the Canon,” (*ExpTim* 86 [1975]: 339-42) argues that if the author of the book of Ecclesiastes aimed for his work to be understood as having the Solomonic authorship, he would have used Solomon's name as in the case of Pseudepigrapha.

¹² Frank A. Spina in his chapter “Qoheleth and the Reformation of Wisdom” in *The Quest for the Kingdom of God* (Fr. George E. Medenhall; [ed. H.B. Huffmon, F.A. Spina, and A.R. W. Green; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983], 267-79) suggests that Qoheleth associates himself with Solomon only to judge Solomon and his ethics. Armstrong expresses an opposite opinion, stating that Qoheleth chooses to use the Solomonic persona to improve Solomon's image in the eyes of his readers. See James F. Armstrong, “Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament Theology,” *PSB* 94 (1983): 16-25.

¹³ Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 191. Rüdiger Lux remarks on the Solomonic fiction in the book of Ecclesiastes that “this text in the Old Testament exegesis has long been a paradigm of fiction in the Bible” and employs the metaphor of Qoheleth putting on a mask in his introduction in Eccl 1:12. See Rüdiger Lux, “‘Ich, Kohelet, bin König...’: Die Fiction als Schlüssel zur Wirklichkeit in Kohelet 1, 12–2, 26,” *Evangelische Theologie* 50 (1990): 331-42 (335).

¹⁴ Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words*, 157-59. See also Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 296; Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 40-42; Antoon Schoors, “The Pronouns in Qoheleth,” *HS* 30 (1989): 71-90.

¹⁵ Harold Fisch, “Qoheleth: A Hebrew Ironist,” in *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 158-78. See also Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 173-74.

¹⁶ Fox points out the three instances when the third person personal pronoun is used in Eccl 1:1–2, 7:27, and 12:8 and identifies the speaker as the frame narrator whose words envelop Qoheleth's.

אתנה/נתתי את־לבי	"I gave my heart"	1:13, 17; 8:9, 16; 9:1
ראיתי אני/ראיתי / אראה	"I saw"	1:14; 2:13, 24; 3:10, 16, 22; 4:1, 4, 7, 15; 5:13, 18; 6:1; 7:15; 8:9, 10, 17; 9:1
אמרתני אני/דברתי אני	"I said"	1:16; 2:1, 2, 15; 3:17, 18; 6:3; 7:23; 8:14; 9:16
תרתי בלבי	"I searched with my heart"	2:3; 7:25
פניתי/שבתי/סבותי אני	"I turned"	2:11, 12, 20; 4:1, 7; 7:25; 9:11
ידעתי	"I know"	1:17; 2:14; 3:12, 14; 8:12
אנסכה/נסית	"Let me test," "I tested"	2:1; 7:23

The autobiographical style of writing allows him to touch upon different subjects that are joined together due to his personal experience. Qoheleth's persona which is "unified and multifaceted"¹⁷ serves as an "organizing consciousness"¹⁸ of the book. It can be said that the autobiographical narration is integral to the coherence of Qoheleth's argument as a whole.¹⁹ At the same time, the Solomonic guise enables him to speak freely and with authority about existence "under the sun," for Solomon was the wise king *par excellence* who had and experienced everything.

3. Abundance and Limitations in Qoheleth's Life

As Qoheleth commences the narrative about his experiences, he informs his audience that he has chosen to dedicate his life to investigating "everything that is done under heaven" (Eccl 1:13a).²⁰ At first glance, his enterprise seems to be of hyperbolic proportions. However, he clarifies the focus of his activity by stating that he is interested only in what human beings are busy with (Eccl 1:13b).²¹ He narrows down

The frame narrator is not the author of Qoheleth's words; he only articulates them. See Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 365.

¹⁷ Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 37.

¹⁸ Fox, *Qoheleth and his Contradictions*, 159.

¹⁹ Christianson, *A Time to Tell*, 42.

²⁰ Christianson (*A Time to Tell*, 36) suggests that Qoheleth sets out on his quest "to ensure his own place under heaven." Yet, it is important to remember that Qoheleth's programmatic question is about human "profit" in general. Focusing only on his own gain would significantly undermine his goal to influence his audience to listen and follow his teaching.

²¹ See also Michael Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 171; Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 73.

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1:13	ונתתי את־לבי לדרוש ולתור בחכמה על כל־אשר נעשה תחת השמים הוא ענין רע נתן אל־הים לבני הארם לענות בו	And I gave my heart to seek and to search by wisdom everything that is done under heavens. It is an evil preoccupation that God gave to the sons of man to be busy with.
1:14	ראיתי את־כל־המעשים שנעשו תחת השמש והנה הכל הבל ורעות רוח	I saw all the deeds which are done under the sun and behold, everything is fleeting and pursuit of wind.
1:15	מעות לא־יוכל לתקן וחסרון לא־יוכל להמנות	What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.
1:16	דברתי אני עם־לבי לאמר חנה אני הגדלתי והוספתי חכמה על כל־אשר־היה לפני על־ירושלם ולבי ראה הרבה חכמה ודעת	I said in my heart saying, behold, I have become great and increased wisdom over all who have been before me in Jerusalem and my heart saw great wisdom and knowledge.
1:17	ואתנה לבי לדעת חכמה ודעת הוללות ושכלות ידאתי שגם־זה הוא רעיון רוח	And I gave my heart to know wisdom and knowledge, foolishness and folly; I know this is also pursuit of wind.
1:18	כי ברב חכמה רב־כעס ויוסף דעת יוסף מכאוב	For in great wisdom is great vexation, and who adds knowledge, adds pain.

Wisdom is perceived as one of the most significant characteristics of the king of Israel.²⁶ In the case of Solomon, he prays for wisdom and understanding (1 Kgs 3:9), and God gives him everything that the divine wisdom can provide: riches, authority, power, and honour (1 Kgs 3:11–13). Qoheleth utilizes the king's wisdom to embark on a quest of unparalleled proportions: "I set up my heart to seek and search by wisdom everything that is done under heaven" (Eccl 1:13). He speaks in universal terms as he is prepared to examine "everything." He is very particular in his choice of words; he uses two infinitives לדרוש "to seek" and לתור "to search" together with the phrase נתתי את־לבי "I gave my heart" to highlight the task he has chosen for himself (Eccl 1:13). The expression נתתי את־לבי "I gave my heart" emphasizes the seriousness of the sage's pursuit and his intense determination and devotion to it. He has given his לב "heart", his whole being to finding the good under the sun.²⁷ He also makes it

²⁶ Kalugila, *The Wise King*, 102-104.

²⁷ H.-J. Farby, "לב," *TDOT* 7:399-437; Alex Luc, "לב," *NIDOTTE* 2:749-54; L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, "לב," *HALOT* 2:513-15.

clear from the beginning of his narrative that dedicating or “giving” (נתן) his heart to his investigation sets the quest in motion.²⁸ This intent speaks of the abundance of wisdom that Qoheleth has, for he gives his heart, the seat of wisdom,²⁹ completely over to this search. He understands that his wise heart will guide his pursuit.³⁰

Qoheleth employs the verb דרש “to seek” (Eccl 1:13) to identify the activity he is interested in because he views his enterprise as an active search not just an intellectual musing. The term דרש “to seek” clearly describes the sage's intent, for “[t]he element of movement as a presupposition for the process of seeking and asking seems to be ... inherent in all OT examples even when it is not explicitly mentioned but it is clearly indicated by the context.”³¹ In Judges 6:29 the people are “seeking” (דרש) and asking about a person, even though the object of the verbs is not expressed. The literal meaning of an active search gives rise to a metaphorical meaning of “inquiring” and “investigating”³² in the example of Hezekiah who “seeks” or “questions” (דרש) the issue of taxes that the people had collected for the priests and the Levites (2 Chr 31:9). The Babylonian emissaries come to Hezekiah to “seek the sign” (דרש המופת) that the land of Israel has witnessed (2 Chr 32:31).

Isaiah also uses the verb דרש “to seek” in a metaphorical sense when he admonishes the Israelites to “seek justice” (דרש משפט; Isa 1:17). Yet, the context of the verse suggests personal involvement in the activity of “seeking justice”—practising and living out justice. The same meaning of דרש “to seek” can be found in Jeremiah who encourages the people to “seek peace or welfare” (דרש שלום) of Babylon while the Israelites live there (Jer 29:7). The book of Deuteronomy teaches the people about “not seeking peace and good” (לא תדרש שלום ומטבתם) with their enemies (Deut 23:6 [7]). In all of these examples the verb דרש “to seek” implies an

²⁸ Michael A. Grisanti, “נתן,” *NIDOTTE* 3:205-11; L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, “נתן,” *HALOT* 2:733-35; E. Lipiński, “נתן,” *TDOT* 10:90-107.

²⁹ Farby, “לב,” *TDOT* 7:422; Luc, “לב,” *NIDOTTE* 2:753; Koehler and Baumgartner, “לב,” *HALOT* 2:514-15.

³⁰ Qoheleth's use of wisdom as a means of investigation alludes to Solomon's “wise heart” mentioned in 1 Kgs 3:12; 10:3-9; 2 Chr 1:11-12; 9:3-7.

³¹ S. Wagner, “דרש,” *TDOT* 3:293-307 (294); David Denninger, “דרש,” *NIDOTTE* 1:993-99; L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, “דרש,” *HALOT* 1:233.

³² Wagner, “דרש,” *TDOT* 3:294-95; Denninger, “דרש,” *NIDOTTE* 1:994-96; Koehler and Baumgartner, “דרש,” *HALOT* 1:233.

element of activity; “seeking” finds its complete meaning only in the practice of what is “sought.”

When Qoheleth uses the verb “to seek” as part of his quest, he openly states his intent to practise everything that he will investigate. This truly will be an investigation of royal proportions, for only a person of privilege and unlimited resources can undertake such project and take care of the unexpected circumstances on his way.³³ Qoheleth's interest in “seeking” what is done on earth also underscores the theological connotation of this verb: he desires to find “good” (Eccl 1:3), an abstract concept, yet it defines one's relationship with God.³⁴ Amos calls the people of Israel to “seek good” (דרש טוב; Amos 5:14) and that would ensure their livelihood, because pursuing justice, doing good and hating evil pleases God and speak of their obedience to his commandments (Amos 5:15).³⁵

To clarify his intention further Qoheleth employs the term תור “to search”, a synonym of the verb דרש “to seek.” He is determined to do what he must in order to satisfy his desire to find good. The term תור “to search” speaks of going on a mission to spy out something of importance.³⁶ In the wilderness narratives this verb underscores God's intent to search out the land for his people. God is portrayed as being on a reconnaissance mission to find the best places of encampment for the Israelites: “[God] goes before you on the way to search out (תור) a place for you to camp, in fire by night, and in the cloud by day, to show you the route you should take” (Deut 1:33). In Numbers 10:33 the Ark of the Covenant goes out as God's representative to explore and prepare the way for his people: “So they set out from the mount of the LORD for three days, while the ark of the covenant of the LORD preceded them on the three-day journey to search out (תור) a resting place for them.” Ezekiel makes this point explicit by pointing out the role of God who searched out the Promised Land for Israel: “On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out of

³³ See also Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 72. He claims that “Qoheleth undertakes an impossible task: the exploration of everything within human experience. This scope extends far beyond the modest pursuit of earlier sages.”

³⁴ Wagner, “דרש,” *TDOT* 3:298; Denninger, “דרש,” *NIDOTTE* 1:996.

³⁵ See also Mic 6:8, Hos 10:12 for a similar use of דרש. Jeremiah 29: 12–14 and Isa 55:6–14 speak of “seeking” God in order to change one's unhappy situation, for a relationship with God would restore one's fortunes.

³⁶ R. Liwak, “תור,” *TDOT* 15:604–608; Gordon H. Matties and J. A. Thompson, “תור,” *NIDOTTE* 4:283–84.

the land of Egypt into a land that I had searched out (תור) for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most glorious of all lands" (Ezek 20:6). Thus, these passages suggest that God is the initiator of the journey to the desired land and the one who precedes his people on this journey in order to prepare a way for them.³⁷

In a similar way, Qoheleth seems to undertake his quest to show those who would want to follow him what they may expect on the way. He goes first to ensure that he investigates and tries everything that this life can offer and then give a comprehensive report about his findings. Pedersen suggests that the use of תור "to search" in the book of Ecclesiastes points out that this quest involves experiential observations and not just mental activity.³⁸ The vastness of his wisdom knows no boundaries; as a king he knows that he has the ability to try anything and follow his pursuit to the end.³⁹ Such straightforward boasting and the totality of his quest that encompasses everything that is done in the world (Eccl 1:13), "exudes a royal aura."⁴⁰ Abundance of wisdom that Qoheleth possesses firmly puts him among other kings who usually exaggerate their abilities and accomplishments. Qoheleth's language is similar to the boastful language of fictional royal autobiographies in the ancient Near Eastern royal wisdom literature, although this boasting is not as bold as the claim of Assurbanipal to search the heavens and the earth and even the wisdom of his gods.⁴¹

Qoheleth stays true to the royal ideology in claiming to possess great wisdom and insight. He alludes to Solomonic wisdom in hyperbolic fashion to establish himself firmly among the royal sages who fully benefited from their wisdom.⁴² However, unlike the other ancient Near Eastern kings whose wisdom guided them in bringing peace and prosperity to their lands and led their subjects with justice and order,⁴³ Qoheleth is concerned with the consequences of wisdom on a more personal

³⁷ Matties and Thompson, "תור," *NIDOTTE* 4:283-84.

³⁸ Pedersen, "Scepticisme Israélite," 331.

³⁹ Brown is correct in suggesting that Qoheleth sees the world as his "classroom, his laboratory." See Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 29.

⁴⁰ Koh, *Royal Autobiography*, 30. Murphy suggests that this language is reminiscent of the all-encompassing wisdom of Solomon (1 Kgs 3:12). See Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 14.

⁴¹ Maximilian Streck, *Assurbanipal and die letzten assyrischen Könige bis zum Untergange Niniveh's*, Vol 2 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs Buchhandlung, 1916), 363.

⁴² See also Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 14; Koh, *Royal Autobiography*, 31.

⁴³ Kalugila points out: "By royal wisdom the king administered justice, thereby conferring blessings on his subjects. People received mercy, peace and prosperity. The wise king was the father and mother, the counselor, and the source of the fertility of his country." See Kalugila, *The Wise King*, 68. The Russian Synodal Text seems to reflect such understanding of the royal wisdom in the difficult passage of Eccl 5:8, ויהרון ארץ בכל היא מלך לשדה נעבד, "превосходство же страны в целом

level. He is interested in the abundance of wisdom and knowledge and their effect on his well-being.⁴⁴

From the onset of his quest, Qoheleth's wisdom makes him conscious of the power and control that God exerts over the world. Qoheleth first mentions God and his activity in connection with his desire to search out everything that is done on earth. He observes that this task is ענין רע "an evil preoccupation" (Eccl 1:13b),⁴⁵ which leads to anxiety, restlessness and worry.⁴⁶ Yet, it is a task given to humanity by God, who has already set the order of the universe that no human effort can affect. Qoheleth appears to use a traditional proverb, "what is crooked cannot be made straight" (Eccl 1:15), subversively to show that even the wise cannot put to order this world, because they have little control over the circumstances that befall them.⁴⁷ The subject is not clear, מעות לא יוכל לתקן וחצרון לא יוכל להמנות, "what is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted." However, in Eccl 7:13 Qoheleth explicitly attributes to God the job of making things crooked in order to remind his readers that only God has power over this life, "Consider the work of God: indeed, who is able to make straight what he has made crooked?"

Qoheleth is also interested in wisdom and knowledge as the objects of his quest. He makes it clear that increasing these qualities is possible for he has done it (Eccl 1:16). Qoheleth finds out that increase in knowledge and wisdom brings only pain and misery (Eccl 1:18).⁴⁸ The pursuit of wisdom does not guarantee happiness or

есть царь, заботящийся о стране" ("and the advantage of the land is on the whole a king taking care of the land").

⁴⁴ Höffken argues that Qoheleth's rejects wisdom's benefits and finds both wisdom and knowledge beyond human reach. See Peter Höffken, "Das EGO des Weisen," *TZ* 4 (1985): 121-35. However, Qoheleth's interest in this personal aspect of wisdom does not present him as radically opposed to the traditional wisdom which Solomon possessed. It simply underscores a different approach to the study of wisdom, for he definitely enjoyed the blessings it brought to him as a king (Eccl 2:1-10).

⁴⁵ Isaksson suggests that at this point in his narration Qoheleth makes a comment about the story he is narrating for the sake of the reader. Qoheleth identifies the comment outside of the narration with הוּא עֲנִין רַע, a nominal clause with the subject coming at the beginning of the sentence, הוּא עֲנִין רַע נָתַן אֱלֹהִים לְבְנֵי הָאָדָם לְעֲנוּת בּוֹ, "this is an unhappy business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with." See Isaksson, "The Syntax of the Narrative Discourse in Qoheleth," 43.

⁴⁶ F. J. Stendebach, "עֲנִין," *TDOT* 11:215-30 (228); A. R. Pete Diamond, "עֲנִין III," *NIDOTTE* 3:452-53; L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, "עֲנִין III," *HALOT* 2:854;

⁴⁷ See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 146-47; Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 48.

⁴⁸ This boost of wisdom has opened Qoheleth's eyes to the injustices and oppressions of the world which he will address later in his work (cf. Eccl 3:16; 4:1; 7:15; 8:14). The Russian play "Woe from Wit" written by poet Alexandr Griboedov in 1823 excellently illustrates Qoheleth's point, for it

security. Seeking out the abundance of wisdom and knowledge is ענין רע “an evil preoccupation” as much as labour, since they bring only כעס “irritation” and מכאוב “pain” (Eccl 1:18). Almost at the very onset of his quest, Qoheleth acknowledges the inherent incongruity between the abundance of his wisdom and the paradoxical consequences of it. The wealth of knowledge and insight exposes the limitations of this life instead of obliterating them (Eccl 1:17–18). The wealth of wisdom that Qoheleth boasts about highlights its own limitations: the sage can only observe what happens under the sun, but he has no control over it.

3.1.2 Royal Accomplishments (Eccl 2:1–10)

2:1	אמרתי אני בלבי לכה־נא אנסכה בשמחה וראה בטוב והנה גם־הוא הבל	I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test pleasure and see the good!” And behold, all of this is fleeting.
2:2	לשחוק אמרתי מהולל ולשמחה מה־זה עשה	About laughter I said, “foolishness,” and about pleasure, “What does it do?”
2:3	תרתי בלבי למשוך ביין את־בשרי ולבי נהג בחכמה ולא־אחוז בסכלות עד אשר־אראה אי־זה טוב לבני האדם אשר יעשו תחת השמים מספר ימי חייהם	I searched with my heart to cheer with wine my body, and my heart guiding me in wisdom, and to grasp folly, until I might see what was good for human beings to do under heavens during a short number of days of their life.
2:4	הגדלתי מעשי בניתי לי בתים נמעת לי כרמים	I made great works; I built houses for myself; I planted vineyards for myself.
2:5	עשיתי לי גנות ופרדסים ונמעתי בהם עץ כל־פרי	I made for myself gardens and parks and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees.
2:6	עשיתי לי ברכות מים להשקות מהם יער צומח עצים	I made for myself pools of water to irrigate from them forests of growing trees.
2:7	קניתי עבדים ושפחות ובני־בית היה לי גם מקנה בקר וצאן הרבה היה לי מכל שהיו לפני בירושלם	I bought servants and maidservants and home-born slaves for myself. I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than anybody who had been before me in Jerusalem.

speaks of a man whose ability to understand the affairs of the world and see the true nature of people and things makes him an outcast in the society and brings only pain and vexation to his existence.

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2:8	כנסתי לי גם־כסף וזהב וסגלת מלכים והמדינות עשיתי לי שרים ושרות ותענוגת בני האדם שדה ושדות	I gathered for myself also silver and gold and treasures of kings and the provinces. I got for myself male and female singers and delights of the sons of man—many concubines.
2:9	וגדלתי והוספתי מכל שהיה לפני בירושלם אף חכמתי עמדה לי	So I became great and surpassed all who had been before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me.
2:10	וכל אשר שאלו עיני לא אצלתי מהם לא־מנעתי את־לבי מכל־שמחה כִּי־לבי שמח מכל־עמלי וזה־היה הלִקִי	And all which my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not keep my heart from all pleasure, for my heart was joyful from all my labour and it was my allotment.

Qoheleth's narration of his great achievements parallels the style of West Semitic royal inscriptions.⁴⁹ The great building projects and increase in revenue are the standard features of the royal propaganda. The king's wisdom is seen in what he can accomplish.⁵⁰ Gardens, parks, pools, vineyards represent the pride of ancient kings in the boastful reports about their achievements. Thus, King Mesha speaks of building cities, towers, palaces, water reservoirs and cisterns to herald his greatness to his subjects as well as to posterity,

I have built Karchoh, the wall of the woods and the wall of the citadel,
and I have built its gates, and I have built its towers,
and I have built the house of the king,
and I have made the double reser[voir for the
spr]ing (?) in the innermost part of the city...
And I am the kin[g over the] hundreds in the towns
which I have added to the land...
And I brought there [...] flock of the land.⁵¹

King Azatiwada is able to protect his vassals with strong fortresses and towers which he has erected for them. He even has built a city and named it after himself. He has also brought peace and luxury to the whole kingdom,

I enlarged the land of the plain of Adana from East to West.
Now there was in my day all good for the
Danunians and abundance and luxury. And I built this city.
And I gave it the name Azatiwadaya...

⁴⁹ Isaksson, "The Syntax of the Narrative Discourse in Qohelet," 38-39. Isaksson points out that Qohelet narrates his great accomplishments in a general sense to lay out a background of supportive material for his message.

⁵⁰ Kalugila, *The Wise King*, 63.

⁵¹ "The Instruction of King Mesha," translated by K. A. D. Smelik (*COS* 2.23: 137-38). See also "The Inscription of Zakkur, King of Hamath," translated by Allan Millard (*COS* 2.35: 155-56).

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in abundance and in luxury and good living
and in ease of heart, that it might be a guard for the Plain of
Adana and the house of Mopsos.
Since in my days there was for the land of the
Plain of Adana abundance and luxury.
And there was never any night for the Nanunians in my days.⁵²

Abundance and luxury are so important to Azatiwada that he mentions them three times in this inscription in connection to his great accomplishments on behalf of his kingdom. The king boasts of his greatness to demonstrate to the other kings and the world that he has achieved true greatness and nobody can compete with him.

In enumerating their mighty works in royal inscriptions, the kings mention their benevolent actions for the sake of the welfare of their people. King Kulamuwa has brought such prosperity to the land that,

whoever has never possessed a sheep,
I made lord of a flock.
And whoever had never possessed an ox,
I made owner of a herd and owner of silver and lord of gold.
And whoever from his childhood had never seen linen,
now in my days wore byssons.⁵³

Unlike the ancient Near Eastern kings who find it important to mention the good that they have done for their kingdom, which has brought prosperity and abundance to their people, Qoheleth speaks only about his own wealth and accomplishments in Eccl 2:4–8 as if to show that the abundance that he has enjoyed has no effect on anybody else. Qoheleth uses לִי “for myself” eight times in five verses, which underscores the highly personal nature of his achievements. Everything that Qoheleth boasts about is לִי!⁵⁴

⁵² “The Azatiwada Inscription,” (COS 2.31: 149-50).

⁵³ “The Kulamuwa Inscription,” (COS 2.30: 148). Azatiwada's rule has benefited his kingdom so greatly, that he can proudly proclaim, “Ba'al made me a father and a mother to the Danunians. I caused the Danunians to live...And there was never any night for the Danunians in my days.” “The Azatiwada Inscription,” (COS 2.31: 150). The deeds of king Amminadab, who built a vineyard, gardens and a water cistern caused rejoicing and gladness in his kingdom. See “The Tell Siran Inscription,” translated by Walter E. Aufrecht (COS 2.25: 139-40). See also E. J. Smit, “The Tell Siran Inscription. Linguistic and Historical Implications,” *JSem* 1 (1989): 108-17. See also “The Panamuwa Inscription,” (COS 2. 37: 159). Panamuwa's wise and loyal rule has brought much silver and gold to his house and prosperity to his land, “And it (the land) abounded with wheat and barley and ewe and cow in his days. And then [the land] ate [and drank...]. The price was cheap.

⁵⁴ Perdue offers an interesting suggestion that “the great works” of Qoheleth in Eccl 2:4–8 can be naturally divided into seven sections resembling the seven days of creation in Gen 1:1–2:3. See Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 214-15. However, Perdue fails to follow his own comparison to the end for he does not see Qoheleth finding his works pleasing and good in the end, but rather הַבֵּל (Eccl 2:11), unlike God who pronounces his accomplishments “very good” (Gen 1:31). Perdue seems to overlook Eccl 2:10 in which Qoheleth declares that his heart rejoiced in his labour which he counted as

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Eccl 2:4b	בניתי לי בתים נמעת לי כרמים	I built houses <u>for myself</u> and planted vineyards <u>for myself</u>
Eccl 2:5	עשיתי לי גנות ופרדסים	I made <u>for myself</u> gardens and parks.
Eccl 2:6	עשיתי לי מים	I made <u>for myself</u> pools of waters.
Eccl 2:7a	קניתי עבדים... לי	I bought servants... <u>for myself</u>
Eccl 2:7b	מקנה בקר וצאן הרבה היה לי	great possession of cattle and sheep there was <u>to me</u> (I had).
Eccl 2:8a	כנסתי לי גם כסף וזהב	I also gathered <u>for myself</u> silver and gold.
Eccl 2:8b	עשיתי לי שרים ושרות ותענוגת בני האדם	I got <u>for myself</u> male and female singers and luxury of men...

Koh proposes that “Qoheleth’s focus lay solely on making known the extent of his private wealth and past lifestyle of indulgent merrymaking.”⁵⁵ However, one should remember that Qoheleth is interested in finding the good in one’s labour in this life (Eccl 2:3). This study suggests that Qoheleth stays true to the purpose of his quest by omitting a part about the king’s positive impact on his kingdom. The royal fiction is needed for Qoheleth to create a sense of respect and authority for himself, so that he can proceed with sharing his teaching and encouraging a certain type of behaviour in his audience. As in the case of the abundance of wisdom and its effect on one’s well-being, Qoheleth is interested in finding a connection between the abundance of wealth, great accomplishments and one’s satisfaction in life.

Qoheleth continues to lead the life of abundance that he has chosen for the purpose of his experiment. He is surrounded by luxury and indulgence; he is free to try anything his heart desires—pleasure, laughter, madness, folly, wine (Eccl 2:1–3). Yet, there is a certain restraint that he imposes on his own experiment; his wisdom still guides his actions (Eccl 2:3), keeping him away from mindless and shallow activities.⁵⁶ He is interested in the enduring quality and value of pleasure. And yet,

his reward for his great works, כִּי־לִבִּי שָׂמַח מִכָּל־עֲמָלִי וְזוֹה־הָיָה חֶלְקִי מִכָּל־עֲמָלִי, “for my heart found pleasure in all my labour and this was my allotment in all my labour.” He believes that this pleasure is his “reward” or “allotment” (חֶלֶק) in his labour.

⁵⁵ Koh, *Royal Autobiography*, 81.

⁵⁶ Similarly, Murphy claims that שְׂמֵחָה should be understood “as the good life, not the mindless joy of Prov 21:17 (‘the one who loves pleasure...’) or something superficial.” See Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 17-18.

while he is testing pleasure, he is actually testing himself to find out what would bring him satisfaction. His inner dialogue with his heart points out the fact that his quest is not a mere intellectual activity, but an active search for fulfillment.

Qoheleth's "extravagant living"⁵⁷ is further seen in his intense pursuit of **אִי־זָה טוֹב לְבְנֵי הָאָדָם** "what was good for people" (Eccl 2:3b). He is set to follow his investigation to the end regardless of how long it may take him. He even states that he is determined to satisfy his every desire (Eccl 2:10). Such freedom in action speaks of a life of unparalleled opportunity that Qoheleth as king benefits from. Royal privilege also allows him to enjoy material success. Qoheleth describes his wealth and lists the ways in which he has used it. He has built parks, gardens, pools, and vineyards (Eccl 2:4–6). This building activity is reminiscent of Solomon, who erected the "King's Garden" in the Kidron Valley and a vineyard in Baal-Hamon.⁵⁸ Seow suggests that when speaking of making pools, Qoheleth can be referring to those close to Jerusalem.⁵⁹ Josephus mentions "Solomon's pool" situated between the Pool of Siloam and a place called Ophlas.⁶⁰ It is quite interesting to note that Qoheleth does not mention the building of the Temple among his accomplishments. It is hard to believe that the Temple could have been among the accomplishments that brought no satisfaction to Solomon.⁶¹ At the same time one should remember that Qoheleth does not recreate the experience of Solomon; rather, he uses the association with the King of Israel quite loosely in order to emphasize his royal background, privileges, and powers. Qoheleth wants to dispel any doubt that he is a king; therefore, everything he does, he does as a king "on a grand scale."⁶²

Qoheleth's investigation into the life of luxury and abundance results in a paradox: on the one hand, his heart finds joy and pleasure in his accomplishments **לִבִּי שָׂמַח מִכָּל־עֲמָלִי** "my heart rejoiced in all my work" (Eccl 2:10); yet, on the other hand, he does not find anything in his work that has a lasting advantage

⁵⁷ Koh, *Royal Autobiography*, 32.

⁵⁸ Jer 39:4; 52:7; 2 Kgs 25:4; Neh 3:15; Song 8:11. See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 128; Koh, *Royal Autobiography*, 32-33.

⁵⁹ 2 Kgs 18:17; 20:20; Isa 7:3; 22:9, 11; Neh 3:10. See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 129.

⁶⁰ W. Whiston, *Wars* 5.145 in *The Works of Josephus* (n. p., New Updated Translation; Peabody: Hendrickson Publishes, 1987).

⁶¹ Koh argues that the omission of the Temple "is logical since Qoheleth's recitation here is of his past and meaningless achievements." See Koh, *Royal Autobiography*, 33.

⁶² Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 78.

הכל הבל ורעות רוח ואין יתרון “everything is fleeting and pursuit of wind, and there is no profit” (Eccl 2:11).⁶³ The repetition of the phrase רעות רוח “pursuit of wind” brings to the readers’ minds Qoheleth’s conclusion about the abundance of wisdom (Eccl 1:18). The acquisition of royal opulence turns out to be the activities of a fool!⁶⁴ The achievements that speak of the power and riches of the king as in the case of a Near Eastern royal inscriptions do not constitute the good for which Qoheleth searches.⁶⁵ The description of the king’s works sounds similar to the prologue of the *Gilgamesh Epic* which mentions both Gilgamesh’s “toil” and his “hardships,” suggesting that these “toils” brought about the troubles the great hero had to go through.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, Qoheleth admits that he has found pleasure in his labour (Eccl 2:10). He believes that this pleasure is his “allotment” (חלק).⁶⁷ Qoheleth repeats the term חלק “allotment” eight times in the book (Eccl 2:10; 21; 3:22; 5:17–18 [Eng. 18–19]; 9:6, 9; 11:2). The frequency of this word suggests that this is one of the key terms in Qoheleth’s discourse. The word חלק “portion/allotment” defines a piece of land that constitutes one’s inheritance received after the conquest of the Promised Land (Num 26:52–56; Josh 13:7) and later, after the exile (Isa 61:7).⁶⁸ God is the originator of this allotment in the context of the settlement of Canaan. The Israelites have done nothing to deserve a given piece of land designated for their tribe or family. In this process, God, the true owner of the land, brings to fulfilment a promise that he has given to Abraham in Gen 17:8—to grant the land of Canaan to Abraham’s descendants as everlasting inheritance. Moreover, at the time of the division of the

⁶³ See also Robert V. McCabe, “The Message of Ecclesiastes,” *DBSJ* 1 (1996): 85-112.

⁶⁴ Similarly, Brown argues: “As king—the earthly counterpart to divinity in ancient Near Eastern tradition—Qoheleth is able to grasp something of the totality of existence but not in any satisfying or meaningful way.” See Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 30.

⁶⁵ Similarly Seow states: “Qoheleth itemizes the king’s many accomplishments only to show that even Solomon, Israel’s most glamorous king, is no better off than ordinary people in some ways.” See Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 151. See also Spina, “Qoheleth and the Reformation of Wisdom,” 277-78.

⁶⁶ “Epic of Gilgamesh,” (“Academy of Ancient Texts,” n. p. [cited 22 February, 2012. Online: <http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/mesopotamian/gilgamesh/tab1.htm>]). See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 133.

⁶⁷ NRSV translates חלק as “reward” (Eccl 2:10). Further, *TDOT* offers “portion” as the primary meaning for this word. See M. Tsevat, “חלק,” *TDOT* 4:447-51. As I explain below, translating חלק as “allotment” fits better the context of the book of Ecclesiastes.

⁶⁸ Cornelis Van Dam, “חלק,” *NIDOTTE* 2:161-63.

land Canaan has not been conquered yet; nonetheless, this "portion/allotment" is now theirs forever and by the ordinance of God it must stay in the family (Num 27:8–11).⁶⁹

The allotment of the land is necessary to ensure the survival and well-being of every Jewish family; yet, on the national level the whole of Israel possesses the whole of the land. Further, Aaron and the Levites are not given any land, because God is their inheritance and their "portion/allotment" (חלק; Num 18:20); he will take care and provide for them (Num 18:30–32). Therefore, while the Levites do not possess any land, they are supposed to benefit from the profits of the entire land. Such allotment is similar to the inheritance every Israelite and the entire nation of Israel have received.⁷⁰

This study proposes that rendering חלק as "allotment" rather than "portion" in the book of Ecclesiastes offers a better understanding of Qoheleth's message. Although the word "portion" shares the same semantic field as "allotment" and sometimes can be used interchangeably, the word "portion" conveys the idea of a part as opposed to the whole.⁷¹ Such meaning limits the understanding of חלק in Qoheleth's work and can potentially be inadequate.⁷² "Allotment" is perceived as the entirety of what one receives or what is assigned to a person for a particular purpose.⁷³

Qoheleth talks about חלק "allotment" as something very special and treasured, something that is assigned to him presumably by God since he does not explain who has assigned him this part. Qoheleth understands this "allotment" in terms of the Levitical inheritance. Qoheleth brings to the fore God's active engagement in this world, even if he does not speak of God explicitly. Hence, in Qoheleth's description of his own life and work, he is offering a possible answer to the thematic question of the book, "What advantage does a person have in all his

⁶⁹ L. Daniel Hawk, "Allotment of Land," *NIDB* 1:103-104.

⁷⁰ Van Dam, "חלק," *NIDOTTE* 2:162. See also Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, 58.

⁷¹ Jess Stein, ed., "portion," *RHDEL* 1120; Philip B. Gove, ed., "allotment," *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* 2:1768.

⁷² Van Dam, "חלק," *NIDOTTE* 2:162. See also Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, 58. A possible exception to this interpretation can be found in Eccl 11:2, where Qoheleth encourages a behavior of spontaneity and entrepreneurship by admonishing his readers to share their possessions with other people, "Give an allotment (חלק) to seven and even to eight, for you do not know what evil will happen upon the earth."

⁷³ Stein, "allot, allotment," *RHDEL* 40; Gove, "allotment," *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* 1:58.

labour?" (Eccl 1:3): accepting the allotment given to one by God by finding pleasure in his labour and being content with what he does and has (Eccl 2:10).⁷⁴

However, the word "allotment" carries certain limitations in space and time, for the dead have no חֵלֶק "allotment" with the living (cf. Eccl 9:6). The reality of labour and enjoyment, the life of contentment and satisfaction are only possible while a person is alive. The great and wise king has to share the same fate as an ordinary person. This does not make his labour meaningless, but, rather, fleeting. Even the success of the king *par excellence* is limited by death.⁷⁵

The abundance of wisdom helps Qoheleth understand that all the abundance this life could bring him as the extraordinary king has meaning only while he is alive and able to enjoy it. A legendary king whose experiences should be so much above those of a commoner, Qoheleth is in many ways no better than an ordinary person. The outstanding accomplishments that have surpassed everything that have been done before should present Qoheleth as the ultimate king and sage *par excellence*. However, Qoheleth's autobiography proves that legendary wealth, wisdom and accomplishments do not make him a legendary hero.⁷⁶ This study will now turn to the analysis of the limitations in Qoheleth's life and the effect that death as the ultimate limitation has on his existence and teaching.

3.2 Limitations in Qoheleth's Life (Eccl 2:11–16 and 17–23)

The abundance of wisdom and accomplishments seems to impose its own limitations on Qoheleth's existence, for his unsurpassed wisdom and greatness are impotent in the face of the inescapable death (Eccl 2:20–21). Thus, when Qoheleth turns to consider his life, he is trying to find a solution for this contradiction. This section will now analyze the limitations of wisdom and accomplishments in Qoheleth's autobiography. It will also determine how the experience of limitations in general and the constraint of death in particular impact Qoheleth's thought and move him to accept his life with contentment.

⁷⁴ See also Zuck, "God and Man in Ecclesiastes," 50.

⁷⁵ Seow points out the similarities between Qoheleth's view of human success and limitations imposed by death and the Gilgamesh Epic, in which Gilgamesh, who has succeeded every other king due to his wisdom and training, has to acknowledge his mortality and the fact that he will die as any person. See Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 152.

⁷⁶ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 151.

3.2.1 Limitations of Wisdom (Eccl 2:11–16)

2:11	ופניתי אני בכל־מעשי שעשו ידי ובעמל שעמלתי לעשות והנה הכל הבל ורעות רוח ואין יתרון תחת השמש	And I turned to all the work which had done my hands and to the labour which I have laboured, and, behold, everything is fleeting and pursuit of wind. And there is no profit under the sun.
2:12	ופניתי אני לראות חכמה והוללות וסכלות כי מה האדם שיבוא אחרי המלך את אשר־כבר עשוהו	And I turned to see wisdom and folly and foolishness for what [can do] a man who comes after the king [over] what has already been done?
2:13	וראיתי אני שיש יתרון לחכמה מן־הסכלות כיתרון האור מן־החשך	So I saw that there is profit to wisdom over foolishness like profit to light over darkness.
2:14	החכם עיניו בראשו והכסיל בחשך הולך וידעתי גם־אני שמקרה אחד יקרה את־כלם	The wise has eyes in his head but the fool walks in darkness. Yet, I also know that the same fate happens to both of them.
2:15	ואמרתי אני בלבי כמקרה הכסיל גם־אני יקרני ולמה חכמתי אני אז יותר ודברתי בלבי שגם־זה הבל	So I said in my heart, “If the fate of the fool will also happen to me, then why have I become excessively wise? And I said in my heart that this was also fleeting.
2:16	כי אין זכרון לחכם עם־הכסיל לעולם בשכבר הימים הבאים הכל נשכח ואיך ימות החכם עם־הכסיל	For there is no remembrance to the wise with the fool to eternity, as in the coming days everyone will be forgotten. How [can] the wise die with the fool?

Qoheleth returns to the theme of wisdom and its worth after having discussed his great accomplishments and their relative value and fleetingness in this life (Eccl 2:1–11). He turns to consider the significance of wisdom and foolishness (Eccl 2:12) for he has already experienced both to find what is good for human beings in their life under the sun (Eccl 2:1–3). He is interested in the impact that wisdom and folly have after life is over: “So I turned to see wisdom and folly and foolishness; for what can the man do who comes after the king?” (Eccl 2:12).⁷⁷ Qoheleth has already noted that the abundance of wisdom and knowledge has caused pain and anxiety in his present

⁷⁷ I follow Seow's suggestion, who points אַחֲרַי as אַחֲרֵי “after me” to continue the autobiographical narration without interruptions which the popular reading “after the king” offers. Thus this line is parallel to Eccl 2:18, which states: לְאָדָם שֶׁהֵיָה אַחֲרַי “to the man who comes after me.” See Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 134. See also Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 182-83.

life (cf. Eccl 1:18). Now he considers the impact wisdom may have after his death; he wants to know if his wisdom will be able to control the choice of his successor. He will answer his own question later in Eccl 2:19.

Before discussing the possibilities of succession, Qoheleth considers the importance of wisdom in the face of death. He acknowledges the fact that "there is profit to wisdom over foolishness" (Eccl 2:13), which seems to be a contradiction of his earlier statements: "there is no profit under the sun" (Eccl 2:11) and "in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge, increases pain" (Eccl 1:18). Qoheleth's claim that "wisdom excels folly" (Eccl 2:13–14a) seems to be contradicted by the fact that in death wisdom is as powerless as folly: the same fate happens to both the wise and the fools (Eccl 2:14b–16). Therefore, it seems death makes it meaningless to be wise.⁷⁸ Zimmerli suggests that: "Ecclesiastes sees death as power that takes away the power of the whole creation and even man's Wisdom."⁷⁹

Wisdom is הַבַּל "fleeting"; it cannot guarantee permanence or security. It can only remind humanity of its limited and mortal nature. Qoheleth offers a different reading of Deuteronomic theology that presents a sharp contrast between life and death. The words of Moses present life as wisdom, blessings and prosperity and death as wickedness and poverty, "See, I have given to you today life and good and death and evil" (Deut 30:15). The book of Proverbs teaches about following wisdom and finding prosperity and wealth, while wickedness always results in death,

Riches and honour are with me,
Lasting wealth and righteousness...
For whoever finds me, finds life
And obtains favour from the Lord.
But he who sins, his soul suffers;
All who hate me, love death.⁸⁰

Qoheleth believes that acquisition of wisdom and knowledge does not ensure life's benefits or provide the ability to secure life and future existence.⁸¹ Wisdom falls short in discerning the "will of the inscrutable God."⁸² Death is the end of both the wise and the fool. Neither one can enjoy the enduring comfort or permanence of immortality or

⁷⁸ Lo, "Death in Qoheleth," 93.

⁷⁹ Zimmerli, "The Place and Limit of the Wisdom," 158.

⁸⁰ Prov 8:18–19, 35–36. See also Deut 30:19; Prov 13:21; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 305.

⁸¹ Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 121.

⁸² Seow, "Theology When Everything is out of Control," *Int* 55 (2001): 237–49.

legacy (Eccl 2:15).⁸³ Yet, Qoheleth also believes that in this life wisdom does have an advantage over folly. It brings light (Eccl 2:13–14).⁸⁴ Vittoria D'Allario correctly points out that, "Qoheleth resorts to an irrefutable reality, which is the object of the experience of every human being, to explain or to bring to light a fundamental principle of the wisdom tradition: namely, the superiority of wisdom over folly at the existential level."⁸⁵

Qoheleth compares the profit of wisdom over folly to the profit of light over darkness (Eccl 2:13). This comparison is too significant to be seen as underscoring only a relative importance of wisdom, for when light and darkness are contrasted in the Bible, the relationship between life and death is discussed.⁸⁶ The prophets describe God's punishment on the disobedient Israel as darkness: "Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? (Amos 5:18–20) and "I am one who has seen affliction under the rod of God's wrath; he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light" (Lam 3:2). At the same time, they speak of the Lord's blessings on Israel as light: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined (Isa 9:1 [Eng. 2]) and "Your sun shall no more go down, or your moon withdraw itself; for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended" (Isa 60:20).⁸⁷

Life is associated with light as the idiom "light of life" proves: "For you have delivered my soul from death, and my feet from falling, so that I may walk before God in the light of life" (Ps 56:14 [Eng. 13]) and "God indeed does all these things, twice, three times, with mortals, to bring back their souls from the Pit, so that they may see the light of life" (Job 33:29–30).⁸⁸ Darkness, then, is synonymous with the realm of the dead where there is no light: "Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?" (Job 38:17) and "For the enemy

⁸³ Kathryn L. Reinhard, "Passing Sorrow, Passing Joy: Redefining Wisdom in Qoheleth," *STR* 51:1 (2007): 13-21.

⁸⁴ Later on Qoheleth states that wisdom gives life (Eccl 7:11–12) and strength (Eccl 7:19); it "makes one's face shine" and softens the expression of a person's face (Eccl 8:1); and finally, it helps one to be successful in life (Eccl 10:10).

⁸⁵ Vittoria D'Alario, "Liberté de Dieu ou Destin? Un Autre Dilemme dans l'Interprétation du Qohélet," in *Qoheleth in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors; Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 457-63. Enns suggests that while Qoheleth does not resolve the tension between these statements, he underscores the relative value of wisdom over the folly in this world. See Peter Enns, *Ecclesiastes* (THOTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 46-47.

⁸⁶ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 153.

⁸⁷ See also Ezek 32:7–8; Dan 2:22; Mic 7:8–9; Hab 3:11; Zec 14:7.

⁸⁸ See also Job 3:20, 23, 33:28; Ps 36:10 [Eng. 9].

has pursued me, crushing my life to the ground, making me sit in darkness like those long dead" (Ps 143:3).⁸⁹ Qoheleth shows the same understanding of darkness as the representation of death when he speaks of the unborn child's fate: "For it [unborn child] comes into vanity and goes into darkness, and in darkness its name is covered" (Eccl 6:4) or when he encourages his audience to live life to the fullest: "Even those who live many years should rejoice in them all; yet let them remember that the days of darkness will be many" (cf. Eccl 11:8).⁹⁰

Taking into consideration the relationship between the concepts of light and darkness and the realms they represent, Qoheleth encourages his audience to think of wisdom as having a life-giving and life-sustaining quality and states: "The wise has eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness" (Eccl 2:14).⁹¹ He underscores the Old Testament view of wisdom's ability to protect a person from wandering about in the shadows of ignorance⁹² and to guide his ethical behaviour.⁹³ Qoheleth seems to use extreme opposites like light and darkness to show the profit that wisdom has in this world.

Nonetheless, wisdom is powerless in the face of death and, what is even worse, death strips wisdom off all its advantages over folly: "How can the wise die just like the fool?" (Eccl 2:16). Herein lies the main contradiction of wisdom for Qoheleth: his great wisdom has enabled him to rise above others and to achieve so much; yet, it is incapable of warding off death or even change his fate (Eccl 2:14b–16). Qoheleth understands that everybody is mortal, but death obliterates every distinction that is important to human beings: the wise and the fools die alike (Eccl 2:15); just as the humans and the animals die alike (cf. Eccl 3:19); the righteous and the wicked die alike (cf. Eccl 9:2–3). Death is a common fate!

Such conclusion stands in a sharp contrast to the wisdom sayings recorded in the book of Proverbs. It claims, for example, that wisdom has the power to prolong the life of those who seek it: "My child, do not forget my [wisdom] teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments; for length of days and years of life and abundant

⁸⁹ See also Ps 49:20 [Eng. 19]; Job 3:16; 33:28.

⁹⁰ Qoheleth speaks of a death-like existence of those who hoard the wealth in Eccl 5:17. I will address this passage in another chapter.

⁹¹ Some believe that Qoheleth quotes a proverb at Eccl 2:14. On the use of quotations in the book of Ecclesiastes See Gordis, *Koheleth*, 221–22; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 153.

⁹² See Job 12:24–25; 37:19; 38:2; Prov 9:13; 13:16.

⁹³ See Prov 2:13; 4:19; 20:20; Ps 82:5.

Theme of Contentment in Qoheleth's Autobiography

welfare they will give you" (Prov 3:1–2).⁹⁴ Only a fool's life is supposed to be cut short: "those who miss me [wisdom] injure themselves; all who hate me love death" (Prov 8:36). Further, it is said: "the instruction of the wise is a spring of life, so that one may escape the snares of death" (Prov 13:14; 14:27). The sages believed that those who found wisdom, found life (Prov 8:35). This is not to say that they thought of immortality or a complete avoidance of death. Rather, they exaggerated the benefits of wisdom to encourage a wise way of life: wisdom and folly are like "light" and "darkness" or "life" and "death."⁹⁵

Qoheleth appropriates this rhetoric when he compares wisdom and folly (Eccl 2:13–14), but chooses to focus on a different relationship between the two; he calls attention to the fact that in the face of death there is no distinction between them. Wisdom has value only in this life (Eccl 2:15)! The heart of Qoheleth's problem lies in the fact that he will have a fate similar to the fool's while being a sage *per excellence*. Seow suggests: "The fact that even the archetypical wise person is subject to the same fate as the ordinary fool makes mockery of any oversimplification about different destinies for the wise and the foolish."⁹⁶ Qoheleth's observations resonate with the wisdom of the Proverbs that states: "Do you see man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him" (Prov 26:12). Qoheleth does not suggest that wisdom is unnecessary; he warns against seeking great wisdom for its own sake. He has already shared with his audience his own experience of gaining great wisdom that only brought pain and anguish (Eccl 1:18). In Eccl 2:15 he elaborates on this thought and adds that the excess of wisdom does not change a person's fate.⁹⁷

Further, Qoheleth observes that death not only erases the distinctions between the wise and the foolish; it also eradicates any memory of either one (Eccl 2:16). He sheds light on the exception in the relationship between death and human memory that Proverbs seems to overlook: "The memory of the righteous is a blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot" (Prov 10:7).⁹⁸ Qoheleth points out that death brings

⁹⁴ See also Prov 4:10; 9:11; 15:24.

⁹⁵ These extremes are especially noticeable in Proverbs 1–9. See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 154.

⁹⁶ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 154.

⁹⁷ See also Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 184; Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, 134.

⁹⁸ See also Zuck, "God and Man in Ecclesiastes," 49. Williams contends that the righteous order spelled out in the book of Proverbs is had to be seen "under the sun" from a human limited perspective: "Proverbs affirms by *faith* (not by sight as it commonly assumed) that a righteous order exists in the world, but Qoheleth contends that righteous order cannot be discerned by *sight*. This latter premise, that even the wise cannot explain the apparent lack of order in the world, is simply Qoheleth's way of expounding on the limitations of wisdom...Ecclesiastes was intended to balance the optimism of

neither a blessing nor a curse; it brings forgetfulness, a thought that is reminiscent of his earlier statement about human lack of remembrance (Eccl 1:11).⁹⁹

Qoheleth's disappointment in wisdom causes him to hate his life (Eccl 2:17). Given Qoheleth's high view of life, this contradictory statement might take the readers by surprise.¹⁰⁰ However, the resolution to Qoheleth's frustration with wisdom can be found in the main limitation of wisdom in the face of death: wisdom has no control or power over the future. Guttridge's evaluation of Qoheleth's words is correct when she argues that "the fact that he reacts to this conviction by 'hating life' shows that his original desire to attain lasting glory and control—as the traditional epitome of power and success, the wise King-figure—was extreme: beyond the limits proper to a mortal, and hence unrealistic and inappropriate."¹⁰¹ His disillusionment with the power of wisdom to achieve an impact which would last beyond his own death stems from his acknowledgment of his own mortality and his inability to control his life or the life of others.

Qoheleth masterfully portrays the contradiction surrounding wisdom as part of human existence; on the one hand, wisdom offers great advantage to those who seek and live with it. On the other hand, the power of wisdom is restricted to the life "under the sun," for it has no control over the destiny of a person. Death imposes its own boundaries on wisdom. While Qoheleth's initial reaction to such incongruity is negative, his final conclusion reflects a realistic outlook on life. He suggests that contentment and the ability to embrace life allow him to find balance between being wise and acknowledging wisdom's limitations (Eccl 2:24–26). This passage will be addressed in Section 4.2 Contentment in Qoheleth's Experience.

faith with the realism of observation." See Neal D. Williams, "A Biblical Theology of Ecclesiastes" (ThD. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1984), 85-86 (*italics his*).

⁹⁹ See also Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose*, 160.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Eccl 2:24–25; 3:12–13; 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20]; 9:4–10. Qoheleth is not alone in expressing the feelings of despair and hatred towards life. Job shares these sentiments in discussing his life (Job 3:3–26). Yet for Job as well as Qoheleth such outbursts are temporary and short as both present a balanced view of life (Job 42:1–6; Eccl 2:24–26). Fredericks grounds Qoheleth's feeling of hatred towards life in his passionate response to the divine curse of the Fall. See Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 98. See also Anderson, "The Curse of Work in Qoheleth," 109-111.

¹⁰¹ Coralie Ann Guttridge, "Wisdom, Anti-Wisdom and the Ethical Power of Uncertainty: The Book of Ecclesiastes/Qoheleth in the Context of Biblical and Greek Wisdom Theory" (PhD. Diss., University College London, 1998), 114-15.

3.2.2 Limitations of Accomplishments (Eccl 2:17–23)

2:17	ושנאתי את־החיים כי רע עלי המעשה שנעשה תחת השמש כי־הכל הבל ורעות רוח	So I hated life for evil to me was what was done under the sun, for everything is fleeting and pursuit of wind.
2:18	ושנאתי אני את־כל־עמלי שאני עמל תחת שמש שאניחנו לאדם שיהיה אחרי	And I hated [the fruit of] all my labour which I laboured under the sun, which I will leave to the man who will be after me.
2:19	ומי יודע החכם יהיה או סכל וישלט בכל־עמלי שעמלתי ושחכמתי תחת שמש גם־זה הבל	And who knows if he will be wise or a fool. Yet he will have control over all my work in which I worked and was wise under the sun. This also is fleeting.
2:20	וסבותי אני ליאש את־לבי על כל־העמל שעמלתי תחת השמש	So I turned to despair my heart over all the labour in which I laboured under the sun.
2:21	כי־יש אדם שעמלו בחכמה ובדעת ובכשרון ולאדם שלא עמל־בו יתננו חלקו גם־זה הבל ורעה רבה	For [here] is a man who has laboured with wisdom, knowledge and success and to a man who has not worked for it, he will leave his allotment. This is fleeting and a great evil.
2:22	כי מה־הוה לאדם בכל־עמלו וברעיון לבו שהוא עמל תחת שמש	For what is there for a man in all his labour and striving of his heart with which he labours under the sun?
2:23	כי כל־ימיו מכאבים וכעס עונו גם־בלילה לא־שכב לבו גם־זה הבל הוא	Because all of his days pain and vexation are his preoccupation. Also in the night his heart does not rest. This is also fleeting.

In narrating his story, Qoheleth considers two main areas: his wisdom and his achievements. He has discovered that while wisdom enabled him to do mighty works of royal proportions and significance, it has failed him in exercising control over the future (Eccl 2:16). Paradoxically, this very wisdom allows him to see that great accomplishments cannot bring about any change in his destiny; death robs him of his achievements, making them fleeting and impossible to retain (Eccl 2:17).

Qoheleth believes that the brevity of life affects what he can take from his work. The outcome of his labour is temporary: “all is fleeting and pursuit of wind” (Eccl 2:17). Anderson suggests that Qoheleth’s negative view toward work in light of the impending death is grounded in the curse of Gen 3:17–19: “Whether one does one’s work with wisdom or foolishness, the results have the same frustrated yield and

conclusion: Death is the ultimate expression of that curse."¹⁰² Qoheleth will have to leave everything that he has acquired to his successor because he cannot take anything with him to Sheol. People go naked to their final abode, just as they came into this world (cf. Eccl 5:14–15 [Eng. 15–16]).

Qoheleth points out that the funerary ritual¹⁰³ does not change the status or the fate of the deceased: even though they have worked hard all their life, they cannot take their gain¹⁰⁴ to the grave (cf. Eccl 5:14–15 [Eng. 15–16]). Qoheleth seems to find such situation frustrating, for he utters a rather shocking statement in Eccl 2:17: "So I hated life." It appears that he views death as desirable, as something much better than life. Crenshaw believes that Qoheleth moves toward "radical denial of life's essential goodness."¹⁰⁵ He further demonstrates that Qoheleth's radicalism and negativism make Qoheleth's life and journey rather lonely because he goes against the teachings of the prophets and sages, who speak about God rewarding virtue and hard work with wealth and longevity.¹⁰⁶ What Crenshaw seems to overlook is the circumstances which cause Qoheleth to make this utterance. He finds no joy in life because he has realized that getting ahead by acquiring wealth and power cannot change one's destiny, as the same fate awaits everybody (Eccl 2:15–16).¹⁰⁷

From his disillusionment with life in general (Eccl 2:17), Qoheleth discusses his grief about the loss of his accomplishments (Eccl 2:18). He hates the fruit of his labour, not only because he will lose it after death, but because he has no control over

¹⁰² Anderson, "The Curse of Work in Qoheleth," 110.

¹⁰³ Some scholars suggest that the Israelites supplied their dead with food and provision on their way to Sheol just as their Canaanite neighbors did. See Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, "Life in Judah from the Perspective of the Dead," *NEA* 65 (2002): 120-30; Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religion: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 328; Xella, "Death and the Afterlife in Canaanite and Hebrew Thought," 2059-70. For Canaanite mortuary cult see Dennis Pardee, *Ritual and Cult at Ugarit* (ed. Theodore J. Lewis; SBLWAW 10; Atlanta: SBL, 2002); John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

¹⁰⁴ Rashbam in his commentary on the book of Ecclesiastes interprets the word עֲמָל "labour" as referring mainly to wealth and the fruit of one's labor, and seldom identifies "labour" with work itself (Eccl 6:7). See Rashbam, *The Commentary on Qoheleth*, 47.

¹⁰⁵ Crenshaw, "The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth," 575.

¹⁰⁶ Crenshaw, "The Shadow of Death in Qoheleth," 575.

¹⁰⁷ The transience of this world and its material life is also addressed in the Akkadian wisdom text *The Wisdom of Supe-ameli—A Deathbed Debate between a Father and a Son*. The son after having discussed the issues of success and the value of wealth comes to the same conclusion as Qoheleth—death nullifies the significance of any accomplishments in this life: "All the property and the bread and the tax—the king, it's his money—will go out." See Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, "The Wisdom of Supe-ameli—A Deathbed Debate between a Father and a Son," in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel* (SBLSymS 36; ed. Richard J. Clifford; Atlanta: SBL, 2007), 37-51. The son disagrees with his father's advice to strive for material success because of the inevitability of death.

choosing the person who will inherit his wealth. The possibility of the heir being foolish brings despair to Qoheleth (Eccl 2:19). The lack of remembrance which is common to humanity is bad enough, but when coupled with a foolish management of one's assets, it may completely ruin the good reputation even of a wise king like Qoheleth. Brown argues that Qoheleth's angst regarding the human inability to achieve any lasting gain stems from the socio-economic realities of the society in which Qoheleth lived.¹⁰⁸ However, such reasoning does not account for Qoheleth's anguish about losing lasting fame and legacy.¹⁰⁹

Qoheleth finds it preposterous that one can inherit the wealth for which he has not worked (Eccl 2:21). The wise conduct which is so important to the sage seems little to do with the outcome of his labour. The achievements as well as wisdom cannot secure what happens after the person's death or what happens to his possessions. "The one who has laboured with wisdom and knowledge and skill" does not even receive the reward of knowing if one's accomplishment would bring profit to others or not (Eccl 2:21). The traditional wisdom teaches that the righteous and the wise are deserving of the inheritance: "Tragedy pursues the sinners, but good will reward the righteous. A good person gives an inheritance to the children's children, but the wealth of the sinner is hoarded for the righteous" (Prov 13:21–22).

Qoheleth's personal life and the observation of the world around him have moved him to develop a more complex view of wisdom. While he affirms the traditional wisdom, he also points out its limitations in securing a person's future: nobody can know for sure what kind of person would inherit the wealth (Eccl 2:18–19). The person may be wise or foolish; hence an unworthy fool may end up with the inheritance of the righteous instead of having his life end in tragedy. Qoheleth finds "lack of distinction between the deserving and the undeserving ... the 'great sadness'" (Eccl 2:21).¹¹⁰ Reality does not always follow the rules people have put down for themselves. In fact, Qoheleth realizes that he has no control over the future of his own family.¹¹¹ He points out that people cannot find true satisfaction in their achievements because they may be easily lost in the case of death or mishandling by a foolish heir.

¹⁰⁸ Brown argues: "Qoheleth lived in an era of unprecedented commercial expansion, rife with both entrepreneurial opportunities and incalculable financial risk," which naturally made any business venture susceptible to failure. Brown, "Whatever Your Hands Find to Do," 272.

¹⁰⁹ See also Reinhard, "Passing Sorrow, Passing Joy," 17.

¹¹⁰ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 156. See also Roland E. Murphy, "The *Pensees* of Coheleth," *CBQ* 17 (1955): 184–94 (188).

¹¹¹ See also George R. Castellino, "Qohelet and His Wisdom," *CBQ* 30 (1968): 15–28 (27).

Thus, such accomplishments cause only frustration; the more effort has gone into gaining them, the more frustration will be felt at a possibility of losing them. Human beings are powerless in gaining advantage through their accomplishments.

Though Qoheleth considers himself to be the wisest of kings, he has little power in determining what will happen to his wealth. If the most famous king is unable to exercise his control over his possessions in the end, his readers should not expect a different outcome in their lives. The audience must have been surprised to hear that this all-powerful king is not that powerful in real life. Wealth and authority do not bring satisfaction and security. He might have to look somewhere else to find fulfilment and peace of mind.

In view of such limitations of his ability to control his wealth, Qoheleth restates the main question of his investigation which initiated his search (Eccl 1:3) and still drives it: "For what is there to a man in all his labour and striving of his heart, with which he labours under the sun?" (Eccl 2:22) And while he does not offer an answer to this question, in Eccl 2: 23 he speaks of human labour as bringing "pain" (מכאבים), "vexation" (כעס), and lack of rest (בלילה לא־שכב לבו; lit. "in the night his heart does not rest"). This language is reminiscent of his assessment of much wisdom bringing "much vexation" (כעס) and great knowledge resulting in "increase of pain" (מכאבים; Eccl 1:18). Qoheleth suggests that the excess of even good things results in making his life miserable.

Further, Qoheleth points out that striving for material gain is transitory and fleeting (Eccl 2:23). Qoheleth portrays labour and effort that go into acquiring wealth as short-lived and creating no permanent reality. On the contrary, the quest for material gain creates a false sense of security, fulfilment and happiness.¹¹² Such false reality eventually brings frustration and disappointment, which Qoheleth has personally experienced. Yet, it is a part of the process that leads to contentment, which he finds to be the ultimate answer to his programmatic question about finding profit in life, and which he turns to discuss in the very next section (Eccl 2:24–26).¹¹³

Qoheleth's personal experience moves him to observe another contradiction in life: work brings satisfaction and enjoyment (Eccl 2:10); yet, working for the sake of gaining and accumulating more wealth offers no lasting satisfaction or control over

¹¹² See also Castellino, "Qoheleth and His Wisdom," 17.

¹¹³ Ecclesiastes 2:24–26 will be discussed in section 3.4 God's Gift of Contentment: Qoheleth's Answer to Life's Contradictions.

his future (Eccl 2:19); such labour does not offer any profit (Eccl 2:11). It robs the person of rest and enjoyment of life and fills his existence with anxiety, pain and grief (Eccl 2:23). Qoheleth's autobiography shows the limitations of human achievements (in the form of labour, material possessions and pleasure) and of wisdom. Having looked at both sides of the contradictions, Qoheleth is now ready to propose his own response: a life of contentment in the face of death (Eccl 2:24–26). Qoheleth's teaching on the value of contentment in one's life will be considered next.

4. Contentment: Qoheleth's Response to Life's Contradictions

Qoheleth's life story has taught him that life is full of contradictions. His royal wisdom and accomplishments have made his experience superior to others; yet they have exposed significant limitations for him as they have proven impotent in securing lasting gain, memory and immortality.¹¹⁴ In the face of death nothing can prevail. Qoheleth returns to his programmatic question of finding profit in life at the end of his autobiographical narration (Eccl 2:22) to demonstrate that one should consider profit in terms of leading a good life and being content with what one already possesses (Eccl 2:24–26).

Qoheleth will reiterate this question several times throughout the book as a way to guide his readers to the conclusions he wants them to make. At times Qoheleth answers his own question about the profit (cf. Eccl 2:22, 24; 3:9, 12–13; 5:15 [Eng. 16], 17 [Eng. 18]). And at times he leaves it without an immediate answer as if to make sure his readers ponder his question on their own (cf. Eccl 1:3; 2:10; 6:12). The interplay between these questions and answers or lack thereof moves the readers through Qoheleth's message to the final conclusion in Eccl 11:9 about living the life of contentment which is pleasing to God. Thus, the programmatic question of Eccl 1:3 and the complete answer of Eccl 11:9 frame Qoheleth's discourse (see the chart below).

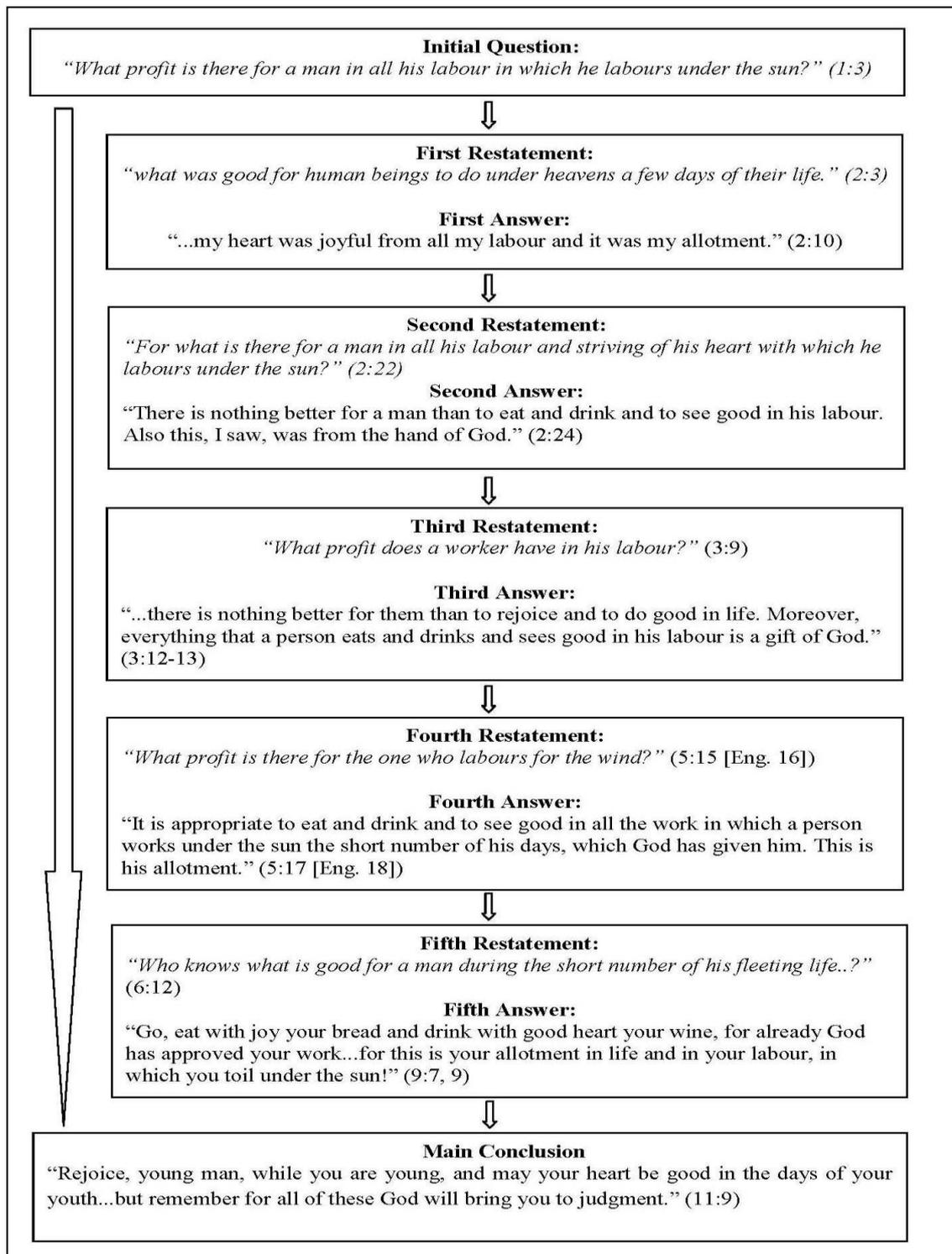
Qoheleth encourages his audience to learn to live in the world "under the sun" acknowledging the power of death and yet being able to live abundant lives.¹¹⁵ The way to do it, according to Qoheleth, is to be content. While the word "contentment" is not used in the book, Qoheleth joins together two words in his work **רָבַח** "profit"

¹¹⁴ See also Green, "I Undertook Great Works," 285.

¹¹⁵ Kathleen Farmer, "Contentment," *NIDB* 1: 728.

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and טוב "good" to show that one can find profit in life only by leading a good life and accepting it as God's gift, which reflects an attitude of contentment.¹¹⁶



Qoheleth repeats such terms as "satisfy", "fill", "eat", "drink", "see good in one's labour", "sleep", and "enjoy"¹¹⁷ to show that contentment is seen in enjoying

¹¹⁶ Cf. Eccl 2:13; 3:9; 5:7 [Eng. 8], 15, [Eng. 16]; 7:12; 10:10–11 and Eccl 2:3, 24; 3:12, 13; 4:6; 5:17; 6:9, 12; 9:7–9.

simple pleasures in life like eating, drinking, and finding rest and pleasure in one's labour (cf. Eccl 2:24–26; 5:11 [Eng. 12]). It also requires willingness to accept the good with the bad which is coming from the hand of God as a sign of trust in him (cf. Eccl 7:14; 8:12–13; 12:14).

The following section will demonstrate how Qoheleth brings out and develops the theme of contentment in his autobiography (Eccl 1:12–2:26). To do this the meaning and use of the term רוֹבֵחַ “profit” in the book of Ecclesiastes will be examined first. Then there follows the analysis of the word טוֹב “good.” Finally, the relationship between these two terms will be established to see how Qoheleth uses them to develop the theme of contentment in his autobiography.

4.1 Qoheleth's Use of the Terms “Profit” and “Good”

The main question that guides Qoheleth's experience is about finding “profit” in this life. He is not concerned about what happens after a person dies. This does not mean that he is not interested in the afterlife, because he does consider the consequences of people's actions at the ultimate judgment (Eccl 3:17; 8:13; 12:4). However, he also knows that the dead are often forgotten (Eccl 1:11) and what is more important, they can no longer be involved in or influence the existence of the living (Eccl 9:5–6).

The use of the phrase תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ “under the sun” designates the parameters of his quest, “What profit is there for a man in all his labour in which he labours under the sun?” (Eccl 1:3).¹¹⁸ When Qoheleth exclaims that “it is good for the eyes to see the sun” (Eccl 11:7), he highlights the worth of a human life. In his mind, “to see the sun” is “to be alive.”¹¹⁹ The psalmist speaks of “living with the sun” as a metaphor for human existence in this world (Ps 72:5). A Canaanite inscription *Tabnit of Sidon* presents the dead as those who are separated from “the living under the sun,” contrasting this world with the netherworld, “the resting place with the shades” which

¹¹⁷ The words “joy,” “enjoyment,” and “contentment” are part of the same semantic field. In fact in French, the words *joie*, *contentment*, *plaisir*, *satisfaction* (joy, contentment, pleasure, satisfaction) are synonymous. Humbert has adequately shown how the term שְׂמֵחָה can mean *contentement* (contentment) in Ex 4:14; Jug 9:19 and *joie* (pleasure) in Eccl 2:1–2. See P. Humbert, “‘Laetari’ et ‘exultare’ dans le vocabulaire religieux de l’Ancien Testament” *Revue d’histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 22 (1942): 185-214. I will demonstrate the implications of the terms “enjoy,” “enjoyment,” and “pleasure” for the present study and their relationship to the concept of contentment in the book of Ecclesiastes below.

¹¹⁸ See also Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 219.

¹¹⁹ Schoors, *The Preacher Thought to Find Pleasing Words*, 28, 60.

does not have the sun.¹²⁰ Psalm 58:9 [Eng. 8] speaks of a stillborn as the one who “never sees the sun.” Qoheleth echoes this idea in Eccl 6:5 when he states that an unborn child “never sees the sun or knows anything.” In Job 3:16 the phrase “to see light” is negatively used as well in relation to a stillborn child. Qoheleth uses the expression “to see the sun” metaphorically to signify “life” and his “delight of mere living.”¹²¹ In Ecclesiastes 11:7 he deems this earthly life good and pleasing. Ogden suggests that “the adjectives *mātôq* and *tôb* in parallel, together with *hā'ôr* and its complement *lir'ôt 'et-haššemeš*, provide the opening forceful statement about the pleasure of life; it is indeed marvellous to be alive.”¹²² Thus, Qoheleth's quest is focused on finding the “profit” which makes the human existence in this world “good.”

4.1.1 Qoheleth's Use of the Term יָרָוּן “Profit”

The verbal form יָרָוּ is frequently used in the Old Testament to mean “to be left over”, “to remain.”¹²³ This primary connotation can be seen in 2 Sam 17:12 which speaks of Hushai's advice to Absalom to destroy David and his men with him so that neither he nor his men “will be left.” After the plague of locust no green “was left” in all of Egypt (Ex 10:15). A similar understanding of the term can be seen in the Old Testament passages which speak of thanksgiving sacrifices, enemies and manna because none of those have been allowed to remain for later. A paschal lamb must be eaten completely and the people should “let none remain until the morning” (Ex12:10). A sacrifice of praise to the Lord must be eaten on the day of the sacrifice with nothing “left over” till morning (Lev 22:29–30). If any of the Canaanites were allowed “to remain” in the Promised Land, they would become a threat to the Israelites (Num 33:55). Manna cannot “be left” till next morning according to Moses'

¹²⁰ “Tabnit of Sidon,” translated by Franz Rosenthal (*ANE*, 310-11). A similar idea is present in another Canaanite inscription *Eshmun'azar of Sidon*, in which Eshmun'azar king of Sidon warns “the living under the sun” not to trouble him or his sarcophagus in fear of being cursed by him. See “Eshun'azar of Sidon, translated by Franz Rosenthal (*ANE*, 311-12). Seow offers a further distinction between the phrases “under the sun” and “under the heavens.” He suggests that “under the heavens” speaks of cosmos in general and “under the sun” signifies the temporal nature of human existence. See Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 105-106.

¹²¹ Barton, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 184.

¹²² See Graham Ogden, “Qoheleth XI 7–XII 8: Qoheleth's Summons to Enjoyment and Reflection,” *VT* 34 (1984): 27-37 (30).

¹²³ T. Kronholm, “יָרָוּ,” *TDOT* 6:485; David Latoundji, “יָרָוּ,” *NIDOTTE* 2:571-74; Koehler and Baumgartner, “יָרָוּ,” *HALOT* 2:451-52.

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words in Ex 16:19. In prophetic writings the derivative of the verb יָתַר “to remain” comes to mean “remnant” that God spares after the exile (Isa 1:9; 4:3; Jer 44:7; Ezek 6:8; 12:16).

The term יִתְרוֹן “profit” occurs nine times in the book of Ecclesiastes, the only book in the Old Testament which employs it. The participle יוֹתֵר “advantage, remainder”¹²⁴ is used seven times in the Book of Ecclesiastes.¹²⁵ In its original meaning the term “profit” signifies “a material gain, an excess, or surplus.”¹²⁶

1:3	מה־יתרון לאדם בכל־עמלו	What profit is there to a man in all his labour?
2:11	ואין יתרון תחת השמש	And there is no profit under the sun.
2:13	וראיתי אני שיש יתרון לחכמה מן־הסבלות ביתרון האור מן־החשך	But I saw that there is profit to wisdom over foolishness as profit to light over darkness.
3:9	מה־יתרון העושה באשר הוא עמל	What profit is there to the worker in which he works?
5:8	ויתרון ארץ בכל היא מלך לשדה נעבד	But the profit to the land, in all, a king for a plowed land.
5:15	ומה־יתרון לו שיעמל לרוח	And what profit is there for the one who works for the wind?
7:12	יתרון דעת החכמה תחיה בעליה	The profit of knowledge is that wisdom preserves its master.
10:10 ¹²⁷	ויתרון הכשיר חכמה	A profit is to make wisdom appropriate.

¹²⁴ Latoundji, “יתר,” *NIDOTTE* 2:571-74; T. Kronholm, “יתר,” *TDOT* 6:482-91.

¹²⁵ Eccl 2:15; 6:8, 11; 7:11, 16; 12:9, 12. Apart from this book it occurs in 1 Sam 15:15 which describes the event when the Israelites spared the best of the animals they had taken from the Amalekites and sacrificed “the rest.” It is also used in Est. 6:6 to describe Haman’s advantage in his own eyes over everybody else as he rhetorically asks, “To whom will the king be willing to do the honor more than me?” The noun “abundance, profit” (מוֹתֵר) can be clearly defined by comparing it with its antonym “want” (מַחְסוֹר), “the plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to want” (Ps 14:23. See also Ps 21:5). See Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words*, 394.

¹²⁶ Latoundji, “יתר,” *NIDOTTE* 2:571; Kronholm, “יתר,” *TDOT* 6:487-88.

¹²⁷ I understand this sentence as a verbal clause with the hiphil infinitive construct functioning as a noun. See Waltke and O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 600-601; Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 68; Ronald J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline*, (2nd ed.; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 35; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 318. Cf. Frendo’s translation that reads: “the advantage

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The first answer to the question about profit posed in Eccl 1:3 comes in Eccl 2:11 after Qoheleth has described his great works and achievements. He states that profit is lacking in everything that he has accomplished, “there is no profit (יִתְרוֹן) under the sun.” Ecclesiastes 3:9 offers another rhetorical question about יִתְרוֹן “profit” in one’s labour, “What profit does one have in his labour?” The implicit answer seems to come in the following verse as Qoheleth speaks of the “business” (עֲנִיָּה) that God has given to humanity (Eccl 3:10). The mentioning of this word takes the readers back to Eccl 1:13 where Qoheleth qualifies this “business” (עֲנִיָּה) as “evil” (רָע) and compares it to a futile pursuit, “pursuit of wind” (Eccl 1:14). Therefore, it is possible to understand his answer as negative in Eccl 3:10 for, according to Qoheleth, people have no control over the events in their lives which occur in the “appropriate times” set by God (Eccl 3:11).

Ecclesiastes 5:8 [Eng. 9] speaks of יִתְרוֹן “profit” which a land may have. This verse presents a significant difficulty to an interpreter due to the awkwardness of the syntax and lack of coherence with the preceding and following verses.¹³⁴ Qoheleth could be arguing that the land is profitable when it is cultivated for what it can yield.¹³⁵ Such translation is very helpful as it moves the interpretation of this verse away from the discussion of the political and/or administrative system of the land and places it into an ethical arena. This reading is consistent with Qoheleth’s view of יִתְרוֹן “profit” in other passages.¹³⁶ Qoheleth points out that the acquisition of land does not bring advantage to the one who owns it if this land is seen only as an investment.¹³⁷ The land should be used as a means to produce food and give nourishment to the one who cultivates it. This verse, therefore, highlights the idea that profit can be found only if the land is used for what it can produce, rather than for

¹³⁴ Seow (*Ecclesiastes*, 204) suggests that this verse is “hopelessly corrupt.” Schoors (*The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words*, 426) calls it “obscure” and does not offer a definite meaning for this verse. Gordis (*Koheleth*, 250) sees it as “an insuperable crux.”

¹³⁵ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 204. He understands בִּכְלָהּ either as an infinitive construct or a noun from the root כוּל/כִּיל “to measure, measure out” (Cf. Isa 40:12, כֹּל “he measured”). He also suggests that this noun can be related to Hebrew כָּל כָּל “to support, nourish.” The final ה on בִּכְלָהּ is 3fs suffix which has אֶרֶץ as its referent. The ל is epexegetical.

¹³⁶ Cf. Eccl 2:13; 7:12; 10:10.

¹³⁷ Cf. Isa 5:18, “Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!”

acquiring it for its own sake. Qoheleth gives a positive answer to the question of profit in this instance.

The inquiry of the יִתְרוֹן “profit” in a person's labour is the focus of Qoheleth's observations in Eccl 5:15 [Eng. 16], “what profit (יִתְרוֹן) is there as he labours for the wind?” This rhetorical question entails a negative answer again. But this time the reason for the absence of profit in one's labour resides in the fact that a person is unable to take his possessions which he has worked for in his life with him when he dies (Eccl 5:14–15 [Eng. 15–16]).¹³⁸ Qoheleth seems to suggest that there is nothing in this life that can guarantee advantage of any kind to human beings either because they have no power or control over the circumstances in life (cf. Eccl 3:9), or because they are unable to carry their possessions and achievements with them to their graves (Eccl 5:15). Ultimately, death imposes a levelling bar on everybody. Humans die like animals having no יִתְרוֹן “profit” over the animal world (Eccl 3:19).

Qoheleth develops the idea of יִתְרוֹן “profit” that wisdom gives to a person in Eccl 7:11–12, “Wisdom is as good as an inheritance, a profit (יִתְרוֹן) to those who see the sun. For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money, and the profit (יִתְרוֹן) of knowledge is that wisdom gives life¹³⁹ to the one who possesses it.” Qoheleth suggests that money and inheritance always bring a financial yield to a person who has them. When he compares wisdom and material benefits, he underscores the life-giving power of wisdom. He invites his audience to think of יִתְרוֹן “profit” in a non-monetary sense, for the profit of wisdom is that it is capable of affecting the life itself.¹⁴⁰

The saying in Eccl 10:11, “If the snake bites before the charm, there is no profit (יִתְרוֹן) to the charmer,” suggests that יִתְרוֹן “profit” consists in a person's ability to utilize his skills; otherwise they are useless. This saying parallels Qoheleth's teaching on יִתְרוֹן “profit” of wisdom in the preceding verse, “If the iron is blunt, and one does not whet the edge, then more strength must be exerted; but wisdom has profit (יִתְרוֹן) to succeed” (Eccl 10:10). This יִתְרוֹן “profit” is seen in the fact that

¹³⁸ See also William H. U. Anderson, “A Note on *ytr* for Qoheleth,” *JNSL* 26 (2000): 133-36.

¹³⁹ A similar interpretation of the verb חַיָּה “to live, to give life” can be seen in Ps 85:7 [Eng.6].

¹⁴⁰ R. G. Moulton, *Ecclesiastes and the Wisdom of Solomon* (New York: Macmillan, 1902), 152.

wisdom offers a clear guidance and direction in life unlike folly that leads a person in the darkness (Eccl 2:3; 6:8–9). Qoheleth presents a stark contrast between wisdom and folly: like light over darkness, life over death.¹⁴¹ Thus, יִתְרוֹן “profit” of wisdom lies in its application in the present because nothing can withstand death, not even wisdom (Eccl 2:15).¹⁴²

Qoheleth uses the word יִתְרוֹן “profit” with its economic connotations to invite his readers to think of profit metaphorically. Nothing has a lasting value; but wisdom and labour benefit those who use them in the present.¹⁴³ Qoheleth teaches his readers about יִתְרוֹן “profit” in a manner similar to the way God taught the Israelites about the value and purpose of manna. Manna was to be used and enjoyed at the moment, with “nothing left over till the morning” (Ex 16:19). When the people disobeyed and gathered too much of the manna, they found out that it was of no use to them (Ex 16:20). Yet, when they gathered it daily, regardless of whether they thought it was little or much, it was enough for them for that day (Ex 16:18). God was teaching them to be content with what he had given them and learn to enjoy it in the moment. Qoheleth forces his audience to think of יִתְרוֹן “profit” as something that should not “be left over till the morning.” Everything in life should be used and benefited from in the present, because what God has allotted is enough.

When Qoheleth speaks of יִתְרוֹן “profit”, he employs two meanings of this word: material and ethical. Both meanings are important to him when he compares the profit of wisdom to the profit of one's inheritance (Eccl 7:11–12). However, Qoheleth does not stop at the level of the material meaning; rather, he uses the term יִתְרוֹן “profit” to render a deeper lever of meaning—a moral way of life that can constitute יִתְרוֹן “profit” in this world. He takes his audience to a higher, more spiritual goal in life; namely, a life of ethical profit in the present moment.

¹⁴¹ See my discussion of the phrase “under the sun” (תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ) above. Elsewhere in the Old Testament we can see a similar to the treatment of these terms. Darkness symbolizes the realm of the dead who cannot see the sun (Ps 49:20 [19]; Job 3:16; 33:28) and the light equals life (Job 3:20, 23; 33:28, 30; Ps 36:10 [9]; 56:14 [13]). See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 153.

¹⁴² Kidner suggests, “The phrase in 11b, *an advantage to those who see the sun*, may well be a double-edged remark, a reminder that there is a time-limit to the help that even wisdom, at this level of general good sense, can offer. It pays no dividends in the grave.” See D. Kidner, *A Time to Mourn and to Dance: Ecclesiastes and the Way of the World*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1986), 68. See also Kathryn L. Reinhard, “Passing Sorrow, Passing Joy: Redefining Wisdom in Qoheleth,” *STR* 51 (2007): 13-21 (16).

¹⁴³ See also Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words*, 426-27; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 103-104.

In Ecclesiastes 2:3 Qoheleth reiterates his original question from Eccl 1:3, but this time instead of the word יִתְרוֹן “profit” he uses the word טוֹב “good”: “What good (טוֹב) is there for a man to do under the sun?” In so doing, Qoheleth adds an ethical dimension to יִתְרוֹן “profit” and moves its meaning away from the economic arena into a relational one. Qoheleth is interested in the positive outcome of human life rather than material benefits. He equates יִתְרוֹן “profit” (Eccl 1:3) with טוֹב “good” that the human beings could do “under heaven” (Eccl 2:3).¹⁴⁴ He also points out that there is no material benefit to be gained in being wise or working hard; rather a person should choose to live a life of wisdom and work because it is good to do so.¹⁴⁵

4.1.2 Qoheleth's Use of the Term טוֹב “Good”

The word טוֹב “good” is used fifty-two times in the book of Ecclesiastes. This word is generally employed to describe a thing or person which is fitting, appropriate and useful in a situation.¹⁴⁶ Qoheleth considers a reward for the work of two people טוֹב “good” because it is more beneficial than what an individual can achieve on his own. Further, such reward is good because it can be shared.¹⁴⁷ He finds wisdom as “good (טוֹב) as an inheritance” (Eccl 7:11)¹⁴⁸ because it is beneficial to the one who possesses and utilizes it, in the same way one's inheritance provides a comfortable and secure existence in this world. In addition, Qoheleth declares that wisdom is טוֹב “good” because it can achieve better results than physical force or weapons of war

¹⁴⁴ See also I. Höver-Johag, “טוֹב,” *TDOT* 5:296-317; Robert P. Gordon, “טוֹב,” *NIDOTTE* 2:353-57; L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, “טוֹב,” *HALOT* 2:370-71.

¹⁴⁵ See also W. E. Staples, “Vanity of Vanities,” *CanJT* 1 (1955): 141-56.

¹⁴⁶ Robert P. Gordon, “טוֹב,” *NIDOTTE* 2:353-57; See also Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words*, 28.

¹⁴⁷ See also Ogden's suggestion that in Qoheleth's view “the reward for one's work has no abiding value unless it is something that can be shared with others.” See Ogden, “Qoheleth XI 7—XII 8,” 30.

¹⁴⁸ I read the preposition עִם in the phrase עִם־נַחֵל הַ “as” to reflect the value that Qoheleth ascribes to wisdom, which is comparable to the value of one's inheritance. Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 219; Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline*, 57-58. See also Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words*, 29; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 239. This use of עִם is similar to Eccl 2:16 in which Qoheleth compares the fate of the wise to the fate of the fool only to highlight the fact that they share the same fate, וְאִיךָ יָמוּת הַחֵכֶם עִם־הַכְּסִיל. Seow points out that עִם is analogous to the use of the preposition כִּי in Job 9:26 and 1 Chr 25:8, where it indicates equivalence. See Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 135. For the interpretation of עִם as “with,” see Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 256; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 273.

(Eccl 9:16, 18). Hence, to see the טוב “good” of wisdom is to recognize its תרון “profit.”¹⁴⁹

On occasion this term speaks of benefits that can be gained through an action to secure harmony and special advantage of some sort. In 1 Sam 16:16, 23 Saul is advised to find a man who is skilful in playing the lyre because listening to such music will be beneficial (“good”) to Saul and the evil spirit will leave him. David’s music is able to soothe the king’s soul and make it well (“good”). Deuteronomy provides a way for a freed slave to remain with his master if his life is advantageous (“good”) in this situation (Deut 15:16). The Israelites desire to return to Egypt instead of wandering in the desert because their previous circumstances appear better (“good”) than their current ones (Num 11:18; 14:3). Qoheleth employs the word טוב “good” as that which is profitable, when he encourages work and action because they may bring beneficial results, “In the morning sow your seed, and at evening do not let your hands be idle; for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good (טוב)” (Eccl 11:6).¹⁵⁰ Thus, Qoheleth underscores the relationship between “good” and “profit” in the economic sphere and shows that they belong to the same semantic field.

Qoheleth’s use of the expression עשה טוב “do good” also follows the ethical treatment of this term.¹⁵¹ He challenges his audience to do good even when they cannot predict the outcome of their actions; they should learn to do good without waiting for a return (Eccl 11:1–2).¹⁵² Qoheleth associates “doing good” with “righteousness” and opposes it to sinning when he observes that, “There is no man on earth so righteous as to do good and never sin” (Eccl 7:20). He employs the phrase עשה טוב “do good” to emphasize a lifestyle of following the Lord and his Law (Eccl 3:12; 7:20; 12:14).¹⁵³ He believes that God will ultimately judge human beings both righteous and wicked according to their deeds either “good” or “evil” (Eccl 3:17;

¹⁴⁹ See also Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and The Song of Songs*, 171-72.

¹⁵⁰ See also Seow, “The Socioeconomic Context of ‘The Preacher’s’ Hermeneutic,” *PSB* 17 (1996) 168-95 (193-94).

¹⁵¹ Cf. Deut 6:18; 30:15; Ps 14:1, 3; 37:3; Mic 6:8. See also C.-L. Seow, “Linguistic Evidence and the Dating of Qoheleth,” *JBL* 115 (1996): 643-66. Barton claims that the expression “do good” (עשה טוב) in Qoheleth “excludes an ethical meaning.” However, he offers an example from 2 Sam 12:18. See Barton, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 32.

¹⁵² See also Seow, “The Socioeconomic Context of ‘The Preacher’s’ Hermeneutic,” 193-94.

¹⁵³ Ecclesiastes 12:14 uses the noun “deed” (מעשה) with the adjective “good.” See also Eugene Carpenter, “עשה,” *NIDOTTE* 3:546-52.

12:4). Thus, he encourages his audience to live a טוב "good" life and emphasizes the advantage of wisdom and righteousness. A wise person is able to see the light and make appropriate decisions (Eccl 2:13–14). In addition, a person's righteousness results in good things that the Lord will bestow on him (Eccl 8:13). Qoheleth contrasts "good" behaviour with wrongful life-style which is evident in the fool's existence, "fools ... do not know how to keep from doing evil (לעשות רע)" (Eccl 4:17 [5:1]); "the desire to do evil (לעשות רע) grows in the human heart, for an offender can do evil (עשה רע) a hundred times and prolong his life" (Eccl 8:11–12).¹⁵⁴

Qoheleth's search for יתרון "profit" is a way for him to find the means of leading a טוב "good" life in the eyes of God.¹⁵⁵ "To be good in God's eyes" speaks of being approved and pleasing to him; in contrast, the sinner must come to judgment and is unable to fair well before God (Eccl 2:26; 7:26). "Doing what is good in God's eyes" entails a whole-hearted and faithful devotion to him (cf. 2 Kgs 20:3). After posing a rhetorical question, "Who knows what is good (טוב) for a man in his life, during a short number of days of his life?" (Eccl 6:12), he goes on to describe a טוב "good" life pointing out that everything comes from God; therefore, people should learn to accept everything and be content with what they already have or what comes their way for it ultimately comes from the Lord (Eccl 7:1–14).

Further, Qoheleth makes an explicit theological claim on the life of contentment in Eccl 7:14 as contentment is understood in terms of accepting the totality of life experiences including the bad ones together with the good. This verse clearly outlines the reality of both the good and the bad things in life in parallel lines, "on the good day, do good" and "on the bad day, consider." More important in Qoheleth's teaching is the fact that God has created both occasions, "God has made one as well as the other" (Eccl 7:13–14). Lee is correct in pointing out that Qoheleth calls his audience to reflect on divine actions "in the world fraught with contradictory realities" and responding appropriately rather than trying to control what happens in

¹⁵⁴ Ringgren, "עשה," *TDOT* 11:393-94.

¹⁵⁵ Staples argues that both יתרון and טוב are absent from human existences; however, the deity makes people think that their work is good. See W. E. Staples, "'Profit' in Ecclesiastes," *JNES* 4 (1945): 87-96.

life.¹⁵⁶ For Qoheleth, a “good” life is a life of contentment that recognizes the transcendence of God's activity in the world and is able to experience its presence in every moment.¹⁵⁷ Having established the meaning and relationship between the two terms, יִתְרוֹן “profit” and טוֹב “good”, this study will proceed to investigate Qoheleth's understanding of contentment in his personal life.

4.2 Contentment in Qoheleth's Experience

2:24	אִין־טוֹב בְּאָדָם שִׂאֲכַל וְשָׂתָה וְהִרְאָה אֶת־נַפְשׁוֹ טוֹב בְּעִמְלֹו גַּם־זֶה רָאִיתִי אֲנִי כִי מִיַּד הָאֱלֹהִים הִיא	There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and to see good in his labour. Also this, I saw, was from the hand of God.
2:25	כִּי מִי יֵאָכֵל וּמִי יִחְוֹשׁ חֹזֵן מִמֶּנִּי	For who might eat and who might rejoice without him?
2:26	כִּי לְאָדָם שְׂטוֹב לִפְנֵי נָתַן חִכְמָה וְדַעַת וְשִׂמְחָה וְלַחֹטֵא נָתַן עֲנִיָּן לְאִסּוּף וּלְכִנּוּס לַתֵּת טוֹב לִנְפְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים גַּם־זֶה הִבֵּל וְרֵעוֹת רוּחַ	So, to the man who is good before him, he gives wisdom and knowledge and joy, and to the offender he gives a preoccupation to gather and to collect in order to give to the one who is good before God. This is also fleeting and pursuit of wind.

As the wind goes around and around, turning (סָבַב) from north to south only to start again (Eccl 1:6), so Qoheleth has gone full circle in his investigation. He has started with pursuit of wisdom and knowledge; then he enjoyed his work; next he turned (פָּנָה) to consider his life achievements (Eccl 2:11); after that he turned (פָּנָה) to examine his greatness and immense wisdom (Eccl 2:12). He has come to see that there are two different perspectives to his inquiry: one that brings personal enjoyment and contentment; and the other turns (סָבַב) his heart to despair (Eccl 2:20). And now he is ready to pass a verdict on his life: there is nothing better than to enjoy life (Eccl 2:24–26). Qoheleth makes this conclusion personal as he connects it with his own experience. He has done it all; and the contentment that he has experienced from accepting his “allotment” (Eccl 2:10) is his recommendation for everybody.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 52.

¹⁵⁷ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 53.

¹⁵⁸ Crenshaw is mistaken in arguing that Qoheleth understands the question, “What is good for a man?” (Eccl 2:3) “in a thoroughly selfish manner.” See Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 127.

After Qoheleth describes his positive and negative experiences in order to answer his own question about *תרוֹן* “profit” in life, he shares his conclusions with the readers in Eccl 2:24–26.¹⁵⁹ He mentions the divine activity again in these verses; yet, this time his evaluation is significantly different from his first observation in Eccl 1:13, where he only implies that God orchestrates all the activity in the universe. Qoheleth develops his view of God and perceives him as a source and originator of what is good, “for apart from him [God] who might eat and who might rejoice?” (Eccl 2:25) Qoheleth begins and ends his life story with God (Eccl 1:13; 2:24–26).¹⁶⁰ This inclusio suggests that God is an integral part of human existence. Having considered a life where human beings pretend to be in control of their existence, Qoheleth points to God who is the sole sustainer and ruler of the world.

When speaking about the results of his search for what represents “good” life in this world in Eccl 2:24–26, Qoheleth uses the word *טוֹב* “good” four times and, therefore, provides a partial answer to his question in Eccl 2:3, “what is good (*טוֹב*) for a man to do under heaven during the few days of his life?” The *טוֹב* “good” life is given to those who are already *טוֹב* “good” before God (Eccl 2:26). This fact is another dilemma in itself for, on the one hand, a “good” life is available to those who recognize the joy of living as they “eat, drink and see good” in life (Eccl 2:24); on the other hand, such existence becomes possible only if God grants it as a gift, “it is from the hand of God” (Eccl 2:24).¹⁶¹

Qoheleth calls his readers to return to the main objective of wisdom—life itself.¹⁶² He declares that “there is nothing better than to eat and drink and to see good” (Eccl 2:24). Ecclesiastes 2:24–26 outlines the ways which make such life possible: the simple things like enjoying daily provisions and finding satisfaction in work result in allowing a person to lead a good and contented life. Such lifestyle is pleasing to God and is his gift (Eccl 2:24–25).¹⁶³ Ogden believes that each one of the

¹⁵⁹ See also Reinhard, “Passing Sorrow, Passing Joy,” 15.

¹⁶⁰ See also Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 56; Lee, 53.

¹⁶¹ Lee suggests that Qoheleth understands the importance of human agency in making one “see good” in life even though the human beings are incapable of making themselves “good.” See Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 37.

¹⁶² Johnston, “Confessions of a Workaholic,” 14-28.

¹⁶³ For a different understanding of Eccl 2:24–26 see Gordis, who believes that this advice shows Qoheleth's “resignation to the inevitable rather than the cheerful contentment of a pious believer who sees God's will in his/her destiny...” Gordis, *Koheleth*, 228. See also Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 90-91; Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 189-91.

“nothing better” form is an “animated affirmation” about humanity’s highest goal to synchronize with God’s superior purposes for it.¹⁶⁴ Eaton points out the connection which Qoheleth makes between enjoying the earthly realm and the fact that it is created good and meant to be enjoyed.¹⁶⁵ While Qoheleth does not use the word “to be satisfied” (שָׂבַע) in this passage, he describes the state of satisfaction by listing the most simple activities that enable people to enjoy their lives—eating and drinking, which constitute the meaning of the verb שָׂבַע “to be satisfied” (Eccl 2:24).¹⁶⁶ In comparison to death that looms on the horizon it is amazing to be alive. “Eating” and “drinking” are the most basic activities that sustain human existence, and “to eat” can mean “to live.”¹⁶⁷ The life that God gives should be accepted and enjoyed to the fullest ability. At the same time, it should always be remembered that life is brief and passing; therefore, there exists an urgency to embrace every present moment of life.¹⁶⁸

Qoheleth envisions such life being possible only in community. Table fellowship where eating and drinking play the key roles is meaningful only when people are able to share their possessions with others.¹⁶⁹ Eating (אָכַל) speaks of the worker’s ability to benefit from the fruit of his labour. God envisions his people working and finding satisfaction in their labour because they are able to eat from it: “Then the Lord took the human being and settled him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to keep it. And the Lord commanded the human being, saying: ‘From any tree in the garden you may freely eat’” (Gen 2:15–16).¹⁷⁰ Drinking generates a picture of feasting and taking pleasure in one’s company.¹⁷¹ Eating and drinking together portray a certain kind of fellowship with family and friends, which in turn “produces

¹⁶⁴ Graham S. Ogden, “Qoheleth’s Use of the ‘Nothing Is Better’-Form,” *JBL* 98 (1979): 339-50.

¹⁶⁵ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 86-87.

¹⁶⁶ Daniel Schibler, “שָׂבַע,” *NIDOTTE* 3:1209-14; G. Warmuth, “שָׂבַע,” *TDOT* 14:19-31; L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, “שָׂבַע,” *HALOT* 3:1302-1304.

¹⁶⁷ In Gen 47 one reads about Joseph’s preparations for the coming economic crisis in Egypt and his decision to buy the Egyptians’ land in lieu of future payment for their food so that they would not die of starvation. The only land he does not buy is the land which belongs to the priests for “they lived (ate) on the provision the Pharaoh had given them” (Gen 47:22).

¹⁶⁸ See also Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 105.

¹⁶⁹ Qoheleth will develop this theme further in Eccl 5:18–19 [Eng. 5:19–20] and 9:7–9 where he will explicitly mention sharing of one’s life and possessions as living a “good” life. See also Lee, 38.

¹⁷⁰ Magnus Ottosson, “אָכַל,” *TDOT* 1:236-41; Robert H. O’Conner, “אָכַל,” *NIDOTTE* 1:393-97. Prov 1:31 speaks about enjoying the fruit of one’s behavior, “they will eat the fruit of their ways” (וַיֹּאכְלוּ מִפְּרֵי דַרְכָּם).

¹⁷¹ Robert H. O’Connell, “שָׂתָה,” *NIDOTTE* 4:260-62; L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, “שָׂתָה,” *HALOT* 4:1667-69.

divine power [to] strengthen the unity.”¹⁷² Meals create peace and harmony essential to the communal life. A shared meal is often accompanied by a state of safety, joy and contentment, as “eating” and “drinking” highlight the idea of fully embracing life. Qoheleth echoes the words of the psalmist who speaks of eating the fruit of one's labour as a blessing and a sign of טוב “good” way of life (Ps 128:2).¹⁷³

The “offender” who is not content with one's life, is in a very different position. While Qoheleth encourages his readers to “eat and drink” as their way of acknowledging the gifts that God has already given them (Eccl 2:24–25), he contrasts this “good” life with the life of a “offender”¹⁷⁴ whose preoccupation (עניי) is to “collect and gather” only to give it all away to the one whom God finds to be “good” (Eccl 2:26). The use of the word “preoccupation” (עניי) brings to mind the words of Qoheleth in Eccl 1:13, where he qualifies this word as being “evil” (רע). Thus, an “evil” life is the life void of contentment; a life where “eating” happens “in darkness, in much vexation and sickness and resentment” (Eccl 2:23; 5:17). Qoheleth glances ironically at persons busily engaged in storing up earthly possessions without realizing that they cannot hold onto them.”¹⁷⁵

Qoheleth also points out that contentment comes from “seeing good” in life (Eccl 2:24). The verb ראה “to see” in tandem with the adjective טוב “good” come to mean “to see how good something is.”¹⁷⁶ This emphasizes the idea that God has created it “in good order.”¹⁷⁷ Further, the term ראה “to see” can mean “to experience” any kind of activity or state.¹⁷⁸ Schoors argues that in Qoheleth's

¹⁷² Ottosson, “טוב,” *TDOT* 1:241.

¹⁷³ See also Ps 104:15 in which the Psalmist praises God for providing bread as nourishment for human heart and wine to make it glad. A similar concept is present in the Egyptian text *The Admonitions of Ipuwer*, “Lo, a man is happy eating his food. Consume your goods in gladness, while there is none to hinder you. It is good for a man to eat his food. God ordains if for him whom he favors.” See *AEL* 1:157. See also Lee 38.

¹⁷⁴ For a detailed analysis of the word “offender” (עניי) see Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 141-42; Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 88-89.

¹⁷⁵ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 91.

¹⁷⁶ Höver-Johag, “טוב,” *TDOT* 5:304. See also Agustinus Gianto, “The Theme of Enjoyment in Qoheleth,” *Biblica* 73 (1992): 528-32.

¹⁷⁷ Höver-Johag, “טוב,” *TDOT* 5:304.

¹⁷⁸ Jackie A. Naudé, “ראה,” *NIDOTTE* 3:1007-1015; H. F. Fuhs, “ראה,” *TDOT* 13:208-242. Psalm 16:10 speaks of the faithful not experiencing (“seeing”) Sheol and death. See also Ps 89:48 [49]. Contrary, Psalm 34:8 [9] exhorts the people to “taste and see that the Lord is good.” Barton claims that “those who hold that ראה means enjoyment, are quite mistaken. It is used for any experience, pleasurable or otherwise.” See Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 88. See also Gordis, *Koheleth*, 204.

language “it is always an enjoyable experience” (Eccl 2:3; 3:13; 5:17 [Eng. 18]; 6:6).¹⁷⁹ However, the experience is not always a positive one. Qoheleth employs the term רָאָה “to see” to connote the suffering and injustice that have to be endured in life (Eccl 4:3). He encourages this audience to experience (“see”) life surrounded by family and doing what can be enjoyed in life (Eccl 9:9). Job even refers to רָאָה טוֹב “seeing good” as being alive (Job 7:7; 9:25).¹⁸⁰ Qoheleth brings to his readers’ attention the fact that what they already have, “sight of the eyes” (מַרְאֵה עֵינַיִם) is to be enjoyed in the present rather than longing for something that they might have in the future (Eccl 6:9). “The sight of the eyes” has to do with the attitude and ability to find contentment in life *vis-à-vis* constantly wanting more.¹⁸¹ Staples even translates רָאָה טוֹב “see good” in Eccl 2:24 as “make himself see a profit in his labour” to highlight the connection between הָרַוַן “profit” and טוֹב “good” in Qoheleth’s teaching.¹⁸²

Qoheleth’s idea of a life of contentment does not focus on the pursuit of pleasure or enjoyment.¹⁸³ Whybray is helpful in pointing out the importance of whole-hearted enjoyment of life in Qoheleth’s thought. Yet, he is mistaken in suggesting that Qoheleth turns his “depressing considerations” about the brevity of life, the necessity of accepting one’s allotment, and one’s ignorance of the future “into positive incentives to enjoy all the more what God gives in the present.”¹⁸⁴ Such view of Qoheleth’s picture of life is rather naïve and reactive. Qoheleth does not resign

¹⁷⁹ Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words*, 37.

¹⁸⁰ In contrast, “to see evil” (רָאָה רָע) denotes “to experience evil,” “to suffer” (Eccl 4:3; Num 11:15; 2 Kgs 22:20; Hab 1:13). See also Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 38.

¹⁸¹ Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words*, 31. Further Schoors suggest that because “good” (טוֹב) often parallels “pleasure” (שִׂמְחָה), the expression “to see good” (רָאָה טוֹב) can only mean “to enjoy the good things or pleasure” with no ethical connotation attached to the joy that one should experience in one’s life. See Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words*, 37-38. See also Gordis, *Koheleth*, 222; Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qoheleth*, 105. Fox’s definition of “seeing good” is rather confusing. On the one hand, he states that goodness can be of any kind and in the Bible “it rarely refers to the feelings of merrymaking and feasting.” Yet in the very next sentence without any explanation he claims that “only in Qoheleth does ‘see good’ mean to enjoy oneself.” See Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 116.

¹⁸² Staples, “Vanity of Vanities,” 148.

¹⁸³ See Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy, 92-94; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 119, 123-24; Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 14-15; Ogden, “Qoheleth XI 7–XII 8,” 30.

¹⁸⁴ Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” 88. See also William P. Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 136-40.

himself to pursue happiness and joy "because he cannot have justice and wisdom."¹⁸⁵ Contentment is not "a new joy which has ended with disappointment in the afterthought reflection."¹⁸⁶

Qoheleth does not choose one end of the spectrum of life circumstances over the other. Such representation of Qoheleth disregards the apparent contradictions that he identifies in life. A meaningful and content human existence is possible only when one acknowledges and holds together the joys and the sorrows of one's life. Good is correct in stating that, "The clear boundaries of life express not the grim limits within which man functions but the importance of making the most of significance in this life where alone meaning is to be found."¹⁸⁷ Qoheleth has learned to embrace his allotment that God has given him, which may include good and bad circumstances. He has submitted the control of his life into God's hands and has become actively involved in every moment of his life.

5. Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that Qoheleth's royal persona is crucial in establishing his authority and power and is necessary for Qoheleth to address his audience. The chapter has shown that Qoheleth's life story functions as a means to convey his message rather than simply narrate his experiences. Qoheleth finds his own efforts to grasp by wisdom everything that is done in the word to be only "fleeting and pursuit of wind" (Eccl 1:14). His own desire to increase his wisdom and knowledge has brought about the same results as one would expect from enterprises of fools. Qoheleth, a king whose wisdom and mighty acts have exceeded those of other kings (Eccl 1:16), has also realized that there are limitations "under the sun" that can potentially deprive him of joy and lasting satisfaction. For example, seeking after great wisdom and increasing knowledge has made him acutely aware of the pain and suffering associated with a high degree of perception and discernment (Eccl 1:18).

In addition, death serves the final blow when it renders all-surpassing wisdom and incomparable accomplishments powerless as they can offer no influence or control over the one's destiny. Ultimately, everybody dies regardless of the person's

¹⁸⁵ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 84. See also Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 140-44; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 157-58; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 89-91.

¹⁸⁶ Hans-Peter Müller, "Wie Sprach Qohälät von Gott?" *VT* 18 (1968): 507-21 (511).

¹⁸⁷ Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1965), 192. See also Staples, "Vanity of Vanities," 154.

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appropriate conduct or social status (Eccl 2:16–19). Seeking wisdom and the tangible blessings it brings does not lead to any kind of permanence, to say nothing of immortality. Further, the abundance of wealth and accomplishments do not make Qoheleth the master of his own life or offer security and stability in the future. Only God has the power over human life and its circumstances because “everything is in the hand of God” (Eccl 2:24; cf. 1:15). He gives his good gifts of wisdom, knowledge, success, and joy to those who lead a “good” life before him (Eccl 2:25–26a). A person who is seeking after accumulation of wealth, possession and even wisdom misses the mark of “good” and contented living before God (Eccl 2:26b).

And yet in spite of it all, Qoheleth has been able to find peace and joy and receive satisfaction from his labour (Eccl 2:10). He suggests that while he was living in the moment and was content with what he had and did, he enjoyed his life. Qoheleth offers this life lesson as an initial answer to his programmatic question about the profit in life “under the sun” (Eccl 1:3). He believes that the meaning of life is found in obeying God and accepting his gifts of daily joys. Simple things like eating and drinking and leading an ethical life bring contentment into his life which gives him strength and composure to embrace the inevitability of death and the inscrutability of God.

This study proposes that Qoheleth's autobiography (Eccl 1:12–2:26) serves as a lens to read the rest of the book of Ecclesiastes. The following chapters will demonstrate how Qoheleth's view on death and the role of God in human affairs as seen through his own life experience in his autobiography (Eccl 1:12–2:26) leads him to urge his audience to seek contentment as a response to life's contradictions.

Chapter 4

Contentment in the Midst of Limitations

1. Introduction

The previous chapter has demonstrated how the experience of abundance and limitations has brought Qoheleth to embrace life as a gift of God and develop an attitude of contentment. This chapter will look at the further development of the theme of contentment in Qoheleth's thought. It will discuss Qoheleth's exhortation to be content in the midst of life's limitations focusing specifically on limitations imposed by time, inscrutability of God and inevitability of death. Qoheleth's teaching on the relationship between the limitations in life and the attitude of contentment will also be considered. This chapter will analyze the ways in which Qoheleth's autobiography (Eccl 1:12–2:26) connects Qoheleth's observations of life in general and the experiences of his audience in this world. It will demonstrate how his personal experience of limitations and contentment serves as a lens through which Qoheleth's readers should look at their lives and appropriate his teaching on contentment in the midst of limitations.

In order to investigate Qoheleth's teaching on contentment in the midst of limitations, this chapter will first study Eccl 3:1–8 to present Qoheleth's view of time and the impossibility to control time by humanity. It will also address Qoheleth's understanding of eternity in Eccl 3:9–15. Then it will consider how the concept of the brevity of life fits within his understanding of eternity. Next it will examine Eccl 9:1–6 to discuss Qoheleth's idea of death as the common fate of humanity and its influence on the allotment that God has given his people. Finally, the chapter will look at Eccl 9:7–12 to explore Qoheleth's exhortation on contentment in midst of life's limitations.

2. Limitations in Human Life

Qoheleth makes fundamental statements in Eccl 3:1–15 that play a pivotal role in the book. Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 echoes the initial section of the book which speaks about the permanence of nature and the brevity of human existence (Eccl 1:4–11). Ecclesiastes 3:12–13 contains Qoheleth's advice on living a life of contentment that comes from his autobiography (Eccl 2:24–26), and which is attested in the rest of the book (cf.

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Ecc 3:22; 5:17–19 [Engl.18–20]; 8:15; 9:7–10). Finally, Ecc 3:11, 14–15 anticipate his remarks on God’s role in the world in later sections (cf. Ecc 3:17; 7:13–14; 8:5–6, 17; 9:11–12; 11:5).¹

Qoheleth’s experience has taught him that God was the primary actor in his every circumstance. Further, everything that he had received in life was a divine gift (Ecc 2:24–25). Qoheleth has learned to see his labour as his חֶלֶק “allotment,” which was meaningful and fulfilling, because the opportunity to work was given to him by God (Ecc 2:10, 24). Being content with what he was given and putting it to use in the present moment constituted a טוֹב “good” life that pleased God (Ecc 2:26).

Searching for יִתְרוֹן “profit” in his עֲמַל “labour” robbed him of satisfaction and fulfillment that work could bring (Ecc 2:18–22). Qoheleth had no power over the future (Ecc 2:21–22) or death (Ecc 2:14b–16). He did not comprehend the divine activity (Ecc 2:13, 15). Yet, he had learned to be content with eating and drinking, with table fellowship and living in community, with experiencing the daily joys of life (Ecc 2:24–26), rather than being burdened with עֲנִיָּן “preoccupation” to understand and, therefore, control his life (Ecc 1:13). The key points which are found in Qoheleth’s autobiography can also be found in the chart below. These echoes to the autobiography will be analyzed later in the chapter.

Hebrew	English	Ecclesiastes 1–2 Qoheleth’s Autobiography	Ecclesiastes 3
עֲנִיָּן	preoccupation	1:13; 2:26	3:10
יִתְרוֹן	profit	1:3; 2:11, 13	3:9
טוֹב	good	2:3, 24, 26	3:12–13, 22
אָכַל/שָׁתָה	eat/ drink	2:24–25	3:13
עֲמַל	labour	1:3; 2:3, 10–11, 18, 20, 22, 24	3:9, 13, 22
חֶלֶק	allotment	2:10, 21	3:22

Qoheleth moves his focus from describing his experience to observing life under the sun in general. When Qoheleth looks at the world, he is able to trace similarities between the circumstances of his audience and his own. He invites them to look at their experiences through the lens of his autobiography so that they would be able to learn how to deal with their limitations because Qoheleth has already been through similar circumstances. Qoheleth used the key terms to describe his own

¹ See also James L. Crenshaw, “The Eternal Gospel (Ecc 3:11)” in *Essays in Old Testament Ethics* (eds. James L. Crenshaw and John T. Willis; New York: KTAV, 1974), 23-55 (25).

experience and now he makes use of the same vocabulary (see the chart above) to emphasize the connections between what he, a great king, has done, felt or failed to achieve and the desires, feelings and aspirations of his readers as he addresses the limitations imposed by 1) humanity's inability to control time, 2) inscrutability of God, and 3) death. Before addressing these limitations of human existence, Qoheleth considers the issue of time because it is directly connected to the brevity of human life. He wishes his audience to picture how their transient lives fit into the eternity of God.

2.1 Humanity's Inability to Control Time (Eccl 3:1–8)

3:1	לכל זמן ועת לכל־חפץ תחת השמים	To every thing there is a season and a time to every matter under heavens.
3:2	עת ללדת ועת למות עת למטע ועת לעקור נטוע	A time to give birth ² and a time to die; A time to plant and a time to pluck what was planted;
3:3	עת להרוג ועת לרפוא עת לפרוץ ועת לבנות	A time to kill and a time to heal A time to break and a time to build;
3:4	עת לבכות ועת לשחוק עת ספור ועת רקוד	A time to weep and a time to laugh; A time to lament and a time to dance;
3:5	ת להשליך אבנים ועת כנוס אבנים עת לחבוק ועת לרחק מחבק	A time to throw stones and a time to collect stones; A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing;
3:6	עת לבקש ועת לאבד עת לשמור ועת להשליך	A time to search and a time to lose; A time to keep and a time to throw away;
3:7	עת לקרוע ועת לתפור עת לחשות ועת לדבר	A time to tear and a time to sew; A time to keep silent and a time to speak;
3:8	עת לאהב ועת לשנא עת מלחמה ועת שלום	A time to love and a time to hate; A time for war and a time for peace.

² The Hebrew word ללדת means “to give birth” rather than “to be born,” though many of the English translations (NRSV, NEB, NAB) render it as “to be born” in opposition to “to die” למות. See also Fox, *A Time to Be Born*, 191; Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 111. LXX translates the Hebrew infinitive as τεκεῖν “to give birth.” NJB acknowledges the active meaning of the infinitive ללדת and translates it as “a time for giving birth.” The active meaning of the infinitive ללדת carries more significance as the giving and losing of life comprise the perfect opposites of the whole range of human existence. See also Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 33; Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 92.

This poem paints a picture of time, which does not really consist of individual moments; rather it encompasses different occasions to create a sense of eternity. He, possibly, finds beauty and security in the timeless activity of the universe, because he understands that God has created and arranged it this way.³ The introductory poem (cf. Eccl 1:4–9) anticipates and points to the development of this theme in Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 which identifies every human activity as ordained by God and as arranged by him to be a part of eternity (cf. Eccl 3:11–12).⁴ In the same way as the sun has certain times to rise and set (Eccl 1:5), human life has appointed times for giving birth and dying, for crying and laughing, for breaking down and building up (Eccl 3:2–4).

2.1.1 Thematic Unity of Eccl 3:2–8

It has been argued that there is no thematic connection between the verses in Qoheleth's poem about appropriate times.⁵ Whybray explains the lack of thematic unity in Eccl 3:2b–8 by the fact that this passage does not belong to Qoheleth. Rather Qoheleth edits the poem that came together in a long process of gradual composition by adding Eccl 3:1–2a and then offering his commentary on the poem in Eccl 3:9–15.⁶ The poem (Eccl 3:2b–8) presents life as consisting of different seasons, that often occur in contrasting pairs and that require certain attitudes and behaviours from people.⁷ While Whybray's theory about Qoheleth's quoting the poem in his work may be correct, it is clear that Qoheleth makes it his own with the help of the introduction

³ Ecclesiastes 1:9 states: "What was will be again, and what has been done, will be done again." The impersonal nature of this activity points to the creating activity of God, who is explicitly identified as the originator of every event in the universe in Eccl 3:11a and 3:14. Leo Gorssen makes a similar argument in "La Cohérence de la Conception de Dieu dans l'Ecclésiaste," *EphThL* 40 (1970): 282-324.

⁴ Lohfink, following medieval theologians, suggests that Qoheleth has "the *concursum divinum*" in mind: "One and the same event has its fragmentary, strangely determined, experiential human dimension, and its other dimension which extends into God's eternity and beauty. Thus, every human action is at the same time divine action." See Lohfink, "The Present and Eternity," 239.

⁵ Whybray, "A Time to be Born and a Time to Die," 476-77; Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 112; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 171.

⁶ Whybray, "A Time to be Born and a Time to Die," 480-81. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 171. Wright shares this point of view and suggests that there is an incongruity in main themes between Eccl 3:2–8, Eccl 3:9–15, and Eccl 3:16–22. The first passage (Eccl 3:2–8) is a piece of literature that belongs to the wisdom tradition and reflects the fact that human life encompasses different activities, which is a very perceptive and wise observation. The second passage (Eccl 3:9–15) applies the wisdom observations only to the areas of labour and profit and the following pericope (Eccl 3:16–22) addresses the time for judgment which does not seem to happen. The themes of the last two passages are not connected to the theme of the appropriate times in Eccl 3:2–8. See Wright, "For Everything There Is a Season," 321-28.

⁷ Wright, "For Everything There Is a Season," 327; Whybray, "A Time to be Born and a Time to Die," 481.

(Eccl 3:1) and the commentary that follows the poem (Eccl 3:9–15, 16–22).

Furthermore, a strong thematic unity can be identified in the structural composition of the catalogue of “matters.”

Two themes are interwoven in the catalogue of times: the theme of the brevity of life and the theme of relational living in community. Lohfink aptly reflects Qoheleth’s emphasis on the transient nature of life in Eccl 3:1–8 when he notes “how effusively Qoheleth describes humanity’s ever new and constantly vanishing moments!”⁸ Qoheleth believes that “permanence is not part of the chronological equation.”⁹ The rhythm of life is constantly moving, as a pendulum swinging back and forth, so no activity has more significance or value than inhaling or exhaling in the constant rhythm of breathing.¹⁰ The brevity of life demands that people take note of every occasion and live it to the fullest. If one keeps in mind the fact that Qoheleth was able to find profit in everyday simple pleasures like eating and drinking, which are always done in fellowship, it becomes very clear how the theme of relationships comes to the foreground in this poem and holds it together.¹¹ Celebrating birth and grieving death, tearing down an old structure to build a new building or a fence, mourning and dancing, embracing and keeping silent, making war and keeping peace are only meaningful in a community with close relationships. Following this line of thought, the times of war and peace pertain to relationships at the level of societies and nations. The themes of the brevity of life and relational living in community in Eccl 3:2–8 will be analyzed next.

2.1.2 The Themes of the Brevity of Life and Living in Community (Eccl 3:2–8)

The poem of “matters” in Eccl 3:2–8 speaks to the theme of the brevity of life and echoes back to Qoheleth’s thoughts about the transience of human existence in Eccl 1:9–11. Yet, at this juncture Qoheleth brings in the theme of human relationships which make this transience meaningful. The following analysis will discuss the interplay between the theme of life’s transience and the theme of relationships looking at two verses at a time: A. Eccl 3: 2–3; B. Eccl 3:4–5; C. Eccl 3:6–7; D. Eccl 3:8.

⁸ Lohfink, “Time and Eternity,” 237.

⁹ Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 41.

¹⁰ Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 41.

¹¹ See also Wright, who identifies love and hate as the main motivators for constructive and destructive actions in life. Wright, “For Everything There Is a Season,” 326.

A. Ecclesiastes 3:2–3 shows a consistent progression of the theme that deals with creation and destruction.¹² While “planting”, “healing”, “building”, and “plucking”, “killing”, “breaking”, can refer to natural human actions, the first three verbs can be used to speak of bringing life and the last three verbs can be used to speak of bringing death. Qoheleth first juxtaposes human ability to create new life with the transient nature of human existence (Eccl 3:2a). He does not necessarily intend both activities to be understood as happening in the life of the same person; rather there is an appropriate timing for the beginning and the ending of each person’s life.¹³ Neither birth nor death can be planned or controlled by people,¹⁴ but sometimes “a time to give birth” is “a time to die” in childbirth or to give birth to a stillborn. While the audience may think that birth and death are extremely removed from each other, by putting them side by side, Qoheleth echoes what he has said earlier about the transience of life, “A generation goes, and a generation comes” (cf. Eccl 1:4).

Qoheleth speaks about common activities that people engage in the course of their lives—farming, construction, war, and medical needs. Yet, he employs a set of verbs that are customarily used together in the Old Testament to describe God’s relationship toward his people and his power to create a nation or to destroy it. In Jeremiah 1:10 God announces to Jeremiah that his mission will bring life or death to those who will hear him, “I have set you this over the nations and over the kingdoms to uproot and to pull down, to destroy and to throw down, to build and to plant.”¹⁵ Qoheleth situates humanity’s creative and destructive actions within the divine activity, because only God has the power to give life and to take it away (Eccl 3:1; cf. 8:8). Qoheleth wants his audience to understand that they need to be attentive to what God is doing in their lives and to submit every activity under God’s control (cf. Eccl 2:25). Thus, Qoheleth addresses the issue of relational living in community on two different but always closely connected levels—a person’s relationship to God influences his relationship to others and vice versa.

¹² Whybray, “A Time to be Born and a Time to Die,” 476.

¹³ See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 171; Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 115.

¹⁴ Contra Blenkinsopp, who argues that Qoheleth was influenced by Greek philosophy and, as a result of this influence, he mentions “a time to die” in reference to the right time for suicide. See Blenkinsopp, “Ecclesiastes 3.1–15,” 59–60.

¹⁵ See also 2 Sam 7:10; Ps 80:9 [Eng. 8], 16 [Eng. 15]; Jer 2:21; 11:17; 12:2; 18:9; 24:6; 31:28; 42:10; 45:4; Ezek 36:36; Amos 9:15; Mal 1:4; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 160; Easton, *Ecclesiastes*, 92–93.

B. Ecclesiastes 3:4–5 continues the theme of interpersonal relationships and living in community by discussing the customary behaviour and emotional state during the mourning period and during the times of celebration. The pairs “weeping...laughing” and “mourning...dancing” (Eccl 3:4) quite naturally fit into what one would consider an “appropriate” behaviour caused by an appropriate occasion (cf. Eccl 7:2–4, 14; 9:8–9).¹⁶ Qoheleth does not assign a value to either of these occasions; rather he believes that there are situations when laughter is not appropriate (cf. Eccl 2:2; 7:6) and sorrow is preferred (cf. Eccl 4:1–2).¹⁷ The polar opposite pairs of “throwing stones”/“gathering stones” and “embracing”/“refraining from embracing” further emphasize the fact that each activity has its assigned time in human life. Embracing is a sign of affection and fondness, yet Qoheleth believes that there are moments in life when such display of affection is not appropriate (Eccl 3:5b). It is unclear what Qoheleth means by the pair of opposites “to throw stones”/“to gather stones.”¹⁸ While Murphy maybe right in stating that it will be wise to leave “the peculiar nature of the metaphor” without an explanation,¹⁹ it is clear that both activities have a special time in one’s life even though they are passing and transient, and that these activities are shared with others.²⁰

C. Ecclesiastes 3:6–7 further develops the theme of brevity and transience of life in the poem of times. The concepts of seeking and losing, and keeping and throwing away are important issues in Qoheleth’s work. He addresses them not only in Eccl 3:6, but in his autobiography (cf. Eccl 1:13; 2:18–21) and his observations of the life in the world (cf. Eccl 5:12–13 [Eng. 13–14]; 7:25; 9:11). In Eccl 3:6a Qoheleth uses two synonyms שׁוֹרֵץ and בִּקְשׁוּ (“to seek to obtain”)²¹ to emphasize an active component of searching and holding on to what his audience desire. He will use the

¹⁶ Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 77; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 161; Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 93;

¹⁷ Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 115.

¹⁸ Targ understands Qoheleth to speak of clearing stones away and gathering them together for a building project. See Knobel, *Targum of Qoheleth*, 28. Whybray believes that gathering of stones refers to clearing the field for construction and throwing stones refers to ruining a one’s field (cf. 2 Kgs 3:19, 25; Isa 5:2). See Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 71. Krüger suggests reading these pair as speaking of throwing stones away from a field for cultivation and gathering them for a building or ruining a wall or a building during a time of war and then reconstructing it. See Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 78. Gordis reads throwing and gathering of stones with sexual connotations. See Gordis, *Koheleth*, 230.

¹⁹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 33.

²⁰ See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 161.

²¹ Wagner, “שׁוֹרֵץ,” *TDOT* 3:294; Denningner, “שׁוֹרֵץ,” *NIDOTTE* 1:993;

Chitra Chhetri, “בִּקְשׁוּ,” *NIDOTTE* 1: 720-929; Siegfried Wagner, “בִּקְשׁוּ,” *TDOT* 2:229-41.

word בִּקֵּשׁ “to seek” again in Eccl 3:15 to demonstrate to his audience that God is the only one who can truly seek and obtain what he is searching for.

The destiny of humanity is to lose the things that they are seeking (Eccl 3:6b), because everything is transient and fleeting. The Hebrew word נָבַח means “to become lost” or “to destroy.”²² Qoheleth uses it to emphasize the fact that possessions that people strive for will become lost not because people do something to lose them, but because the time has come for it. Qoheleth has learned that he will lose everything that he has worked for when he dies (cf. Eccl 2:18–21). Now he teaches his readers to prepare themselves to let go of things that they have worked hard for, to throw them away even when this needs to be done (Eccl 3:6d), because nothing lasts forever in life (cf. Eccl 3:1). Further, “losing” in Eccl 3:6b could be understood as a purposeful and intentional action—“giving up the search.”²³ Qoheleth admonishes his readers intentionally to give up as lost whatever they are searching.²⁴ While continuing the pursuit may sound and look good, people need to be ready to give up as lost (נָבַח) things important to them at the appropriate time.

The theme of the brevity of life and the theme of relational living in community come together in Eccl 3:7. Qoheleth suggests that there are appropriate times to be in mourning, when it is appropriate to tear one’s clothes and keep silent (Eccl 3:7a, c).²⁵ There are also appropriate times to commemorate life as a community, when torn clothes are mended and silence is no longer acceptable (Eccl 3:7b, d).²⁶ Qoheleth believes that there are different ways of celebrating human life, but it should always be done in community with other people. He describes one’s life and labour as something that should always be shared (cf. Eccl 4:9–12; 6:3), as well as the end of one’s life that should leave an imprint on the community (cf. Eccl 7:2; 12:5b).

The issue of timely speech has a broader application in Qoheleth’s thought. He does not think of silence as a negative activity. On the contrary, he encourages silence

²² Benedikt Otzen, “נָבַח,” *TDOT* 1:19-23; Cornelis Van Dam, “נָבַח,” *NIDOTTE* 1:223-25.

²³ In Jeremiah 23:1 the prophet accuses the leaders of Israel for destroying (נָבַח) God’s sheep by scattering them, which means the leaders have given up the people of Israel as lost and stopped intentionally searching for them.

²⁴ See also Gordis, *Koheleth*, 230; Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 258.

²⁵ Knobel, *The Targum of Qoheleth*, 28; Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 93; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 162; Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 165; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 78; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 71.

²⁶ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 230-31; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 162; Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 258; Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 61; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 95-96.

as an appropriate behaviour in the Temple (cf. Eccl 4:17–5:6 [Eng. 5:1–7]) and in relationship to others, especially those in authority (cf. Eccl 8:4; 10:20). Such attitude reflects Qoheleth's view of silence as a virtue in the wisdom tradition and echoes the advice found in the Book of Proverbs, "In the multitude of words transgression does not cease, but he who holds his speech is wise" (Prov 10:19) and "a man of understanding holds his tongue" (Prov 11:12).²⁷

As the wise king *par excellence* Qoheleth has a great appreciation for well-timed speech (cf. Eccl 7:10, 21–22; 9:17), and admonishes his audience in a manner customary of Israelite wisdom. The phrase **ועת ל דבר** "a time to speak" parallels the expressions **ודבר בעתו** "a word in its time" in Prov 15:23 and establishes close links with the advice that the wisdom literature offers to those willing to listen about the importance of wise speech.²⁸ Proverbs 25:11 admonishes the readers that, "A word spoken at the right time is like apples in silver settings." Qoheleth's advice to his readers is to learn to discern the time when to exercise the virtue of silence or the virtue of wise speech, for there is an appropriate time for both (cf. Eccl 3:1).

D. Ecclesiastes 3:8 brings the themes of the brevity of life and relational living in community to a climax. Here Qoheleth addresses the appropriateness of love and hate, war and peace. Love and hate are the ultimate expressions of interpersonal relationships and war and peace reflect the same emotions on the level of intercultural and societal relationships.²⁹ Qoheleth makes a bold claim that circumstances determine whether love or hate, war or peace is timely and appropriate.³⁰

Qoheleth is not encouraging his audience to wage wars or legitimizing the feelings of hatred. Rather, as a realist Qoheleth states the obvious—hatred and war exist in the world.³¹ Nevertheless, war and hatred are not Qoheleth's last words about

²⁷ Cf. Prov 13:3; 21:23. See also Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 116-17; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 71-72.

²⁸ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 72; Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 117; Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 258; Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 41-42; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 34.

²⁹ See also Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 165; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 78.

³⁰ See also Farmer, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 161.

³¹ Consistent with the Old Testament understanding of war is the notion that God uses it as an instrument of punishment for the wicked (cf. Ps 58:7–12 [Eng. 6–11]; 137:7–9). While hatred is a very strong emotion, its existence is often assumed in Wisdom Literature (Ps 139:19–22; Ps 5:6–7 [Eng. 5–6]; cf. Ps26:5; 45:8 [Eng. 7]; 97:19cf. Eccl 2:18). The righteous mirror God's attitude to wickedness and the wicked in their hatred towards them (cf. Ps 58:11 [Eng. 10]; 101:3; 119:104, 113, 128, 163; 139:21). It is clearly understood from the contexts of the above-mentioned passages that such hatred

the appointed times in human life. He brings his catalogue of occasions to a close by addressing the times of love and peace. Together, these constitute an established rhythm of life, which is brief and passing, and yet meaningful and appointed by God (cf. Eccl 3:1). Delitzsch helpfully points out that Qoheleth's words culminate with the time of peace.³² He begins with a time of giving birth (Eccl 3:2a), which speaks of creating of a new life and ends with a time of peace, when new births are expected to occur. Thus, Eccl 3:2a and Eccl 3:8d form an inclusio that frames Qoheleth's understanding of human life with joyful and pleasant occasions. Life is good and should be valued even in the midst of tragic and negative experiences; for God has created it to be good (cf. Gen 1:31).³³ Ogden is also correct when he notes, that Qoheleth's belief in the appropriateness of times is grounded in "the conviction that creation is marked by an orderliness which takes its origin in the divine plan and will."³⁴

Qoheleth has learned from his own experience that there is a certain rhythm to the universe. He had unique opportunities to accomplish great thing in life (Eccl 2:4–9), and then the time came to acknowledge the fleeting nature of these undertakings, especially in the face of death (Eccl 2:17–23). As his autobiography demonstrates, Qoheleth has embraced reality and the fact that the flow of life is beyond his control (Eccl 2:24–26). In presenting human life as a moving and evolving chain of activities in Eccl 3:1–8 Qoheleth suggests that there is "an appropriate time" for each individual action. Qoheleth sees life as brief and passing (cf. Eccl 1:14; 2:11, 17), so his discussion about "time," especially in light of the brevity of human existence, plays an important part in his teaching about accepting life as a gift of God that brings good and bad things alike.

2.1.3 The Meaning of **תּוֹ** in the Book of Ecclesiastes

When speaking about time Qoheleth uses a Hebrew word **תּוֹ** which occurs twenty-eight times in Eccl 3:2–8 and eleven more times later in the book (Eccl 3:11, 17; 7:17;

does not lead to violent and wrongful behaviour. Rather, these verses speak of a clear distinction between attitudes and actions that are pleasing to God and those that are contradictory to his nature. For Qoheleth, his hatred toward life and work (Eccl 2:17–18a) resulted in contemplative behaviour (Eccl 2:18b–23) and positive action (Eccl 2:24–26). See also Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 154.

³² Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 259.

³³ Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 312.

³⁴ Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 51.

8:5, 6, 9; 9:8, 11, 12 (x2); 10:17).³⁵ It is the interpretation of this word, however, that determines Qoheleth's overall view of time in the book of Ecclesiastes.³⁶ According to Barr, עֵת "time" signifies a temporal aspect of an event, referring to conditions lasting over a long period. Barr believes that Qoheleth emphasizes "the stultifying and frustrating effect of time and change upon human effort."³⁷ Murphy follows this line of thinking and reads Eccl 3:2–8 as a statement of strong determinism denying Qoheleth any chance to believe in a beneficent deity.³⁸

However, neither Barr nor Murphy takes into account the fact that Qoheleth follows the Old Testament wisdom tradition which perceives "time" as to be set and ordered by God. For example, Job beseeches God to appoint a time for his plight to be remembered and, by implication, to be ended (Job 14:13). The psalmist speaks of God as the one who sets the time for everything (Ps 75:1) and has the power to choose what to do at a given moment (Ps 69:13; cf. 2 Sam 24:15). The psalmist also attributes the times for the activities of the moon and the sun as being appointed by God (Ps 104:19; cf., Jer 33:20). Qoheleth fully understands that only God is in control of time. Therefore, humanity should accept this fact, learn to recognize the divinely appointed times, and respond to them appropriately.

Fox identifies two meanings of עֵת: (1) "temporally defined: a segment of time of any duration," and (2) "substantively defined: events and their configurations," with the second meaning being the predominant one in the book of

³⁵ T. Kronholm, "עֵת," *TDOT* 11:438. See also Anthony Tomasino, "עֵת," *NIDOTTE* 3:564–67.

³⁶ Von Rad believes that "with him [Qoheleth] the Wisdom literature lost its last contact with Israel's old way of thinking in terms of saving history." See Gerhard von Rad, *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions* (vol. 1 of *Old Testament Theology*; New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 455. See also Henry W. Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946), 121. Galling attributes to Qoheleth the invention and development of *Geschichtlichkeit*, "historicity," of human life. See Kurt Galling, "Das Rätsel der Zeit im Urteil Kōhelets (Koh 3, 1–15)," *ZTK* 58 (1961): 1–15, 1. Barr, however, identifies no "drastic innovation" in Qoheleth's understanding of time. See James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 99–100.

³⁷ Barr, *Biblical Words for Time*, 98.

³⁸ Murphy states: "We may readily grant ignorance and lack of control of our births and deaths, but the religious person lets this rest in the beneficent Providence of God. Qoheleth will have none of this. He seizes upon this poem in time in order to underscore the sad human condition. These are *God's* times, not our times. They happen to us; they are under divine control...This is a fantastic statement of divine sabotage." See Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 39. Loader also views the list of activities mentioned in Eccl 3:2–8 as descriptive and deterministic. See Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qoheleth*, 29, 32. For a systematic examination of determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes, see Dominic Rudman, *Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes* (JSOTSup 316; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

Ecclesiastes.³⁹ He presumes “a less rigid sort of determinism,” for, he claims, Qoheleth believes in God’s control, but he “does not hold to a strict fatalism.” God has the power to predetermine what may happen and when; yet he chooses when to use it.⁴⁰ Thus, for Qoheleth, “every type of event and deed has an ‘*et*, a set of circumstances (whether recurrent or unique) in which it is appropriate.’”⁴¹ Therefore, one should do everything in its appropriate time by adapting “to the constraints of reality” instead of straining against them.⁴²

Schultz offers a different interpretation of Qoheleth’s view of time. He suggests that “it is important both to discern and to act decisively at the right time, rather than passively accepting God’s ordering of the time with moderation or resignation.”⁴³ It seems that the catalogue of times is presented in the book to instruct people to follow the right time for any activity in order to labour profitably. Following Fox, Schultz also points out that Qoheleth names the activities that humans can control to some degree, except for the moments of birth and death; thus any work can be profitable if the appropriate times are recognized and appropriate activities are performed.⁴⁴

Both Fox and Schultz see Qoheleth encouraging his audience to strive to find profit in the fruit of their labour. However, trying to discern the appropriate times to gain greater benefits from one’s enterprises could become another kind of “work,” which would bring frustration, pain and vexation. This occurs, as Qoheleth points out later, because nobody could understand what God is doing in the world (Eccl 3:11). Moreover, Qoheleth is trying to move his audience to see the profit in the activity itself and, thus, accepting what God is doing and responding accordingly.

Wilch understands תוע as identifying an “occasion or a situation as a given opportunity” for any activity or experience. In Qoheleth’s thought, this opportunity is always God-given. The term תוע is not synonymous with *καιρός*⁴⁵ and does not refer to a critical or decision-required moment; rather תוע refers to all situations that happen

³⁹ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 195-96.

⁴⁰ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 197.

⁴¹ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 200.

⁴² Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 205.

⁴³ Schultz, “A Sense of Timing,” 267.

⁴⁴ Schultz, “A Sense of Timing,” 267. See also Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 201.

⁴⁵ LXX translates תוע as *καιρός* in the book of Ecclesiastes.

in a daily life, involving all possible outcomes.⁴⁶ Wilch rejects a deterministic interpretation of this term, and argues that, according to Qoheleth, God has ordered nature and the universe so that individuals could lead ordered lives, waiting for and accepting an opportune occasion.

Wilch's definition of *תוע* is helpful as it reflects Qoheleth's understanding of the attitude of contentment in life. Those who strive to change the time (*תוע*) or situation find their efforts unsatisfactory. Yet, those who consider each occasion and time (*תוע*) as a gift from God are truly wise, "the wise heart knows the time (*תוע*) and way" (cf. Eccl 8:5b).⁴⁷ A wise and contented person acknowledges an opportunity and its limits and does not strive for something outside of his grasp. "The right times may be discerned by anyone, but only the God-fearing is wise enough to limit himself to the extent of the possibility given by God."⁴⁸ Qoheleth desires his audience to develop and maintain an attitude of "*living according to the occasion*"⁴⁹ (Eccl 3:1–8), which is based on the fear of and faith in God and expressed in a life of contentment (Eccl 3:12–14).

By implication, Qoheleth also speaks about inappropriate times for a particular activity. Qoheleth thinks that such actions bring about consequences which result in premature death. He demonstrates in his teaching that inappropriate behaviour regarding speaking will result in God destroying the work of one's hands (Eccl 5:5), while being too righteous or too wise will cause self-destruction (Eccl 7:16). Qoheleth also believes that wickedness and folly ultimately bring about premature death, "why should you die before your time (*תוע*)" (Eccl 7:17).⁵⁰ Therefore, he points out that a wise person should recognize an opportunity in any given situation without trying to foresee the future, which might become an enticing snare for those who desire to plan for it (Eccl 8:6–8).⁵¹ Humanity cannot change the times given to them by God!

⁴⁶ Wilch *Time and Event*, 124.

⁴⁷ Cf. Isaiah describes the successive actions of a farmer who plants his crops in an orderly fashion to receive good results (Isa 28:24–26).

⁴⁸ Wilch, *Time and Event*, 127–28.

⁴⁹ Wilch, *Time and Event*, 128.

⁵⁰ Cf. Job speaks of persons dying "before their time" (Job 22:16) indicating that premature death contradicts the natural order of things and should not happen on a regular basis. Premature death seems to speak to the moral character of the person. When a person does not align himself with God's intent for his life, an early demise is seen as a punishment for sin. See Chapter 1.2.1 The Theme of Death in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

⁵¹ Wilch, *Time and Event*, 127.

2.1.4 Lack of Human Control over Time

The poem of Eccl 3:1–8 emphasizes the theme of humanity’s limitations as it relates to their inability to control or secure their future. Qoheleth has discussed these limitations in his autobiography (Eccl 1:15; 2:16, 19) and now he is able to observe the same truth in other people’s life: the times and seasons people experience are not necessarily those that people can choose on their own (Eccl 3:1; cf. Eccl 3:14).

Qoheleth’s statement echoes Eccl 1:9: “That which happens is that which will happen; and that which is done is that which will be done,” and anticipates the words in Eccl 3:15, where he points out that “Whatever happens has already happened, and what will happen has already happened, and God will seek that which is pursued.” The impersonal way in which he speaks of the events in life seems to point to his belief in God as the one, who has appointed the times for every activity—pleasant and unpleasant,⁵² which is in line with what he has shown in his autobiography (Eccl 1:12–2:26). Qoheleth’s belief is securely grounded in the Old Testament wisdom literature. The writer of Proverbs seems to be aware of such human limitation: “The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps” (Prov 16:9).⁵³

The times of birth and death are not contingent upon human decisions; people seem to have little control over the occasions for weeping, laughing, hating, loving, healing, mourning, being at war or peace (Eccl 3:2–8).⁵⁴ People also appear to be powerless in prolonging the times of embracing, loving, or keeping the peace as the circumstances change. Even though people may choose to dance when they should be mourning or they may prefer speaking when silence would be of greater benefit, they cannot orchestrate events in such a way that they will ensure an expected result of peace, harvesting, or being loved. They may hope for such an outcome, but it is beyond their power to guarantee it.

⁵² Fox is helpful in pointing out that while Qoheleth believes in God’s ultimate control over the world, Qoheleth is not a fatalist. “The Catalogue speaks about the *right* times, the circumstances when, in the proper course of events, something should happen or be done,” but it does not necessitates the times when events have to occur. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 197.

⁵³ See also Prov 19:21: “Many plans are in the heart of a person, but the purpose of the Lord will stand”; Prov 16:11: “Honest balances and scales are the Lord’s; all the weights in the bag are his work.” *Contra* Crenshaw, who argues that Qoheleth is tormented by the inability to understand the mystery of creation. See Crenshaw, “The Eternal Gospel,” 28-34.

⁵⁴ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 171. See also Lohfink, “The Present and Eternity,” 237.

Human beings can only react to events which happen in their life; yet, they do have a choice of how to act.⁵⁵ However, what makes human choices ever harder is the fact that at times people are unable to understand or predict what God will do next.⁵⁶

Thus choosing appropriate times becomes a real exercise in wisdom and trust.

Qoheleth paints a picture of life under the sun in which every moment, good or not so good, is beautiful in its own way as it will be shown in the following chapter. Yet, this picture is not about human control over life events or people's determination of them or even their discernment about the appropriate times. It is about God's activity and the appropriate human response to it.⁵⁷ People's inability to control time is closely connected to their limitations in understanding God and his activity in the world.

Having discussed humanity's lack of control over time, this study will now examine Qoheleth's treatment of humanity's limitations imposed by the inscrutability of God.

2.2 Inscrutability of God (Eccl 3:9–15)

3:9	מה־יתרון העושה באשר הוא עמל	What profit does the worker have in his labour?
3:10	ראיתי את־הענין אשר נתן אל־הים לבני האדם לענות בו	I saw the preoccupation which the Lord has given to the sons of man to be busy with.
3:11	את־הכל עשה יפה בעתו גם את־העלם נתן בלבם מבלי אשר לא־ימצא האדם את־המעשה אשר־עשה האל־הים מראש ועד־סוף	He made everything beautiful in its time. Also he has given eternity in their hearts; yet humanity will not find out the work which God does from beginning to end.
3:12	ידעתי כי אין טוב במ כי אם־לשמוח ולעשות טוב בחייו	I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and do good in life.

⁵⁵ Whybray suggests that Qoheleth does not agree with the proposition that a person can choose how to behave appropriately in different situations because in life a person “does not know his time” and “is snared at an evil time” (Eccl 9:2). See Whybray, “A Time to Be Born and a Time to Die,” 474. However, Whybray seems to omit the fact that Eccl 9:2 deals with the time of death, which is unknown to people, while Eccl 3:2–8 talks about a wise conduct which demands an acknowledgement of God's activity in the world and a faithful dedication to fall in line with that activity.

⁵⁶ See also de Jung, “Qohelet and the Ambitious Spirit of the Ptolemaic Period,” 89.

⁵⁷ Brian Boyle, “‘Let Your Garments Always Be White’ (Eccl 9:8): Time, Fate, Chance and Provident Design According to Qoheleth,” *ABR* 55 (2007): 29-40 (31). See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 172-73.

3:13	וגם כל־האדם שיאכל ושתה וראה טוב בכל־עמלו מתת אל־הים היא	Moreover, everything that a person eats and drinks and sees good in all his labour is a gift of God.
3:14	ידעתי כי כל־אשר יעשה האל־הים יהיה לעולם עליו אין להוסיף הואוממו אין לגרע להים עשה שיראו מלפניו	I know that everything that God does will last for eternity; nothing to add to it and nothing to withdraw. And God does this so that all should fear him.
3:15	מה־שהיה כבר הוא ואשר להיות כבר היה והאל־הים יבקש את־נרדף	Whatever happens has already happened, and what will happen has already happened, and God will seek that which is pursued. ⁵⁸

Having discussed the scope of human activity appointed by God (Eccl 3:1–8), Qoheleth restates the main question of his work: “What profit (יְהִרֹן) does the worker have in his labour (עֲמַל)?” (Eccl 3:9). He suggests that there is a connection between the appropriate events in human life and the profit that one gains from one’s labour. As there is no material profit in refraining from embracing or weeping or mourning, it is possible to interpret Qoheleth’s question about gain in terms of experience and knowledge that one may acquire from different occasions in life.⁵⁹ It is also important to point out that the text following the programmatic question about the profit that a worker can gain from his/her work (Eccl 3:9) presents God as the principle doer of any activity.⁶⁰ The word עֲשָׂה “to do, make, act, work”⁶¹ is employed repeatedly of God, who is mentioned several times in the remainder of Eccl 3. God has made (עֲשָׂה) everything (Eccl 3:11); people cannot discover the deed (הַמְעֲשָׂה) that God has done (עֲשָׂה) from beginning to end (Eccl 3:11); what God does (יַעֲשֶׂה) endures forever (Eccl 3:14); God has acted (עֲשָׂה) so that human beings

⁵⁸ This study chooses to translate the Hebrew expression אֶת־נִרְדָּף as “that which is pursued.” The verbs רָדַף and רָעָה are synonyms and both mean “to pursue.” The use of אֶת־נִרְדָּף in Eccl 3:15 points out the contrast between the expressions רְעוּת רוּחַ “pursuit of wind,” which reflects Qoheleth’s view of people’s attempts to understand the divine activity, and אֶת־נִרְדָּף and God pursuing what people can only search in vain. See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 165. For a detailed study of this expression See Blenkinsopp, “Ecclesiastes 3:1–15,” 62–63.

⁵⁹ Qoheleth returns to the topic of mourning and weeping in Eccl 7 to discuss the benefits of such occasions (Eccl 7:1–4).

⁶⁰ See also Gorssen, “La Notion de Dieu dans l’Ecclesiaste,” 282–324. He helpfully demonstrates that the ‘the work of God’ is central to Qoheleth’s thought.

⁶¹ H. Ringgren, “עֲשָׂה,” *TDOT* 11:389–91.

could be reverent before him (Eccl 3:14). The only thing that people can do (לעשות) is “to see good” in their labour (Eccl 3:12), which is a gift of God (Eccl 3:13).

Qoheleth understands that the desire to understand God and his work in the world originates with God, because he has given his people “an eternity in their hearts” (Eccl 3:11b); yet, the same God has ordained the universe in such a way that allows humanity to see only one appropriate moment at a time (Eccl 3:11a). The meaning of the word עולם, which is usually translated “eternity”,⁶² and its relationship to the word עת “time” may pose a problem. The term עולם is rendered differently by different scholars. For example, Delitzsch follows the Septuagint’s translation αἰών which means “world”, “eternity”, “age”.⁶³ Murphy proposes “duration”,⁶⁴ while James argues for “concealed”, “perpetuity”, “distant”.⁶⁵ The Targum interprets this word to mean “concealed”, for God “concealed” from humanity the day of death.⁶⁶ Crenshaw suggests “the unknown” or “hidden” pointing to the root על which occurs in Eccl 12:14 to mean “hidden” and to its occurrences in Job 28:21 and 42:3, where it is also translated “hidden”.⁶⁷ Whitley follows this understanding of עולם but offers his own interpretation of “darkness” and “ignorance” which goes along with the burden (ענין) with which God has preoccupied human beings (Eccl 3:10).⁶⁸ Fox amends עולם to mean עמל “labour” which would follow the theme of work mentioned in Eccl 3:9, 13. He argues that Eccl 8:17 uses a similar wording including the verb “work” עמל to speak of futile human efforts to understand God’s work with the help of their mental labour.⁶⁹

However, there is no need to amend the word עולם to understand the bigger picture of the contrast between this word and the word עת “time” in Qoheleth’s thought. He juxtaposes these two terms to express the notion of permanence and duration in a world of brevity and transience. In Ecclesiastes 1:4 he points out the

⁶² Cf. NIV, NAU. See also H. D. Preuss, “עולם,” *TDOT* 10:533-42.

⁶³ Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 260-62.

⁶⁴ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 34-35

⁶⁵ Kenneth W. James, “Ecclesiastes: Precursor of Existentialists,” *The Bible Today* 22(1984): 85-90.

⁶⁶ Knobel, *The Targum of Qoheleth*, 28.

⁶⁷ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 97-98.

⁶⁸ Whitley, *Koheleth*, 33.

⁶⁹ Fox, *A Time to Tear Up*, 210-12. See also Fox, *Ecclesiastes קהלת*, 23.

enduring character of the universe, “the earth remains forever (לְעוֹלָם)” in contrast to the constantly changing nature of human life, “a generation goes, and a generation comes.” He also talks about the time following one’s death as “eternity” (עוֹלָם) without any indication of its ending.⁷⁰

Williams suggests that עוֹלָם is the antithesis of הַבֵּל for Qoheleth. He defines עוֹלָם as “the hidden mystery of the whole, the ‘foundation’ of earth’s remaining, the deepest source of human striving.”⁷¹ Thus, the sense of eternity, of something non-perishing, of something permanent drives people to yearn for significance. Yet, the contrast between “time” and “eternity” underscores the futility of such striving.⁷² This yearning for something bigger and lasting is the crucial point in Qoheleth’s presentation of עֵת “time” and its relation to עוֹלָם “eternity” as he contrasts the human desire to understand God and God’s mysterious activity in the world. Qoheleth does not identify anything as “breath” or “transitory” in Eccl 3:1–15 as he speaks of God and his work in the world. He begins the chapter with the poem about proper times for different human activities, stressing the fact that any period will eventually be over and surpassed by another (Eccl 3:2–8). God’s activity, however, is lasting (Eccl 3:14) and not fully comprehensible (Eccl 3:11b). God enables humanity to enjoy their activities as a gift that he bestows (Eccl 3:13). Therefore, God should be acknowledged and revered constantly (Eccl 3:14), for he knows the past, the present and the future (Eccl 3:15). Thus, the relationship between עוֹלָם “eternity” and עֵת “time” does not reflect the constant thwarting of human efforts of accomplishments by God,⁷³ but, instead, the transience and brevity of all human achievements.⁷⁴ Lohfink rightly states: “Everything Qoheleth says about eternity is connected to God’s presence in the here and now and to the constant ephemeral quality of the moment.”⁷⁵

While humanity can never fully comprehend this divine ability to be in full control of life and universe at all times, Qoheleth believes that God desires for people

⁷⁰ Cf. Eccl 2:16; 9:6; 12:5. See also Schultz, “A Sense of Timing,” 266.

⁷¹ Williams, “What Does it Profit a Man?” 182-83.

⁷² See also Karl Haden, “Qoheleth and the Problem of Alienation,” *ChrSR* 17 (1987): 52-66 (60-62).

⁷³ So Tomás Frydrych, *Living Under the Sun: The Examination of Proverbs and Qoheleth* (VTSup 90; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 222-23.

⁷⁴ See also Schultz, “A Sense of Timing,” 266.

⁷⁵ Lohfink, “The Present and Eternity,” 236. See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 173.

to be present fully in every moment of their lives instead of trying to be in control of their existence (Eccl 3:12–15; cf. 7:29). Qoheleth points out that the most significant characteristic of humanity is the reality of the limitations of human life, wisdom, and knowledge.⁷⁶ He observes: “Whatever happens has already happened, and what will happen has already happened, and God will seek that which is pursued” (Eccl 3:15). The first part of the verse reflects the cyclical nature of events described in Eccl 1:4–9. However, Qoheleth places the repetitious occurrences in a theological context. Things happened because God acts in the world. These matters should not concern humanity for God will take care of them.⁷⁷ Qoheleth encourages his audience to accept their limitations and trust in God’s goodness and his design for the universe, because everything comes from the hand of God.⁷⁸ He also desires his readers to learn how to “exist with joy in community with others.”⁷⁹ Above all he knows that “whatever God does will last for eternity; nothing to add to it and nothing to withdraw. And God does this so that all should fear him” (Eccl 3:14).

Qoheleth encourages his readers to have and practise the fear of God, the attitude of the heart that accepts God as the only ruler of the universe and humanity, and that leads to the life style that reflects a mind-set of contentment *vis-à-vis* the individual occurrences and the totality of one’s life (Eccl 3:14).⁸⁰ Lohfink argues that “the ‘fear of God’ is the greatest human possibility. Nothing else compares to it.”⁸¹ Lohfink is correct in identifying the significance of the fear of God in one’s life as it guides a person to acknowledge God as God.⁸² Yet, he is mistaken in suggesting that the fear of God produces joy and ecstasy through which “God allows human beings to forget everything—themselves, their death, the brevity of their lives.”⁸³ Qoheleth does not want his audience to forget about the transient nature of their existence or about

⁷⁶ Maryta Laumann, “Qoheleth and Time,” *The Bible Today* 27 (1989): 305-10 (309). See also James, “Ecclesiastes,” 89.

⁷⁷ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 174.

⁷⁸ Eccl 2:24; 3:13; 5:18 [19]; 7:14; 9:1, 7.

⁷⁹ James, “Ecclesiastes,” 89.

⁸⁰ Crenshaw is mistaken when he states: “There is one book in the Old Testament where the fear of God seems to stand alone without any hint of divine compassion. This book is Eccl” See Crenshaw, “The Eternal Gospel,” 25.

⁸¹ Lohfink, “The Present and Eternity,” 239-40.

⁸² See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 174. Seow states: “Qoheleth stands in the wisdom tradition in its acknowledgement of wisdom’s limits. Human knowledge can only take people so far. Eventually people must accept that they are dealing with a sovereign and inscrutable deity.”

⁸³ Lohfink, “The Present and the Eternity,” 240.

the reality of death.⁸⁴ He desires them to be content with such order of things and to be able to find meaning in every fleeting moment under the sun (Eccl 3:12). He has found contentment to be the answer to his life's insecurities and limitations (Eccl 2:24–26) and now he admonishes his readers to be content and practise the attitude of the fear of God and live a life of trust and obedience to God, who is ultimately in charge of both good and bad situations that happen in one's life.

The aim of this chapter is to investigate the nature of Qoheleth's teaching of contentment in the midst of limitations. Thus far it has treated the limitation of human life imposed by the humanity's inability to control time and the inscrutability of God. The next section proceeds to examine the influence of the ultimate limitation of death in Qoheleth's teaching of contentment.

2.3 Inevitability of Death (Eccl 9:1–6)

- 9:1 כי את־כל־זה נתתי אל־לבי All this I gave to my heart and making
ולבור את־כל־זה אשר הצדיקים clear it all that the righteous and
והחכמים ועבדיהם ביד the wise and their deeds are in the hand
האלהים גם־אהבה גם־שנאה of God; whether it is love or hate, people
אין יודע האדם הכל לפניהם do not know everything before them.
- 9:2 הכל כאשר לכל מקרה אחד To everyone and everything is one fate;
לצדיק ולרשע to the righteous and to the wicked,
לטוב ולטהור ולטמא to the good and the clean and the unclean,
ולזבח ולאשר איננו זבח who sacrifices and who does not;
כטוב כחטא as to the good, so to the sinner,
הנשבע כאשר שבועה ירא who swears is as the one who is afraid of
an oath.
- 9:3 זה רע בכל אשר־נעשה This is an evil in all which is done under
תחת השמש כי־מקרה אחד לכל the sun, for the same fate is for everyone.
וגם לב בני־האדם מלא־רע Also the heart of the sons of man is full
והוללות בלבבם of evil and foolishness is in their hearts
בחייהם ואחריו while they live and after that they [go] to
אל־המתים the dead.
- 9:4 כי־מי אשר יבחר יחבר אל But whoever is joined to all the living has
כל־החיים יש בטחון כי־לכלב hope, because a living dog
חי הוא טוב מן־האריה המת is better than a dead lion.

⁸⁴ See Chapter 2 for the discussion on the importance of the theme of death in the book of Ecclesiastes.

Contentment in the Midst of Limitations

9:5	<p>כי החיים יודעים שימתו והמתים אינם יודעים מאומה ואין עוד להם שכר כי נשכח זכרם</p>	For the living know that they will die, but the dead do not know anything, and they have no reward, because their remembrances are forgotten.
9:6	<p>גם אהבתם גם שנאתם גם קנאתם כבר אבדה וחלק אין להם עוד לעולם בכל אשר נעשה תחת השמש</p>	Also their love and hate and jealousy have already perished. And they do not have an allotment in eternity in anything which is done under the sun.

The ultimate limitation that impacts a human life most significantly is death. Qoheleth sees the need to share his observations and conclusions on the issue throughout his work.⁸⁵ He offers his final remarks on the theme of death and the necessity to practise contentment in daily life, as he brings together in Eccl 9:1–6 the notion of time, fate, death and life that he has discussed previously. Throughout his teaching Qoheleth intentionally creates points of connection between the experience of his audience and his autobiography to exhibit the universality of his experience and the applicability of his conclusions. In order to do so, Qoheleth employs several key terms as the chart below demonstrates. The following section will analyze these terms.

Hebrew		English	Ecclesiastes 1–2 Qoheleth’s Autobiography	Ecclesiastes 9
מקרה		fate	2:14	9:2–3
רע		evil	1:13; 2:21	9:2–3
חלק		allotment	2:10, 21	9:6

The first key term that establishes connections between Qoheleth and his audience is **מקרה** “fate.” At this juncture, Qoheleth shows that his **מקרה** “fate” (Eccl 2:14) falls in line with **מקרה** “fate” of the wise and the righteous (Eccl 9:2). Moreover, it is a common **מקרה** “fate” of humanity in general (Eccl 9:3). He has already observed that human beings die just like animals and death is their common **מקרה** “fate” as well (cf. Eccl 3:19). Now Qoheleth offers a résumé of his thoughts about the universal **מקרה** “fate” of all created beings who have to die regardless of their earthly existence and its implication for the wise and the righteous and the living

⁸⁵ See Chapter 2.3.1 Death as a Natural End of Life in the Book of Ecclesiastes for a detailed discussion on the importance of the theme of death in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

in general (Eccl 9:3–5).⁸⁶ Qoheleth finds a direct connection between the inability of the wise to know the consequences of their deeds and death, the universal מִקְרָה “fate” of humanity (Eccl 9:2).⁸⁷ He seems to underscore one more thing that the wise can know for sure: they will die. This statement echoes Qoheleth’s observations about the same fate that befalls the wise and the foolish in his autobiography (cf. Eccl 2:14).

Qoheleth has concluded in Eccl 8:17 that not even the wise know or understand God’s actions no matter how hard they try or what they say about it: “then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may work in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out.” Now in Eccl 9 he shifts his focus from observing God’s actions to underscore human actions, especially the actions of the wise and righteous. However, his observations bring the same result: “the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God; whether it is love or hate, people do not know everything before them” (Eccl 9:1). What God does cannot be changed or influenced by humans (cf. Eccl 3:14–15). Looking through the lens of his own experience at the life of a wise person under the sun Qoheleth shares with the audience his firm belief in the fact that the wise can only know and have certainty about their inability to predict or influence their own future.

Qoheleth finds such “fate” רַע “evil” (Eccl 9:4). רַע “evil” is the second key term that links Qoheleth’s autobiography with the experiences of his audience. He sees this situation as רַע “evil”, because a person’s ethical conduct has no value in the face of death (Eccl 2:16–17). In the world under the sun, Qoheleth observes the same רַע “evil” happening to other wise and righteous people, whose religious behaviour should have played a significant role in avoiding death (Eccl 9:3). If in the autobiography he only looked at his own life in comparison to a life of a fool; here he has expounded the contrast to other categories of people. The conclusion remains the same: death as a common מִקְרָה “fate” is a רַע “evil” situation.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Ogden, “Qoheleth IX 1–16,” 162.

⁸⁷ Qoheleth speaks of מִקְרָה “fate” always in relation to death (Eccl 2:14, 15; 3:19 (x3); 9:2, 3). See also Peter Machinist, “Fate, *miqreh* and Reason: Some Reflections on Qoheleth and Biblical Thought,” in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots* (ed. Z. Zevit et al.; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 159-75.

⁸⁸ See also Graham S. Ogden, “Qoheleth IX 1–16,” *VT* 32 (1982): 158-69 (160-61).

Qoheleth employs the third key term חלק “allotment” to make his audience aware of the fact that he and his readers also share a common “allotment,” not just one מַקְרָה “fate.” The question of מַקְרָה “fate” appears to be a very serious one, for it impacts life in the present. Qoheleth has come to accept the fact that life is a gift and everything that he has in this world is his חלק “allotment” (Eccl 2:24). His profound reflections on death, its power and its inescapability, have given Qoheleth the strength to overcome the hatred of his life and labour, and moved him to develop an attitude of contentment (Eccl 2:24–26). Qoheleth’s hope is that his audience would similarly come to appreciate life and learn to live in contentment because only the living can enjoy חלק “allotment” from God (Eccl 9:6; cf. 9:9). The living exist under the shadow of their מַקְרָה “fate.” Yet, they are still capable of enjoying life as a reward from God, while the dead have already received theirs and ceased to matter (Eccl 9:4–6). Having discussed the relationship between life and death previously (cf. Eccl 2:16; 3:2, 19), Qoheleth addresses the implications of this correlation: while humanity cannot change their מַקְרָה “fate,” they can influence their life in the present because they have hope (Eccl 9:4).

Qoheleth concludes his search for profit in life, which is brief and transient, in Eccl 9:4 when he underlines the most significant difference between the dead and the living—hope. The hope that he speaks about is the opportunity and ability for human beings to accept their limitations: reality of death and their inability to understand God or control their present life or future events. This hope enables people to focus on living every moment to the fullest. Qoheleth tells his readers that “a living dog is better than a dead lion” (Eccl 9:4); consequently, being alive is already profitable!

People should also accept the fact that no lasting profit can be achieved from all their labour, for they have no control over their future and their accomplishments. The only reward or allotment (חלק) that is available to human beings in the world under the sun is an opportunity to be content with what God has given them and to find joy and satisfaction in their work (cf. Eccl 2:10; 3:12–13, 22). In Eccl 9:1–6 Qoheleth reiterates the thought about God having control over people’s actions and over the rewards that these actions might receive. He concludes that people should treasure everyday life and the rewards it brings instead of trying to secure the future

and be confronted by the nothingness of death (Eccl 9:5).⁸⁹ Qoheleth's teaching on practising contentment in the midst of limitations will be discussed next.

3. Contentment in the Midst of Limitations (Eccl 9:7–10)

In Ecclesiastes 9:7–10 Qoheleth masterfully and powerfully brings together the theme of death, the brevity of human life, and the theme of God's activity in the world to take the development of the theme of contentment in the midst of limitations to its culmination. Having shared his observations about death and the inscrutability of God (Eccl 9:1–2), Qoheleth brings his teaching of contentment to its climactic conclusion. With great urgency he advocates for his audience to accept life and live it to the fullest just as he has chosen to do (Eccl 9:7–10; cf. 2:24–26).

9:7	לך אכל בשמחה לחמך ושתה בלב-טוב יינך כי כבר רצה האל-הים את-מעשיך	Go, eat with joy your bread and drink with good heart your wine, for already God has approved your work.
9:8	בכל-עת יהיו בגדיך לבנים ושמן על-ראשך אל-יחסר	At all times may your garments be white and may oil not lack upon your head.
9:9	ראה חיים עם-אשה אשר-אהבת כל-ימי חיי הבלך אשר נתן-לך תחת השמש כל ימי הבלך כי הוא חלקך בחיים ובעמלך אשר-אתה עמל תחת השמש	See life with your wife whom you love in all the days of your fleeting life which is given to you under the sun for all your fleeting days, for this is your allotment in life and in your labour, in which you labour under the sun.
9:10	כל אשר תמצא ידך לעשות בכחך עשה כי אין מעשה וחשבון ודעת וחכמה בשאול אשר אתה הלך שמה	Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for there is no work or account or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol to which you are going.

With the help of certain key terms which Qoheleth has been using throughout his teaching (see the chart below), he counsels his audience once again on ways to embrace the life of contentment in the midst of limitations, imposed on humanity by their inability to control the times or to discern God's actions in the world. Qoheleth strongly believes that any thought of death and non-existence in Sheol that follows death (Eccl 9:10; cf. 9:5–6) should create a desire to live in the mind of his audience.

⁸⁹ Ogden, "Qoheleth IX 1–16," 162–63.

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Even though their days are הַבֵּל “fleeting” (Eccl 9:9; cf. 1:14; 2:11, 15, 19, 23; 3:19), they should be embraced and lived out with vigour and zeal because they come from the hand of God (Eccl 9:9; cf. 2:24–25; 3:13). Simple things in life as eating and drinking, doing good and enjoying one’s labour constitute the חֶלֶק “allotment” that God has given people as a gift (Eccl 9:7–10; cf. 2:24; 3:13, 22).⁹⁰

Hebrew	English	Ecclesiastes 1–2 Qoheleth’s Autobiography	Ecclesiastes 3	Ecclesiastes 9
חֶלֶק	allotment	2:10, 21	3:22	9:9
עֵמֶל	labour	1:3; 2:3, 10–11, 18, 20, 22, 24	3:9, 13, 22	9:9
שָׁתָה/אָכַל	drink/eat	2:24–26	3:13	9:7
טוֹב	good	2:3, 24	3:12–13, 22	9:7
הַבֵּל	fleeting	1:2, 14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26	3:19	9:9
עֵת	time		3:1–8, 11, 17	9:11–12

Qoheleth moves from advocating the profit of being content with one’s life and enjoying God’s gift to exhorting it forcefully and passionately. Instead of using the phrases “it is good” or “it is better” in encouraging a life of contentment, which is common in his earlier statements,⁹¹ he employs the imperatives and jussives “go”, “eat”, “drink”, “may your garments be white”, “may not oil be lacking”, “see life”, “do” (Eccl 9:7–10) to emphasize the necessity of an immediate application of such attitude in life on the part of his audience. Lee correctly points out that “it is [Qoheleth’s] most exuberant and most expansive endorsement of enjoyment thus far.”⁹²

Qoheleth advocates eating (אָכַל) “with joy” and drinking (שָׁתָה) “with good heart” to underscore the attitude people should have toward such common activities of everyday life (Eccl 9:7a; cf. 10:19a). This reflects his understanding of bread and wine as the Old Testament symbols of good life,⁹³

You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to use,

⁹⁰ See Rudolf Smend, “Essen und Trinken—Ein Stück Weltlichkeit des Alten Testaments,” in *Beiträge zur Alttestamentlichen Theologie* (eds. Herbert Donner, Robert Hanhard and Rudold Smend; Göttingen: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 446–59. See also Humbert, “‘Laetari’ et ‘exultare’ dans le vocabulaire religieux de l’ancien Testament,” 185–214.

⁹¹ cf. Eccl 2:24; 3:12, 22; 5:17 [Eng. 18]; 8:15.

⁹² Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 62.

⁹³ See Gen 14:18; 18:1–6; Jdg 19:19; Ruth 2:14; 1 Sam 16:20; 25:18; Isa 36:17. See also Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 63.

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to bring forth food from the earth,
and wine to gladden the human heart,
oil to make the face shine,
and bread to strengthen the human heart. (Ps 104:14–15)

Lee also suggests that in Qoheleth’s rhetoric bread and wine may represent the nourishment necessary for the mind to nurture wisdom and understanding⁹⁴ just as Lady Wisdom offers to the simple,

Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.
Lay aside immaturity, and live,
and walk in the way of insight. (Prov 9:5–6)

In promoting a fulfilled lifestyle in his teachings, Qoheleth has also changed his strategy from offering advice on practising contentment in a daily life to providing a rationale for it—this is God’s חלק “allotment” to the living (Eccl 9:9).⁹⁵ In order to understand better the meaning of “allotment” in Eccl 9:9, it is necessary to look at a wider context and include Eccl 9:6 in this discussion, because חלק is mentioned there as well. Qoheleth compares the existence of the living and the dead in order to point out that this allotment constitutes the main difference between the world under the sun and Sheol: the dead will never have a חלק “allotment” (Eccl 9:6), while the living have an opportunity to enjoy their חלק “allotment” (Eccl 9:9). He also counsels his audience to embrace life and enjoy it while they still can, for there is nothing available to human beings in Sheol where every mortal will eventually go.⁹⁶ The wise person should live in the light of such knowledge.

The proper understanding of the הבל “fleetingness” of עת “time” by the wise and righteous is so important for Qoheleth that he brings this concept to bear on how to live in the face of death once again. He employs the word עת “time” (Eccl 9:8; cf. 9: 11, 12 [x2]) to emphasize the significance of appreciating every moment that is granted a human being under the sun, reminding his audience that acknowledging the times and responding appropriately to them is a sign of wisdom and obedience to God (cf. Eccl 3:1–8, 17). Qoheleth advocates wearing white clothes בכל־עת “at all times” (Eccl 9:8) because there is no point in delaying or waiting for a better occasion

⁹⁴ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 63.

⁹⁵ Ogden, “Qoheleth IX 1–16,” 164.

⁹⁶ See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 302.

to commemorate life and find satisfaction in it.⁹⁷ People cannot control עֵת “time” (cf. Eccl 3:1; 9:11) or know עֵת “time” for different encounters in life (cf. Eccl 9:12).⁹⁸ It is precisely at the very moment of acknowledging one’s vulnerability in this life and the reality and inevitability of death that Qoheleth counsels his audience to celebrate life (Eccl 9:7–10). He argues that because work, wisdom and knowledge are not available in Sheol, where the dead abide, they should be enjoyed here and now.⁹⁹

Qoheleth is concerned about the situation of the wise and the righteous because, as the wise and just king, he has recognized that God sends the good and the bad to everybody, even to those who do not deserve either the good or the bad.¹⁰⁰ He acknowledges the advantage of wisdom and ethical conduct in this world and encourages his audience to lead a good and moral life. Thus, his advice to the wise is to recognize, accept and enjoy the gift of God when he offers it. Enjoyment of life and work are gifts, just as wisdom and knowledge are gifts that God gives to those who are good (cf. Eccl 2:26). Qoheleth believes that the wise and the righteous are the ones who please God, “for already God has approved your works” (Eccl 9:7).¹⁰¹

Yet, Qoheleth moves beyond admonishing the enjoyment of work, food and drink. He broadens the spectrum of things that God has made available for humanity in which to find contentment and satisfaction. He lists a variety of activities which together paint a picture of a contented and pleasing life.¹⁰² Dressing in white clothing (Eccl 9:8) symbolizes joy and happiness,¹⁰³ purity, prosperity and abundance.¹⁰⁴ Anointing with oil (Eccl 9:7) is a sign of celebration and well-being, common in the

⁹⁷ Brian Boyle, “‘Let Your Garments Always Be White’ (Eccl 9:8): Time, Fate, Chance and Provident Design According to Qoheleth,” *ABR* 55 (2007): 29-40 (38).

⁹⁸ The NRSV’s translation of אֶתֶּרֶן “the time of disaster” is unfortunate as it already anticipates the moment of death, while Qoheleth still speaks about the inability of people to control any type of events in their life, which is consistent with his thoughts in Eccl 3:1–11.

⁹⁹ Ogden, “Qoheleth IX 1–16,” 163.

¹⁰⁰ See also Gorssen, “La Cohérence de la Conception de Dieu dans l’Ecclesiaste,” 282-324.

¹⁰¹ See also Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 36-37.

¹⁰² Fredericks argues against any special meaning to Qoheleth’s words about white clothing and anointing one’s head with oil. He believes that the “primary meaning is to relax in white clothing because it is cooler, and to moisten the scalp and hair with sweet oil. The thrust here is that one should enjoy a clean, refreshing, presentable attire and appearance.” See Fredericks and Esters, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 209.

¹⁰³ Robert L. Alden, “בגד,” *NIDOTTE* 1:597.

¹⁰⁴ Andrew Bowling, “לבוש,” *TWOT*, 467. See also Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 93. A similar concept is present in the psalmist’s words which associate God-given feeling of rejoicing with being dressed in festive clothing: “You have turned my lamenting into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy” (Ps 30:12 [Eng. 11]).

Old Testament.¹⁰⁵ Qoheleth also urges people to experience the joy of companionship, especially with one's spouse (Eccl 9:9). This command echoes the admonition in Prov 5:18–20, which purposes to strengthen the marital relationships in the face of extramarital temptations.¹⁰⁶ Qoheleth turns his endorsement of simple things that bring contentment and satisfaction into a full celebration of life. Brown describes Qoheleth's intensity as "the moral agency and palpable beauty"¹⁰⁷ of pursuing contentment and joy.

This call to enjoyment of life sounds very similar to the words of Siduru, the ale-wife, found in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*:¹⁰⁸

Thou, Gilgamesh, let full be thy belly,
Make thou merry by day and by night.
Of each day make thou a feast of rejoicing,
Day and night dance thou and play!
Let thy garments be sparkling fresh,
Thy head be washed, bathe thou in water.
Pay heed to the little one that holds on to thy hand,
Let thy spouse delight in thy bosom!
For this is the task of [mankind]!

The inevitability of death and the emptiness it brings seems to be a common concern in ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature.¹⁰⁹ In the face of coming death the enjoyment of life is the only way to bear the full consequences of human mortality. Siduru's words are intended to help Gilgamesh see that while the life he has is not one of immortality, it can and should be lived to the utmost.

Anderson argues that in the ancient Near Eastern world, including Israel, joy of life is a part of specified and ritualized behaviour. The behavioural dimension consists of eating, drinking, anointing with oil, dressing in festive clothing and spending time with one's spouse.¹¹⁰ These activities are the regular feature of the world of the living and, thus, constitute the end of the mourning cycle in ancient rituals. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* Gilgamesh instructs his friend Enkidu to abstain

¹⁰⁵ The Psalmist mentions "oil to make the face shine" among the joys God gives to his people (Ps 104:15). See also Ps 23:5; 45:7; 92:11; 133:2; Isa 61:3.

¹⁰⁶ Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 94.

¹⁰⁷ Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 93.

¹⁰⁸ "The Epic of Gilgamesh," translated by E. A. Speiser (*ANET*, 90).

¹⁰⁹ An Egyptian tomb inscription "A Song of the Harper" also advocates the impossibility of immortality and admonishes the enjoyment of life in the present, while people are still alive. See "A Song of the Harper," translated by John A. Wilson (*ANET*, 467).

¹¹⁰ Gary Anderson, *A Time to Mourn, a Time to Dance* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 27-37, 55-56, 74-77. Anderson also includes in this list dancing and singing in praise of God. See also Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 65.

from such activities as he is getting ready to travel to the underworld because the dead might get jealous of him and not allow him to leave their world.¹¹¹ The things in life that bring joy and pleasure to the living are no longer available to them. Therefore, when Gilgamesh is encouraged to practise these things in his life, he is encouraged to terminate the period of mourning for his dead friend and be incorporated into the world of the living again.¹¹²

While Qoheleth advocates the enjoyment of life in Eccl 9:7–10 in terms very similar to Siduru’s admonition to Gilgamesh, he also encourages his audience to work “with your might” (Eccl 9:10). Qoheleth includes work into his picture of a contented and joyful life, because it is also part of the human “allotment” (Eccl 2:24; 3:13, 22) and because “work is not an option; it is an ethical duty.”¹¹³ The satisfaction of work comes not from the profit it may bring, but from the very action of labouring. Qoheleth acknowledges one’s freedom in choosing a vocation, “whatever your hands find to do,” but he requires integrity in doing it, “do it with all your might” (Eccl 9:10). The use of the verb מציא “to find” (Eccl 9:10) is worth mentioning in this context in light of Qoheleth’s consistent claim that people “cannot find” (מציא) and comprehend the divine activity in the world (cf. Eccl 3:11; 7:14, 24–28; 8:17). This is why he persistently tells his audience to focus on being content with what they have been given to understand (cf. Eccl 2:24–26; 3:12–13; 7:14; 8:15). Qoheleth also redirects the human desire to find what God is doing (cf. Eccl 3:11) to finding a meaningful occupation for themselves in which they can find joy (Eccl 9:10). However, from this point on, Qoheleth shows his readers that they are able to find what they are searching for in their work, because work can be satisfying and fulfilling (cf. Eccl 11:1–6).¹¹⁴ Brown is correct in suggesting that “Qoheleth finds a measure of dignity in the very act of toiling.”¹¹⁵ Qoheleth believes that people need to focus heartily on what is right in front of them with all their might and with all their joy. He speaks of work that should be embraced wholeheartedly in terms of the

¹¹¹ “The Epic of Gilgamesh,” (ANET, 97). The Egyptian wisdom literature also presents “bright clothing” as a sign of good life. See Lichtheim, “The Story of Sinuhe,” (AEL I:228). The absence of “white garments” denotes economic instability, poverty and distress. See Lichtheim, “The Admonitions of Ipuwer,” (AEL I: 151).

¹¹² Anderson, *A Time to Mourn, a Time to Dance*, 74-77. See also Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 65.

¹¹³ Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 95.

¹¹⁴ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 67-68.

¹¹⁵ Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 95.

Shema (Deut 6:5).¹¹⁶ Or, as Miskotte states: “altogether earnestly, but not nervously, but rather with a light hand, without much pressure, and with the light of the Sabbath running through it all.”¹¹⁷

Qoheleth provides a theological reason for his urgency in celebrating life. It is God’s will for humanity to be content with their lives and even find pleasure in it: “Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with good heart; for already God has approved your works” (Eccl 9:7). Qoheleth speaks of the divine favour, which is shown in a proper sacrifice or faithful service (cf. 2 Sam 15:26; 1 Chr 29:17; Ps 147:11; Hag 1:8). When human beings take pleasure in the gifts that God so freely gives to them, God responds with delight and favour them even more. Lee is correct in stressing the ideas that in Qoheleth’s thought the “celebration of life is not only sanctioned, but elevated to the status of religious duty, the fulfilment of which brings God pleasure.”¹¹⁸ In the face of inevitable and unavoidable death, the sage advocates a renewed and invigorated zeal for life. The living who still have חלק “allotment” and “hope” must live in the full sense of the word. A life of contentment consists of simple things; yet these very activities infuse life with meaning and purpose.

4. Conclusion

This chapter has examined the ways in which Qoheleth develops the theme of contentment in the midst of limitations imposed by the impossibility to control time, the inscrutability of God and the inevitability of death. Looking through the lens of his autobiography, Qoheleth urges his listeners to submit their will to God and not to disregard God’s gift of appropriate situations (Eccl 3:11; cf. 2:24–25).¹¹⁹ In the face of the inability to control time, Qoheleth encourages his audience to be wise and attentive to what God is doing in their lives so that they could be involved in the appropriate activities at the appropriate times. Qoheleth has demonstrated that while individual human life is brief and passing, it fits beautifully into God’s eternity, so people should value and appreciate the gift of life (Eccl 3:1–8). Instead of trying to manipulate life, Qoheleth encourages his audience to consider life’s limitations and mysteries and to replace their illusive hopes of mastering providence with a well-

¹¹⁶ Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 95.

¹¹⁷ Kornelis H. Miskotte, *When the Gods Are Silent* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 454.

¹¹⁸ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 68.

¹¹⁹ Wilch, *Time and Event*, 126.

established confidence in God's gifts that have already been given to them (Eccl 3:12–13; 9:7–10).¹²⁰

In the face of inscrutability of God, Qoheleth advocates accepting the fact that God and his activity is outside the realm of human understanding (Eccl 3:11, 14–15). People should recognize their life as a gift from God even though they will never be able to comprehend the ultimate meaning of life or God's involvement in their life. Loretz has correctly identified the true intention of Qoheleth: "The purpose of this divine action is unpredictable according to Qohelet so that people do not understand the work of God. There is no question about fatalistic or deterministic ordering of life by God."¹²¹ Life is full of ambiguities, but people need to make choices in spite of them and be content with the consequences. Qoheleth encourages his listeners to take seriously every living moment and find meaning in it, instead of searching out the divine plan (Eccl 3:12–13).

In the face of the inevitability of death Qoheleth urges his audience to celebrate life, one day at a time. The simple joys of life like eating and drinking, like having clothes to wear and spending time with one's family bring the true meaning and joy to one's existence under the sun (Eccl 9:7–10). Qoheleth points out that the wise and the righteous have already found favour in God's eyes and God is already pleased with them and their activities. When they celebrate life, they celebrate the good gifts of wisdom, knowledge, and joy that God has given them. Such lifestyle brings God delight and he bestows even more reward on his people (Eccl 9:7). Qoheleth advocates finding contentment in one's circumstances and being grateful to God for life as the ultimate gift. Contentment comes from the inner attitude of the heart and the mind that is rooted in the permanence and goodness of God. The next chapter will consider the development of the theme of contentment in Qoheleth's thought in the circumstances of living with one's allotment.

¹²⁰ Johnston, "Confession of a Workaholic," 26.

¹²¹ Oswald Loretz, *Qohelet und der Alte Orient. Untersuchungen zu Stil und theologischer Thematik des Buches Qohelet* (Herder: Freiburg, 1964), 253-54.

Chapter 5

Contentment and Living with One's Allotment

1. Introduction

The previous chapter has analyzed the ways in which Qoheleth finds contentment to be the most appropriate mind-set in the midst of limitations imposed on humanity by the inability to control time, the inscrutability of God and the certainty of death. It has also demonstrated how Qoheleth's autobiography serves as a lens to read the book of Ecclesiastes as he connects his own experience with the experience of his audience. This chapter will trace further the development of the theme of contentment in Qoheleth's thought focusing particularly on two areas: 1) his advice on accepting one's allotment in life and learning to be satisfied with it, and 2) his teaching on finding joy and fulfilment in one's work.

In order to address these issues, Eccl 5:7 [Eng. 8]–6:9 will be discussed first to demonstrate what a life of contentment and acceptance of one's allotment should look like, according to Qoheleth. Ecclesiastes 11:1–6 will be examined next to study Qoheleth's thoughts on how human beings could find contentment and happiness in their labour. The analysis of these passages will be presented through the lens of Qoheleth's autobiography to bring forth the reasons for his teaching on contentment in connection to his thoughts on death and the role of God in human life.

2. Living with One's Allotment (Eccl 5:7–19 [Eng. 8–20] and 6:1–9)

Qoheleth expands his teaching on contentment and living with one's allotment¹ in Eccl 5:7 [Eng. 8]–6:9 in light of his own autobiography, his view of death, and the role of God in one's life. He turns to address the issue of material gain and satisfaction once again as he presents a scenario of a life which is led without contentment and contrasts it to a life filled with contentment and joy. Qoheleth restates the programmatic question about searching for profit in human labour for the fourth and last time in Eccl 5:15 [Eng. 16],² which makes it important to consider

¹ In his royal autobiography Qoheleth speaks of his experience of abundance as his allotment. However, in addressing his audience, Qoheleth speaks of allotment in general terms and suggests that allotment is not connected to the amount of wealth one may possess.

² See Chart in Chapter 3.

what he says on the matter in this passage. However, before proceeding to the analysis of the theme of contentment in Qoheleth's teaching in Eccl 5:7 [Eng. 8]–6:9, it is necessary to discuss the literary structure of this passage.

2.1 Ecclesiastes 5:7 [Eng. 8]–6:9 as a Coherent Unit

A certain logical connection can be observed between Eccl 5:7–8 [Eng. 8–9] and the following passage Eccl 5:9 [Eng. 10]–6:9. Fox identifies a loose connection between these passages based on the theme of greed.³ Bartholomew helpfully advances the argument by making connections between the theme of oppression present in Eccl 5:7–8 [Eng. 8–9] and the theme of pursuing riches present in the rest of Eccl 5 and in the larger part of Eccl 6.⁴ Fredericks discerns a chiasmic and parallel structure in Eccl 5:9 [Eng. 10]–6:9 based on the occurrences of the themes of wealth and poverty, satisfaction and rest or lack thereof, breath and transience, and advantage:⁵

- A. 5:9–11 [Eng. 10–12] Limitations to Satisfaction
- B. 5:12–16 [Eng. 13–17] Coming and Going in Darkness
- C. 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20] God's blessing or
- C'. 6:1–2 God's curse
- B'. 6:3–6 Coming and Going in Darkness
- A'. 6:7–9 Limitations to Satisfaction.

Unfortunately, Fredericks does not include Eccl 5:7–8 [Eng. 8–9] in his analysis, which would have strengthened his argument significantly. Qoheleth speaks of an insatiable human appetite in Eccl 6:9 which echoes his thoughts on the insatiability of rulers and officials who oppress the poor to gain wealth for themselves in Eccl 5:7 [Eng.8]. Seow helpfully points out that the term “afflicted” in Eccl 6:8 corresponds to the term “poor” in Eccl 5:7 [Eng. 8], as these two terms are usually used to describe the situation of those who are deprived of justice.⁶ Therefore, Fredericks' proposal

³ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 233.

⁴ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 216.

⁵ Daniel Fredericks, “Chiasm and Parallel Structure in Qoheleth 5:9–6:9,” *JBL* 108 (1989): 17-35 (20). See also Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 148-49. Bartholomew argues against the chiasmic structure presented by Fredericks, because he finds more juxtaposition between passages within this pericope rather than unity. However, he does not offer a different way of analyzing the passage. See Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 216.

⁶ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 216. See also Deut 24:14; Ps 82:3; Prov 22:22; Isa 3:14; Ezek 18:12 which speak of both the poor and the needy or afflicted as lacking justice.

should be modified to reflect the semantic and linguistic connections within this passage:⁷

- A. 5:7–11 [Eng. 8–12] Life without Satisfaction
- B. 5:12–16 [Eng. 13–17] Life in Darkness
- C. 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20] Life with God's Gift
- C'. 6:1–2 Life without God's Gift
- B'. 6:3–6 Life in Darkness
- A'. 6:7–9 Life without Satisfaction

There are good reasons to view Eccl 5:7 [Eng. 8]–6:9 as one literary unit that deals with the theme of profit, human greed and lack of contentment. The use of the key term “profit” throughout this section draws the readers’ attention to finding advantage outside of material gain. Qoheleth’s intention is to address the issue of profit and good one more time to cause his audience, who are privileged to live in abundance, to learn to be content with what they have been given by God in the present and have a meaningful existence under the sun, instead of putting their security and trust in their wealth, which is ultimately unreliable and fleeting.

In the following analysis the parallel elements of the chiasmic structure will be treated together: A and A'–Life without Satisfaction; B and B'–Life in Darkness; C and C'–Life with/without God's Gift.

2.2 Life without Satisfaction (Eccl 5:7–11 [Eng. 8–12] and 6:7–9)

A 5:7	<p style="text-align: center;">אם-עשק רש וגזל משפט וצדק תראה במדינה אל-תתמה על-החפץ כי גבה מעל גבה שמר וגבהים עליהם</p>	<p>If you see the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be surprised—for an arrogant one is above an arrogant one, arrogant ones have watched over them all.</p>
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⁷ Seow modifies Frederick's chiasmic structure to include the omitted verses and argues that Eccl 5:19 [Eng. 20] is the resolution of the whole pericope:

- A. People Who Cannot Be Satisfied (5:8–12 [Heb vv 7–11])
- B. People Who Cannot Enjoy (5:13–17 [Heb vv 12–16])
- C. What Is Good? (5:18–19 [Heb vv 17–18])
- D. Enjoy the Moment (5:20 [Heb v 19])
- C'. What Is Bad? (6:1–2)
- B'. People Who Cannot Enjoy (6:3–6)
- A'. People Who Cannot Be Satisfied (6:7–9).

See Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 217. However, Eccl 5:19 [Eng. 20] is not a resolution to Eccl 5:7 [Eng.8]–6:9, because the conditions in Eccl 5:17–18 and Eccl 6:1–2 are not the same. In the former passage God gives a person power to find satisfaction in life and in the latter he does not. Therefore, an ability to enjoy the moment cannot solve a problem when such ability is non-existent. Eccl 5:17–19 is set in contrast to Eccl 6:1–2. Ecclesiastes 5:19 [Eng. 20] provides a conclusion to the theological reason for the life of contentment that is discussed in Eccl5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20].

Contentment and Living with One's Allotment

5:8	ויתרון ארץ בכל היא הוא מלך לשדה נעבד	But the advantage to the land, in all, a king for a ploughed land.
5:9	אהב כסף לא־ישבע כסף מי־אהב בהמון לא תבואה גם־זה הבל	Whoever loves silver, is not satisfied with silver; who loves riches has no yield. This too is fleeting.
5:10	ברבות הטובה רבו אוכליה ומה־כשרון לבעליה כי אם־ראית ראות עיניו	When goods increase, those who eat them increase; and what success has their owner but to see them [riches] with his eyes?
5:11	מתוקה שנת העבד א־ס־מעט ואם־הרבה יאכל והשבע לעשיר איננו מניח לו לישון	Sweet is the sleep of the labourer whether he eats little or much, but the surfeit of the rich will not let him sleep.
A' 6:7	כל־עמל האדם לפיהו וגם־הנפש לא תמלא	All of man's work is for his mouth, and yet his appetite is never filled.
6:8	כי מה־יותר לחכם מן־הכסיל מה־לעני יודע להלך נגד החיים	What advantage does the wise have over the fool, and what do the poor know about walking before the living?
6:9	טוב מראה עינים מהלך־נפש גם־זה הבל ורעות רוח	Better is the sight of the eyes than wondering of desire. Also this is fleeting and pursuit of wind.

The theme of contentment and material success is of great importance to Qoheleth; hence, he addresses it anew in Eccl 5:7 [Eng. 8]–6:9. In light of his previous discussion about the oppression and injustice that the poor have to endure (Eccl 4:1–3), one may think that acquiring large sums of money would change one's situation and bring fulfilment and satisfaction to one's existence. However, Qoheleth declares that the pursuit of material success is fleeting and unrewarding.⁸ He has personally found out that there is no connection between accumulating wealth and finding contentment in life (Eccl 2:11) and he desires his audience to come to the same conclusions. In order to achieve this result, Qoheleth makes use of several key terms to speak of a wealthy but discontent person in Eccl 5:7–11 [Eng. 8–12] and Eccl 6:7–9. These are the same words that he employed while narrating his autobiography in Eccl 1:12–2:26 (see the chart below). These terms will be analyzed in the following sections. By using these terms, Qoheleth links his own experience as it is expressed in

⁸ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 219.

the autobiography with human life in general and reinterprets his own life circumstances in terms of any person's situation. Now looking at the world around

Hebrew	English	Ecclesiastes 1–2 Qoheleth's Autobiography	Ecclesiastes 5–6
יתרון יותר כשרון	profit/ advantage success	1:3; 2:10–11, 13 2:21	5:8 [Eng. 9], 15 [Eng. 16]; 6:8 5:10 [Eng. 11]
הבל	fleeting	1:2, 14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 22, 26	5:9 [Eng. 10]; 6:2, 4, 9
שבע	be satisfied	1:8	5:9 [Eng. 10]
מלא	be full	1:8	6:7
אכל/ שתה	eat/ drink	2:24–25	5:10–11 [Eng. 11–12], 16– 17 [Eng. 17–18]; 6:2

him through the lens of his autobiography, Qoheleth demonstrates that not only the wealthy (Eccl 5:9 [Eng. 10]) or the labourer (Eccl 5:11 [Eng. 12]), but also the wise, the poor, and all the living (Eccl 6:8) can benefit from his teaching on contentment. Two important issues that Qoheleth has identified in his autobiography present significant concerns to his audience as well: 1) searching for profit in a transient world, and 2) desiring satisfaction and fulfilment.

2.2.1 Searching for Profit

In section A (Eccl 5:7–11 [Eng. 8–12]) Qoheleth uses three different terms to speak of financial gain as he is addressing a situation of a wealthy person: 1) the already familiar יתרון “profit” (Eccl 5:8 [Eng. 9]), and its synonyms 2) תבואה “yield” (Eccl 5:9 [Eng. 10]), and 3) כשרון “success” (Eccl 5:10 [Eng. 11]). Qoheleth will mention יתרון “profit” again later, in Eccl 5:15 [Eng. 16]. These terms speak primarily of material success which is achieved through human effort⁹ and which requires a lot of skills and dedication.¹⁰

The second word תבואה “yield” (Eccl 5:9 [Eng. 10]) speaks of “the produce of the field.”¹¹ It is quite possible that Qoheleth uses this word as *double entendre* to remind his readers that the profit of the land that can only be found in the yield it can bring (Eccl 5:8 [Eng. 9]), on the one hand. Ezekiel has a similar understanding of

⁹ Luc, “כשרון,” *NIDOTTE* 2:738-39.

¹⁰ Kellerman, “כשרון,” *TDOT* 7:367-70.

¹¹ M. Zipor, “תבואה,” *TDOT* 15:553-56 (553); I. Cornelius, “יבול,” *NIDOTTE* 2:389-90

תְּבוּאָה “yield” in his vision as the harvest of the land surrounding the Levitical cities should feed their workers (cf. Ezek 48:18).¹² On the other hand, by employing תְּבוּאָה “yield” Qoheleth underscores the truth that looking for yield in amassing one's wealth does not constitute a blessed and righteous existence (Eccl 5:9 [Eng. 10]), just as Prov 15:6 states: “Better a little with righteousness than a great yield (תְּבוּאָה) without judgment.”¹³

Qoheleth also uses a third word כְּשָׂרוֹן “success” that relates to the matter of profit and gain (Eccl 5:10 [Eng. 11]). He goes on to note that though כְּשָׂרוֹן “success” is gained through hard work, it is often enjoyed by others who have not worked for it at all (Eccl 5:10 [Eng. 11]), as mentioned in Qoheleth's autobiography (Eccl 2:21). In order to make their enterprises truly successful, people need to learn how to be wise enough to find satisfaction in their achievements, and not only how to apply their skills and knowledge to achieve greatness in their entrepreneurship. Otherwise, excessive work only encourages others to enjoy the fruit of such labour.¹⁴ But most importantly a person should always remember that life is הַבֵּל “fleeting” (Eccl 5:9 [Eng. 10]). One's possessions cannot ensure a longer life or a lasting memory. Therefore, Qoheleth's word to the rich is to learn to find contentment in using their wealth while life gives them the opportunity to do so.

In section A' (Eccl 6:7–9), Qoheleth mentions the word יוֹתֵר “advantage” (Eccl 6:8) again. However, this time he opens up the issue of “profit” in one's labour and the possibility of getting ahead to all “the living.” Qoheleth asks questions of his audience to make them think of different groups of people, like the wise, the fools, and the poor (Eccl 6:8) as if one group might have an advantage over the rest in this life. However, it is only natural to answer his questions negatively in light of what the audience knows already about his own experience and in light of their own circumstances. Advantage cannot be secured or guaranteed because of the fleeting (הַבֵּל) nature of life and unpredictability of death (Eccl 6:9). While the circumstances of a poor person may be wrought with oppression and injustice, learning to be content

¹² Zipor, “תְּבוּאָה,” *TDOT* 15:553.

¹³ Cf. Prov 15:6; 10:16; 3:14. See also Zipor, “תְּבוּאָה,” *TDOT* 15:555-56.

¹⁴ See also Kellerman, “כְּשָׂרוֹן,” *TDOT* 7:368.

in the midst of such circumstances will make one's life more meaningful, rather than living with dreams beyond one's reach.¹⁵

Both sections A and A' deal with the issue of profit and satisfaction in life. In section A Qoheleth addresses the situation of the wealthy and in section A' Qoheleth broadens the spectrum of his observations to include the conditions of the wise, the fools, and the poor. Qoheleth makes it very clear that the wise and fools, the wealthy and the poor, everybody can only profit from what he can use in the present moment (Eccl 5:10 [Eng. 11]; 6:9).

2.2.2 Desiring Satisfaction and Fulfilment

As Qoheleth addresses the rich and their desire to get even richer in section A (Eccl 5:7–11 [Eng. 8–12]), he speaks of the inadequacy of money and material possessions to meet the human need of finding satisfaction in life.¹⁶ Material possessions can bring joy and happiness to their owner (cf. Eccl 5:17–18 [Eng. 18–19]; 6:2); yet it is the love of wealth that cannot be fulfilled, because “whoever loves silver” will always desire to have more (Eccl 5:9 [Eng. 10]). Qoheleth is adamant that the accumulation and love of riches do not bring satisfaction to one's life.¹⁷ By using the word “not satisfied” (לֹא־שָׂבַע) in Eccl 5:9 [Eng. 10], Qoheleth ties this part of his teaching with his statement from the opening poem, “The eye is not satisfied (לֹא־שָׂבַע) with seeing” (Eccl 1:8), and with the experiences of humanity in general, “the eyes are not satisfied (לֹא־שָׂבַע) with riches” (Eccl 4:8). When Qoheleth restates the thematic question, “what success (כִּשְׂרוֹן) has their owner [of the riches]..?” he inserts his own answer in that question implying that the gain is “to see them [the riches] with his own eyes” (Eccl 5:10 [Eng. 11]).¹⁸

Qoheleth returns to the theme of discontentment in section A' (Eccl 6:7–9) by pointing out that “the appetite is never filled (לֹא תִמְלֵא)” (Eccl 6:7). The repetition of the phrase “not filled” (לֹא תִמְלֵא) links this statement with what he has said in the

¹⁵ Fredericks, “Chiasm and Parallel Structure in Qoheleth 5:9–6:9,” 23.

¹⁶ Fredericks, “Chiasm and Parallel Structure in Qoheleth 5:9–6:9,” 20.

¹⁷ A similar idea is found in the Egyptian text *The Instruction of Amen-em-Opet*: “Better is bread, when the heart is happy, than riches with sorrow.” See “The Instruction of Amen-em-Opet,” (ANE, 348).

¹⁸ Seow is incorrect when he argues that this question implies a negative answer because Qoheleth does suggest that seeing the riches constitutes the gain from having them. See Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 220.

introductory poem, “the ear is not filled (לֹא־תִמְלֵא אָזְנוֹ) with hearing” (Eccl 1:8). The parallel lines of sections A–A' (Eccl 5:9 [Eng. 10] and Eccl 6:7) that speak about the insatiability of a wealthy person, echo the parallel lines of the introductory poem (Eccl 1:8). Ecclesiastes 1:8 describes an innate human ability to absorb constantly new information which emphasizes the utter impossibility of material possessions to bring satisfaction in life. Qoheleth brings out natural human activities like eating, seeing, and hearing to show that the absence of healthy limitations can make life burdensome, “pursuit of wind,” for there is no end to the wandering of one's desire (Eccl 6:9). The expression “pursuit of wind” is remarkably creative in describing the elusiveness of such quests.¹⁹

In sections A–A' (Eccl 5:7–11 [Eng. 8–12] and 6:7–9) Qoheleth speaks about the ability to see in two different ways. On the one hand, what a person is able to see can cause him to realize what he is missing and, thus, strive to achieve that to the detriment of his current situation (Eccl 5:9–10 [Eng. 10–11]).²⁰ On the other hand, a person is able to see what he has and finds pleasure and enjoyment in it, thus living his life in contentment and acceptance of his allotment (Eccl 5:11 [Eng. 12]; cf. Eccl 2:10, 14; 24–26; 3:12, 13, 22; 4:6). Qoheleth presents the same thought as a statement in Eccl 6:9, “Better is the sight of the eye than wandering of desire.”²¹ He makes it clear that satisfaction in life comes from what one already has and sees as gift, not what one might have.²² Qoheleth connects the concept of יִתְרֹן “profit” with the state of contentment and fulfilment. Profit no longer has financial connotations, because material pursuits cannot guarantee stability in the future due to their limitations (Eccl 5:9 [Eng. 10]).²³

In order to create a vivid picture of what the life of discontentment is like, Qoheleth employs the word אָכַל “to eat” as the key term in Eccl 5:7 [Eng. 8]–6:9. He uses it six times (Eccl 5:10–11 [Eng. 11–12], 16–18 [Eng. 17–19]; 6:2) to show that

¹⁹ Dianne Bergant, *Israel's Wisdom Literature: A Liberation-Critical Reading* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 112.

²⁰ See also Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 66. He calls such attitude “devouring good” which results in resentment and dissatisfaction.

²¹ See also Prov 12:11 that says: “The one working his land will be satisfied with food; but the one pursuing fantasies lacks discernment.”

²² See also Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 67.

²³ See also Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 319-20; R. Johnson, “The Rhetorical Question as a Literary Device in Ecclesiastes” (Ph. D. diss.; Louisville: Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986), 167.

the good life depends on what people consume and how they do it.²⁴ The basic meaning of אכל is “to consume one’s food.”²⁵ Qoheleth speaks of the lifestyle of a rich person who “consumes” and is never satisfied (Eccl 5:10–11 [Eng. 11–12]) in the first part of the chiasm Eccl 5:7–11 [Eng. 8–12]. Moreover, he suggests that if a person is not careful, these goods can “consume” him; thus, a desire to increase his wealth may turn into an obsession and destroy his life (cf. Eccl 5:12 [Eng. 13]).²⁶ In this regard Qoheleth echoes the words of Prov 16:18–19 that speak of an ambitious person who refuses to acknowledge his own limitations for the sake of his own ambition which can only result in his demise.²⁷

Qoheleth connects the idea of eating with the manner in which a person chooses to live his life in section A' (Eccl 6:7–9). The desire for material gain is like a human appetite which can never be satisfied with food (Eccl 6:7). A person can either choose to eat and drink and find contentment in life (cf. Eccl 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20]) or choose ever to consume and remain unsatisfied (cf. Eccl 5:10–11 [Eng. 11–12]). Qoheleth describes the insatiability of hunger and greed (Eccl 6:7; cf. 5:10–11 [Eng. 11–12]) in the language which is reminiscent of the insatiability of death and Sheol in other Old Testament passages that depict Sheol as a great open mouth that swallows everybody and yet constantly searches for more to devour (cf. Isa 5:14; Prov 27:20; 30:16).²⁸ However, even more remarkable is the application of this metaphor to the greedy oppressors who dangerously impact the social order: “I saw the prosperity of the wicked...They set their mouths against heaven, and their tongues range over the earth” (Ps 73:9). In a similar fashion, Habakkuk portrays the arrogant and the proud: “they open their mouths wide as Sheol; like death they never have enough” (Hab 2:5). Qoheleth suggests that greed and desire for gain are dangerous and damaging (Eccl 6:9; cf. 5:7, 9 [Eng. 8, 10]). Human discontentment can only be seen as lethal!²⁹

Thus, Qoheleth offers the same advice to the rich in section A (Eccl 5:7–11 [Eng. 8–12]) and the poor in section A' (Eccl 6:7–9). To the former he suggests that יתרון “profit” can only be found in putting to use their accomplishments (cf. Eccl

²⁴ Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Song*, 126.

²⁵ Magnus Ottosson, “אכל,” *TDOT* 1:236–41. See also Chapter 3.5.2.

²⁶ See also Whybray, “Qoheleth as a Theologian,” 256.

²⁷ De Jong, “Qohelet and the Ambitious Spirit of the Ptolemaic Period,” 90.

²⁸ Peter R. Ackroyd, “Two Hebrew Notes,” *ASTI* 5 (1967): 82–86.

²⁹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 227. Seow further believes that by comparing human discontentment and Sheol Qoheleth makes his audience aware of the fact that greed “endangers life itself.” See also Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 50.

5:10 [Eng. 11]); and to the latter he intimates that they should not pursue material success, but find contentment in what they already have (Eccl 6:9).³⁰ The love of wealth and riches is not the answer to his question about finding ׀הריון “profit” in life (Eccl 5:10 [Eng. 11]).

Another recommendation that Qoheleth has for the rich in section A (Eccl 5:7–11 [Eng. 8–12]) and for the poor in section A' (Eccl 6:7–9) is “to feast (ראוה, lit. “to see”) their eyes” on the possessions they already have (Eccl 5:10 [Eng. 11]; 6:9).³¹ Satisfaction and contentment should be practised daily as every person has been given enough for a meaningful existence in the present; rather than allowing one's mind to dwell on what could make one's life better, because insatiability can never bring a positive change into one's world. The second section of the chiasm, B and B' – Life in Darkness, offers an example of situations when discontentment and insatiability can ruin a life of a whole family.

2.3 Life in Darkness (Eccl 5:12–16 [Eng. 13–17] and 6:3–6)

B	5:12	יש רעה חולה ראיתי תחת השמש אשר שמור לבעליו לרעתו	There is a sickening evil which I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt.
	5:13	ואבד העשר ההוא בענין רע והוליד בן ואין בידו מאומה	And these riches were lost in a bad business, so he has a son, but he has nothing in his hand.
	5:14	כאשר יצא מבטן אמו ערום ישוב ללכת כשבא ומאומה לא-ישא בעמלו שילך בידו	As he came from his mother's womb naked, he will go as he came, and nothing from his labour he will carry in his hand.
	5:15	וגם-זה רעה חולה כל-עמת שבא כן ילך ומה-יתרון לו שיעמל לרוח	This is also a sickening evil: just as he comes, so he will go, and what profit is there for the one who labours for the wind?
	5:16	גם כל-ימיו בחשך יאכל וכעס הרבה וחליו וקצף	Also all of his days he eats in darkness and much vexation, sickness and resentment.

³⁰ See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 227-28.

³¹ See also Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 127.

B' 6:3	אִם-יֹולֵד אִישׁ מֵאָה וּשְׁנַיִם רַבּוֹת יַחִיָּה וּרְבֵי שָׁיְהִיּוּ יָמֵי-שָׁנָיו וּנְפֹשׁוֹ לֹא-תִשְׂבַּע מִן-הַטּוֹבָה וּגְם-קְבוּרָה לֹא-הִיְתָה לוֹ אָמַרְתִּי טוֹב מִמְנוּ הַנֶּפֶל	If a man begets a hundred children and lives many years and even longer become his years, but his soul is not satisfied with the good, and there is no burial place for him, I say a stillborn child is better than him.
6:4	כִּי-בִהְבֵּל בָּא וּבַחֲשָׁךְ יֵלֵךְ וּבַחֲשָׁךְ שְׁמוֹ יִכְסֶה	For it goes fleetingly and in darkness it walks, and in darkness its name is covered.
6:5	גַּם-שָׁמַשׁ לֹא-רָאָה וְלֹא יָדַע נַחַת לְזֶה מִזֶּה	Also it has not seen the sun or known anything, yet it has rest rather than him [rich man].
6:6	וְאִלוּ חָיָה אֶלֶף שָׁנִים כַּעֲמִים וּטּוֹבָה לֹא רָאָה הֲלֹא אֵל-מְקוֹם אֶחָד הַכֹּל הוֹלֵךְ	Even if he lives a thousand years twice over but does not see the good, do not all go to the same place?

Qoheleth develops the idea of discontentment and insatiability further in the second sections of the chiasmic structure, B and B' (Eccl 5:12–16 [Eng. 13–17] and Eccl 6:3–6). He intentionally links the experience of a discontent person with his own with the help of several key terms that he has used in his autobiography (see the chart below). These terms will be discussed in the following sections. Qoheleth's programmatic question about finding profit in one's labour that is passing and ultimately without lasting gain in Eccl 5:15 [Eng.16] echoes his personal struggle with this issue as he considered the fleeting profit that his mighty works had achieved (Eccl 2:11). He describes the toil of a discontented person as עִמַּל לְרוּחַ "labouring for the wind" (Eccl 5:15 [Eng.16]), a similar expression to that which he used to characterize his achievements רְעוּת רוּחַ "pursuit of wind" (Eccl 2:11).

Hebrew	English	Ecclesiastes 1–2 Qoheleth's Autobiography	Ecclesiastes 5–6
כַּעַס	vexation	1:18; 2:23	5:16 [Eng. 17]
הָלַךְ בָּא	come/ go	1:4, 11; 2:12, 18	5:14–15 [Eng. 15–16]; 6:4, 6
חֹשֶׁךְ	darkness	2:13–14	5:16 [Eng. 17]; 6:4
רְעוּת רוּחַ	pursuit of wind	1:14; 2:11, 15, 17, 26	5:15 [Eng. 16]; 6:9

Qoheleth is able to identify with a profit-driven person who lacks sleep and rest in his excessive labouring (Eccl 5:11 [Eng. 12], 16 [Eng. 17]), for he had a similar

experience in his autobiography (Eccl 1:7, 18; 2:23). Life without rest is spent in חֹשֶׁךְ “darkness” (Eccl 5:16 [Eng. 17]), where only fools walk, as Qoheleth mentions in his autobiography (Eccl 2:13–14). The rich man's striving for gain brings “vexation” (Eccl 5:16 [Eng. 17]). Qoheleth's preoccupation with searching for more wisdom resulted in כַּעַס “vexation” (Eccl 1:18), and looking for lasting success from all his work brought about pain and כַּעַס “vexation” (Eccl 2:23). He understands the pain and anger that come from the realization that consumption does not bring contentment (Eccl 5:16 [Eng. 17]). As he continues to build bridges between his autobiographical experience and the experiences of his audience, Qoheleth focuses on the issues of 1) missing the blessing of family, and 2) living in darkness and absence of rest that greed results in.

2.3.1 Missing the Blessing of Family

In section B (Eccl 5:12–16 [Eng. 13–17]), Qoheleth discusses the situation when the increase of wealth leads to the increase of responsibilities of looking after this wealth and the expenses that the management of large estate incurs. Bartholomew helpfully points out that “the thing pursued, namely wealth, takes on a life of its own and starts to control the person pursuing it. All the owner can do is stand and watch as the problems gather momentum.”³² Qoheleth believes that the purpose of abundance is to share it with one's family in the present instead of saving it for later as nobody can escape a bad turn of events in business. He shares an observation with his audience that speaks of “a sickening evil,” a situation when a rich discontent person hoards his wealth as a means of security in the future only to see these possessions bring emotional and material harm and pain to their owner (Eccl 5:12 [Eng. 13]).³³ Moreover, the pain of hoarded riches is felt not only by the owner, but also by his family, for when he loses the inheritance in “a bad business,”³⁴ his heir is left with nothing. It is almost ironic to think that the rich person denies himself the pleasure

³² Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 219.

³³ The book of Proverbs is aware of such misfortune: “The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine the high walls are secure.” See also Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 319; Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 151.

³⁴ Lohfink translates עֵינֵי רָע as “bad venture” in Eccl 5:13 [Eng. 14] and understands it to refer to one's loss of money kept at a bank. He translates the expression בְּיָדוֹ “in his hand” to mean “in his account.” However, Lohfink acknowledges that this is just a hypothesis as there is no evidence to support his claim. See Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 83.

and joy of using his money in order to preserve it for his heir, and yet eventually he finds himself in a situation when “he has nothing in his hand” (Eccl 5:13 [Eng. 14]).³⁵

Further, it is possible to have everything one's heart desires and yet find no contentment in it, as Qoheleth points out in section B' (Eccl 6:3–6).³⁶ Qoheleth portrays the picture of “the abject misery of a life devoid of joy.”³⁷ Qoheleth makes use of a hyperbole to bring home the thought: “a hundred children and great many years of life” (Eccl 6:3) or even “thousand years twice over” (Eccl 6:6) will not satisfy such foolish person. Progeny, wealth and longevity, things that were considered great blessings bestowed by God on the wise³⁸ may not be enough to bring rest and pleasure to some people.³⁹ What makes it even worse, Qoheleth explains, is the fact that though this person is alive and should find satisfaction and contentment in his family and long life, he chooses to worry about his burial place, a place of non-existence (Eccl 6:3)!

Davis, among other scholars, suggests that in Eccl 6:3 Qoheleth expresses a belief, similar to that of his Canaanite neighbours that everybody deserves a burial.⁴⁰

³⁵ Gordis argues for the son being the focus of this situation. See Gordis, *Koheleth*, 253. Seow points out that “he” in the phrase “he has nothing in his possession” in Eccl 5:13 [Eng. 14] is ambiguous and can refer to the father as well as to the son. See Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 221. While such ambiguity does exist in this phrase, the general moral of the story has to do with an attitude of a rich person and his lack of contentment, rather than with his son.

³⁶ See also Provan, *Ecclesiastes/Song of Song*, 129. He states that multiplication of wealth brings about only multiplication of problems.

³⁷ Leo Perdue, “‘I Will Make a Test of Pleasure’: The Tyranny of God and Qoheleth's Quest for the Good,” in *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Eugene: WIPF & Stock, 1994), 193-242 (205).

³⁸ Cf. 1 Chr 28:5; Job 42:10, 12–13; Prov 3:16; 8:18. See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 225-26.

³⁹ Fox suggests that Eccl 6:2 “shows that God's ‘enabling’ a man to consume his wealth means simply that God does not take it away from him.” See Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 129-30. While the verse is ambiguous as to why the person is not able to enjoy his possessions, the following verse clearly indicates that Qoheleth contrasts the possession of good things like a long life and a lot of children and the ability to find satisfaction in them. See also Stuart Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, (New York: T&T Clark International, 2012), 80; Françoise Laurent, *Les biens pour rien en Qohéleth 5,9–6,6 ou La traversée d'un contraste* (BZAW 323; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), 97-99.

⁴⁰ Eichrodt argues that the Israelites as well as their Canaanite neighbours attached a great importance to observing funerary rites and not having a proper burial resulted in less desirable position in the afterlife. See Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; translated by J. A. Backer; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 2:212. See also Saul M. Olyan, “Some Neglected Aspects of Israelite Interment Ideology,” *JBL* 124 (2005): 601-16 (607); Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 51-53. Burial is a very important event in Israel and the Ancient Near East. It marks the end of one's life and changes the status of the person in the world of the living and in the world of the dead. The remains of the deceased are treated with honour and reverence according to the customs of the day. See Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 51. The most dishonourable type of burial is no burial at all, which is seen as terrible punishment, for even the bodies of the criminals are buried the same day (Deut 21:22). God judges Jezebel by depriving her of a burial. Instead her body is eaten by dogs and becomes like “dung” (2 Kgs 9:36–37). Jeremiah speaks of a similar fate for the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah, “They shall die of deadly diseases. They shall not be lamented, nor shall they be buried; they shall become

It is a tragedy if a person's children do not care enough for their father to provide him with a respectable burial.⁴¹ However, one should not think that Qoheleth is concerned about funeral rites or after-death existence of the dead person in this passage. He is speaking about a person who worries about securing a burial place for himself. The word קבורה which is commonly translated as "burial" (so NIV, NRSV, NAS, NKJV) refers to a burial site, a grave, rather than a funeral rite (so LXX, NJB).⁴² Seow suggests that Qoheleth refers to a practice common among the rich to provide a proper resting ground for themselves before their death (cf. Gen 23:3–9; Isa 22:16).⁴³ In this context the comparison of a rich person, who is not able to find contentment in the present life to the point that he chooses to worry about a burial plot for himself, with a stillborn child is even more telling. Both end the same way—dead. But while the stillborn does not have a chance to see good in life, the rich person has it, yet he prefers to focus on death, which benefits him in no way (Eccl 6:4–6)!

In sections B–B' (Eccl 5:12–16 [13–17] and 6:3–6) Qoheleth addresses one of the consequences of the discontented life—missing the blessing of a family. In section B, a rich person's greed and unwillingness to enjoy his wealth with his family in the present moment cost him his fortune and cost his family their future (Eccl 5:12–13 [Eng. 13–14]). Section B' adds a nuance to Qoheleth's discussion of the discontented person pointing out that even when everything in the family and in business goes well, such person will choose something to be dissatisfied about (Eccl 6:3).

2.3.2 Living in Darkness and Absence of Rest

Qoheleth then turns to the theme of death in section B (Eccl 5:12–16 [Eng. 13–17]) to show that possessions can be meaningful only in life because before birth and after death nobody can enjoy what one may have (Eccl 5:14–15 [Eng. 15–16]). Qoheleth uses the verbs בוא "to come" and הלך "to go" to speak of birth and death respectively as he has already done in the introductory poem (Eccl 5:14–15; [Eng. 15–

like dung on the surface of the ground. They shall perish by the sword and by famine, and their dead bodies shall become food for the birds of the air and for the wild animals of the earth" (Jer 16:4).

⁴¹ Davis, "Ecclesiastes 12:1–8," 301. See also Fox, *Ecclesiastes* קל דר, 39; Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 121.

⁴² T. Desmond Alexander, "קבר," *NIDOTTE* 3: 865–68; Koehler, Baumgartner, "קבר," *HALOT* 3:1064. Cf. Gen 35:20; Deut 34:6; 1 Sam 10:2; 2 Kgs 9:28; 2 Chr. 26:23; Ezek 32:23–24. LXX uses the word ταφή "grave," burial place." See Walter Bauer et al., eds., "ταφή," *BDAG*, 991–92; H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, "ταφή," *LSJ* 1761.

⁴³ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 211. See also Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 233; Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 155.

16]; cf. 1:4). Qoheleth addresses the continuum of life from birth to death that is marked by the tragic consequences of greed and dissatisfaction of a father who has subjected himself and his son to a life of poverty (Eccl 5:12–14 [Eng. 13–15]). As there was nothing in the hand of the father, now there is nothing in the hand of the son (Eccl 5:13 [Eng. 14]).⁴⁴

Moreover, Qoheleth points out that people cannot carry anything in their hands to their grave (Eccl 5:14 [Eng. 15]).⁴⁵ People neither bring anything into this world when they are born, nor can they take any of their possessions with them when they die. Non-existence does not require anything, for there is nothing known to humans in death (cf. Eccl 9:10). It would appear that the expression “carry in his hand” (Eccl 5:14 [Eng. 15]) is used here in a similar way as the expression “to see [riches] with one's eyes” (Eccl 5:10 [Eng. 11]) to signify Qoheleth's understanding of contentment. Together these two expressions convey the idea that enjoying the labour and the fruit of that labour are tangible and noticeable expressions of a content life. There is no advantage to hoarding one's wealth, for any material profit is brief, fleeting and elusive when faced with death (Eccl 5:15 [Eng. 16]).

As Qoheleth continues to describe the existence of the unsatisfied rich person in section B (Eccl 5:12–16 [Eng. 13–17]), he states: “Also all of his days, he eats in darkness and much vexation (כַּעַס), sickness and resentment” (Eccl 5:16 [Eng. 17]). Qoheleth purposefully paints a picture of an emotional torment felt by a person who lives in fear of failure and is motivated by the terror of losing his wealth.⁴⁶ Eating (אָכַל), which Qoheleth associates with enjoyment in his autobiography (Eccl 2:24–26; cf. 3:12–13; 5:17 [Eng. 18]), can become another chore for such person, bring emotional exasperation, and even cause physical illness. Qoheleth connects חֹשֶׁךְ “darkness” with death and existence in Sheol, the realm of the dead.⁴⁷ He uses the term חֹשֶׁךְ “darkness” in Eccl 6:4 describing the lifeless existence of an unborn child

⁴⁴ Fredericks, “Chiasm and Parallel Structure in Qoheleth 5:9–6:9,” 25.

⁴⁵ King Intef (or Antef) shares a similar understanding of life after death, “Lo, none is allowed to take his good with him. Lo, none who departs comes back again.” See Miriam Lichtheim, “The Song from the Tomb of King Intef,” (*AEL* I: 197). See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 221; Michael Fox, “A Study of Antef,” *Or* 46 (1977): 393-423.

⁴⁶ Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric*, 319.

⁴⁷ Michel Ringgen, “חֹשֶׁךְ,” *TDOT* 5:245-59 (255-56). Kugel repoints בְּחֹשֶׁךְ as בְּחֹשֶׁךְ to mean “in spare fashion.” See James L. Kugel, “Qohelet and Money,” *CBQ* 51 (1989): 32-49 (39). This change does not alter the meaning of the whole verse much, but reading בְּחֹשֶׁךְ as “in darkness” fits the overall context of Eccl 5:7 [Eng. 8]–6:9 better, for Qoheleth uses the same word in Eccl 6:4 to speak of an unborn child.

and later in Eccl 11:8 he refers to the great number of **ימי החושך** “days of darkness” as compared to the fleetingness of human life. Qoheleth has also spoken of a fool walking in darkness (**חושך**) in his autobiography, who, unlike the wise person, lacks the eyes to see around due to his ignorance (Eccl 2:14).⁴⁸ Thus, Qoheleth implies that a rich person who hoards his possessions instead of profiting from them is a fool, regardless of his wealth, living in misery and pain, consuming his own flesh (cf. Eccl 2:14; 4:6).⁴⁹ Such existence is no better than death!⁵⁰

To make his point even more poignant, in section B' (Eccl 6:3–6) Qoheleth brings up a situation when being dead is better than such miserable existence: a stillborn child who has no knowledge of the world of the living can find rest in its death, something that a discontent rich fool cannot experience in his life (cf. Eccl 5:11 [Eng. 12]).⁵¹ Qoheleth uses the verbs **בוא** “to come” and **הלך** “to go” to signify birth and death, but on this occasion there is no real birth to speak of, for the unborn already comes into the world without life. Such existence is truly fleeting. The **חושך** “darkness” is the proper designation of the stillborn’s environment (Eccl 6:4). The child does not have an opportunity to see the sun or to know anything (Eccl 6:5), which means that it is spared the pain of evil in life. However, its inability to experience life also deprives it of the joy and pleasure that life brings. Nonetheless, the stillborn gains what unsatisfied persons never possess—rest (Eccl 6:5b).

Qoheleth has already mentioned that even a poor worker can find rest and peace at night because he or she is not concerned about how much he or she can or cannot consume (Eccl 5:11 [Eng. 12]) in contrast to the never-ending obsession of the

⁴⁸ See Ps 82:5 that speaks of ignorance as darkness that the wicked live in: “They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk about in darkness.” See also Ringgren, “**חושך**,” *TDOT* 5:253–54.

⁴⁹ Tg. Q. understands the phrase “eat in darkness” to speak of a lonely and, thus, miserable individual. See Knobel, *The Targum of Qoheleth*, 35. Ginsburg emphasizes that this rich person is such a miser that after having lost his fortune, he cannot afford to buy oil for his lamp. See Ginsburg, *Cohleth*, 353–55. However, whether one interprets the phrase “eat in darkness” metaphorically as the Targum does, or literally as Ginsburg does, the picture that Qoheleth paints is of an individual whose life is really not worth living. See also Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 62.

⁵⁰ See also Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 219–20; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 222.

⁵¹ Rashbam makes a direct connection between Eccl 6:3–4 and 5:12–13 [Eng. 13–14] explaining the life of the rich fool who has lost his fortune in terms of “darkness” and “obscurity” used of the unborn in Eccl 6:4 because he did not find joy in his life. See Rashbam, *The Commentary on Qoheleth*, 144. See also Kugel, “Qoheleth and Money,” 40.

rich.⁵² Qoheleth, who presents himself as a king of Solomonic magnitude, who has enjoyed wealth and accomplishments of legendary proportions, finds rest and even death preferable to a life without peace and sleep (Eccl 6:3–5). Contentment lies in acknowledging what is set in front of a person and resisting the temptation to continue wandering in search for more.⁵³ The writer of Prov 17:1 puts it clearly: “Better is a crust of bread with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting and strife.” Job shares Qoheleth’s emotions when he contemplates his life of undeserved misery and pain,

Why did I not die at birth,
come forth from the womb and expire?...
Now I would be lying down and quiet;
I would be asleep; then I would be at rest...
Or why was I not buried like a stillborn child,
like an infant that never sees the light? (Job 3: 11, 13, 16)

Life without rest and contentment is better not lived.⁵⁴ In sections B–B' (Eccl 5:12–16 [Eng. 13–17] and 6:3–6) Qoheleth demonstrates to this audience that the lack of contentment and satisfaction does not allow one to rest and sleep because a person does not seem to get enough (Eccl 5:12–16 [Eng. 13–17]). Greed and worry rob a person of what his wealth should grant him—peace of mind. While an unborn child is unable “to see” and “know” the world under the sun (Eccl 6:5), the living should “see the good” that the life brings and be able to find contentment in it. “For Qoheleth, life consists of both the good and the bad. It is inevitable that one will observe the existence of evil (cf. Eccl 4:1–3), but one can also ‘see good,’ that is, enjoy what one has in the present.”⁵⁵

Therefore, Qoheleth suggests in sections B–B' (Eccl 5:12–16 [Eng. 13–17] and 6:3–6) that discontentment and insatiability can cause a person to miss the blessing of family and fellowship (Eccl 5:12–13 [Eng. 13–14]; 6:3). It is also possible for people to turn their lives into non-existence when they refuse to learn to see life as good and find contentment in it (Eccl 5:16 [Eng. 17]; 6:6). Life is so brief and transient; worrying about the future shortens it even more and turns it into חֲשָׁךְ

⁵² Fredericks argues that Eccl 5:11 [Eng. 12] which is part of A parallels Eccl 6:5 which is part of B', but the proximity of 6:5 to 6:7 makes such parallelism possible. See Fredericks, “Chiasm and Parallel Structure of Qoheleth 5:9–6:9,” 25-26.

⁵³ Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 130.

⁵⁴ See also the advice of an Assyrian sage, Ahiqar, whose words echo Qoheleth’s admonition about the bliss of death over the strife of life: “My son, better is death than life to the man who has no rest.” See A. E. Goodman, “The Words of Ahiqar,” in *Documents from Old Testament Times* (ed. D. Winton Thomas; New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 270-75 (273).

⁵⁵ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 226.

“darkness” (Eccl 5:16 [Eng. 17]). It is a real tragedy to go through one's life on this earth as if the person is already dead and then to worry about a possibility of a lonely death (Eccl 6:3). Qoheleth's rhetorical question, “do not all go to the same place?” points to the fact that all human existence ends in death; there is no reason to hasten its coming voluntarily (Eccl 6:6). Hence, Qoheleth encourages his audience not to take their lives for granted but find contentment in every situation in the third sections of the chiasmic structure, C–C' (Eccl 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20] and 6:1–2)–Life with God's Gift and Life without God's Gift.

2.4 Life with God's Gift (Eccl 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20]) and Life without God's Gift (Eccl 6:1–2)

C	5:17	<p>הנה אשר ראיתי אני טוב אשר יפה לאכול ולשתות ולראות טובה בכל עמלו שיעמל תחת השמש מספר ימיו אשר נתן לו האלהים כי הוא חלקו</p>	<p>Behold, I have seen what is good: it is appropriate to eat and drink and to see good in all the work, in which a person works under the sun a short number of days of his days which God has given him. This is his allotment.</p>
	5:18	<p>גם כל האדם אשר נתן לו האלהים עשר ונכסים והשליטו לאכל ממנו ולשאת את חלקו ולשמח בעמלו זה מתת אלהים היא</p>	<p>To every person, to whom God has given riches and wealth, he has also empowered him to eat from it and to carry his allotment and to rejoice in his work. This is a gift of God.</p>
	5:19	<p>כי לא הרבה יזכר את ימי חיו כי האלהים מענה בשמחת לבו</p>	<p>Not long will he remember the days of his life, because God will keep him busy with joy in his heart.</p>
C'	6:1	<p>יש רעה אשר ראיתי תחת השמש ורבה היא על האדם</p>	<p>There is evil that I have seen under the sun, and it was great upon the man:</p>
	6:2	<p>איש אשר יתן לו האלהים עשר ונכסים וכבוד ואינו חסר לנפשו מכל אשר יתאוה לאישל יטנו האלהים לאכל ממנו כי איש נכרי יאכלנו זה הבל וחלי רע הוא</p>	<p>A man to whom God gave riches and wealth and honour, and there was no need to his soul from all he desired, yet God did not empower him to eat from it, but a strange man eats from it. This is fleeting and a sickening evil.</p>

Qoheleth's question about “what is good” (טוב) in life is always at the centre of his teachings. Section C (Eccl 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20]) and section C' (Eccl 6:1–2) offer Qoheleth's response to the attitude of discontentment and insatiability. He brings

his autobiography to bear upon the situation of his audience through the repetition of several key terms (see the chart below). These terms will be discussed in the following section. Contentment is חלק “allotment” and מתת “gift” that God gives to humanity (Eccl 5:17–18 [Eng. 18–19]), as Qoheleth has discovered in his autobiography (Eccl 2:10, 26).

Hebrew		English	Ecclesiastes 1–2 Qoheleth's Autobiography	Ecclesiastes 5–6
נתן	מתת	(God) gives/ gift	2:26	5:17–18 [Eng. 18–19]; 6:2 5:18 [Eng. 19]
חלק		allotment	2:10, 21	5:17–18 [Eng. 18–19]
מספר		short number of (days)	2:3	5:17 [Eng. 18]
שלט		empower	2:19	5:18 [Eng. 19]; 6:2

In Ecclesiastes 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20] and Eccl 6:1–2 Qoheleth desires his audience to recognize and accept the fact that contentment is a gift from God and that it is everybody's responsibility to live a life of contentment. In order to do this Qoheleth 1) demonstrates that contentment is a theological imperative, and 2) discusses God's response to the problem of human life constrained by death and unpredictability of future.

2.4.1 Contentment as a Theological Imperative

In section C (Eccl 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20]) Qoheleth presents what he knows is “good.” This statement stands in contrast with עשק “oppression” (Eccl 5:7 [Eng. 8]), הבל “fleeting” nature (Eccl 5:9 [Eng. 10]), and רעה חולה “a grievous illness” (Eccl 5:12 [Eng. 13]) that he has seen in life. Lohfink believes that this section constitutes the theological climax of the book.⁵⁶ In part C (Eccl 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20]) Qoheleth mentions God four times and then he speaks of God again in C' (Eccl 6:2), highlighting his role in giving enjoyment in life. It is undeniable that “the divine gift of enjoyment—and the human response to that gift—is the central and dominant concern of the passage.”⁵⁷

Qoheleth describes eating, drinking and finding enjoyment in life as יפה “appropriate” (Eccl 5:17a [Eng. 18a]), a word he has utilized in talking about the

⁵⁶ Lohfink, “Qoheleth 5:17–19—Revelation by Joy,” 631.

⁵⁷ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 44.

appropriateness of every activity done by God, אֵת־הַכֹּל עָשָׂה יְיָ “he had made everything appropriate” (Eccl 3:11). God grants humanity the right and authority to accept the life that he has given them. According to Qoheleth, the same God who gives עֲנִין רָע “evil preoccupation” (Eccl 1:13) is the God who keeps people מְעִינָה בְשִׂמְחָה “busy with joy” (Eccl 5:19 [Eng. 20]). Qoheleth believes that the best way to face the brevity and uncertainty of life is to accept life and learn to enjoy its pleasures.⁵⁸ Qoheleth could be suggesting that God gives an “evil preoccupation” to those who are interested in figuring out how this world works in order to control it. God gives a good preoccupation if the people are willing to accept this life and what God gives them as a gift and allotment, leaving the desire and the need to control their lives in the hands of God.

In both sections C and C' (Eccl 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20] and 6:1–2) Qoheleth presents God as a patron who gives his gifts freely and authorizes those whom he patronizes to accept and make use of these gifts (Eccl 5:17 [Eng. 18]; 6:2). Such representation of God as the source of one's wealth and the ability to accumulate resources is reminiscent of Moses' words who admonishes the Israelites to remember their God because “he is the one who has given you strength to make wealth” (Deut 8:18). Qoheleth desires his audience to understand that everything they have has come from God.

Lee helpfully brings the socio-economic context of the Persian empire to bear upon Qoheleth's representation of the divine and human relationship. She identifies parallels in the language of Persian royal grants that speak of a grantor who gives “the authorization to take up the gift” and Qoheleth's vocabulary describing God as the one who “authorizes” the people to “take up the allotment” (Eccl 5:18 [Eng. 19])⁵⁹ God has the power and the authority to enable people to certain actions. Qoheleth makes use of the term שָׁלַח “to empower” or “to give authority” (Eccl 5:18 [Eng 19])⁶⁰ in a seemingly legal way to speak of God giving a right to his people to dispose

⁵⁸ Gordis argues against the idea that “joy deadens man's sensibility to the brevity of life.” He believes that “Kohleth regards joy not as a narcotic but as the fulfillment of the will of God.” See Gordis, *Kohleth*, 255.

⁵⁹ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 45. See also H. Z. Szubin and B. Porten, “Royal Grants in Egypt: A New Interpretation of Driver 2,” *JNES* 46 (1987): 39-48; Gropp, “The Origin and Development of the Aramaic *šallit* Clause,” 32; Seow, “Socioeconomic Context,” 176-81; Seow, “Linguistic Evidence,” 653-54.

⁶⁰ M. Sæbo, “שָׁלַח,” *TDOT* 15:83-88.

of their assets.⁶¹ Such legal language is evident when Qoheleth speaks of his heir who “will have authorization over all the fruit of my labour” (Eccl 2:9) in his autobiography. A related noun שְׂלֵי מַיִם “rulers” in Eccl 7:19 describe people who have power over a certain land and right to exercise their authority in ways that please them (cf. Gen 42:6).⁶²

In the sections C (Eccl 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20]) and C' (Eccl 6:1–2) Qoheleth suggests that even the ability to exercise contentment in life and enjoy divine blessings is a gift of God.⁶³ De Jong correctly points out that there exists a direct connection between Qoheleth's statements about God's power to control the universe and people's desire to determine one's destiny. The extent of the divine actions becomes clear only when compared to the scope of human limitations.⁶⁴ Thus, it is impossible to consider Qoheleth's admonition to practise contentment in one's life in C (Eccl 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20]) without paying attention to the negative scenario which Qoheleth offers immediately following his encouragement in C' (Eccl 6:1–2). In Ecclesiastes 6:2 Qoheleth describes the situation of a person who is good before God, even though he does not use the word טוֹב “good”, for God gives him wisdom, possessions and honour; yet God does not empower him (לֹא-יִשְׁלַח יְטַנּוּ) to eat from it. It is not clear why God does so, for Qoheleth offers no explanation or reasoning for such divine action. The person who gets to benefit from these gifts is a stranger, who has done nothing to merit them (Eccl 6:2).⁶⁵

The situation which Qoheleth describes in Eccl 6:2 is very similar to his autobiography (Eccl 2:18–21). He deems this “a sickening evil” (Eccl 6:2) Knowing that death is the determining factor in Qoheleth's view of life, it is quite possible to interpret a good person's inability to benefit from his God-given riches due to the fact that death takes it all away from him. The verses following Eccl 6:2 deal with the reality of death: the non-existence of an unborn child and a death-like existence of the

⁶¹ Douglas M. Gropp, “The Origin and Development of the Aramaic *šallit* Clause,” *JNES* 52 (1993): 31-36. See also Seow, “Socioeconomic Context,” 176-81; “Linguistic Evidence,” 653-54.

⁶² Norbert Lohfink, “*melek, šallit* und *mōšēl* bei Kohelet und die Abfassungszeit des Buchs,” *Biblica* 62 (1981): 535-43.

⁶³ See also Stephan de Jong, who states that the enjoyment of life has to be given by God. Stephan de Jong, “God in the Book of Qoheleth: A Reappraisal of Qohelet's Place in Old Testament Theology,” *VT* 47 (1997): 154-67 (163).

⁶⁴ De Jong, “God in the Book of Qohelet,” 162. Johnston likewise observes: “Man's pleasure depends on God's good pleasure, and the divine action cannot be neatly categorized or programmed by man.” See Johnston, “Confessions of a Workaholic,” 25.

⁶⁵ Robert Salters, “Notes on Interpretation of Qoh. 6:2,” (289) argues that “a stranger” should be understood as a person belonging to a different family, rather than being the man's own child.

discontented rich person (Eccl 6:3–6). Qoheleth says that people do not have power over the wind and the day of death (cf. Eccl 8:8), only God does (Eccl 6:2; cf. 2:24–25; 5:18 [Eng. 19]). Therefore, Qoheleth brings up this scenario to underscore the element of human limitations constantly present in life: people as God's created beings are ultimately limited in their power and in the ways they can exercise it. God is the source and the giver of human power (Eccl 6:2)!⁶⁶

There exists a special connection between sections C (Eccl 5: 17–18 [Eng. 18–20]) and C' (Eccl 6:1–2). The vocabulary of the two units is very similar, for both of them talk about God giving people his gift and empowering them to use their allotment. These similarities make the differences between the passages even more stark when one realizes that the main contrast is the negation in Eccl 6:2: "A man to whom God gave riches and wealth and honour...yet God did not empower him to eat from it." Isaksson suggests that Eccl 6:1–2 portrays a tragic exception to the rule of Eccl 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20].⁶⁷ Even if he is correct, the positive and the negative scenarios of this larger unit bring to the fore the question of divine determinism. Qoheleth suggests that the sovereign will of God decides who can and cannot find pleasure and satisfaction in life and human beings are left to live out the incomprehensible choices of the divine ruler.⁶⁸ Qoheleth makes a distinction between the ability to gain riches and the capability to enjoy them. This distinction rests with God, for only he can provide wealth and add to it the gift of finding satisfaction and joy in prosperity. Yet, God may choose to give material possessions without adding the ability to enjoy them.⁶⁹

While Qoheleth firmly believes that God is the absolute ruler of the world and of the human existence, he does not portray God as a despot who arbitrarily picks his favourites and bestows upon them gifts of his own choosing.⁷⁰ Rather, Qoheleth

⁶⁶ Sæbo, "שלט," *TDOT* 15:87.

⁶⁷ Italics the author's. Isaksson points out other notable differences in the passages: Eccl 5:18 [Eng. 19] speaks of all people (כל־הָאָדָם), while Eccl 6:2 speaks of an individual (שׁוֹנֵן); the Hebrew verbs describing the acts of God are perfect form ("God has given," "has authorized"), in Eccl 6:2 the same verbs have imperfect forms ("God gives," "God does not authorize"). See B. Isaksson, *Studies in the Language of Qoheleth: With Special Emphasis on the Verbal System* (Studia Semitica Upsaliensia 10; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1987), 122.

⁶⁸ See also Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 46-47.

⁶⁹ Lohfink, "Qoheleth 5:17–19," 631. See also R. B. Salters, "Notes on the Interpretation of Qoh. 6, 2," *ZAW* 91 (1979), 82-89.

⁷⁰ Contra Rudman who states: "In depicting God's apparent arbitrariness in the choice of his favourites (2.26; 5.17; 6.2), Qoheleth may perhaps intend a parallel to the despotic rulers of his own time." See Rudman, *Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 135. Likewise Crenshaw presents Qoheleth's view of God's gifts as random and void of any comfort: "This knowledge that life's

acknowledges humanity's inability to comprehend God's ways and their inadequacy to predict and control life. The theme of human limitations in comparison to God's greatness is not new to Qoheleth; his view of God rests on a firm foundation of the Old Testament wisdom literature. The writer of Proverbs portrays God as the giver of good gifts⁷¹ and Job adds to this picture by presenting his God as benevolent and caring.⁷²

At the same time these wisdom writers see God as bestowing bad things in life as well.⁷³ Job states it best when he declares his willingness to accept the bad from the hand of God as well as the good (Job 2:10). Humanity is unable to understand what God is doing and it causes only frustration and pain when a person desires to know the ways of the Lord.⁷⁴ God's acts cannot be changed⁷⁵ because there is certain determinism to them.⁷⁶ Therefore, Qoheleth "defends a well-known biblical theme and a genuine characteristic of the God of the Old Testament: the Creator, in relation to whom human hybris is not appropriate, is substantially different from man and acts according to his own free sovereignty."⁷⁷ In the spirit of the Old Testament wisdom literature Qoheleth advises his audience to accept their limitations as created human beings before their Creator.⁷⁸

It is only natural for Qoheleth, as a Jewish wise man, to have a view of God as the sovereign ruler who orchestrates the universe according to his design, "what has come to be has already been named," and to believe that humans cannot contend "with the one who is stronger" (Eccl 6:10; cf. 1:9). However, Qoheleth does not stop at showing only the part God plays in human affairs. He strongly believes in double agency present in the world. Unquestionably God is the one who gives an "allotment" and empowers to find contentment in life, yet humanity is expected "to take up" this allotment and show responsibility in putting the divine gifts to proper use (Eccl 5:18

pleasures cannot be earned through diligence and good conduct undercuts the fundamental premise of wisdom thinking... In Qoheleth's affirmations about God, the notion of divine gift loses its comforting quality. The gift comes without rhyme and reason; it falls on individuals indiscriminately. Those who do not receive it can do nothing to change their condition." See Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 125.

⁷¹ Cf. Prov 2:6; 8:35; 18:22.

⁷² Cf. Job 1:21; 2:10; 5:10, 11, 15, 17–20.

⁷³ Cf. Prov 16:4; 22:2, 14; Job 1:21; 2:10; 3:23; 16:7–14.

⁷⁴ Cf. Prov 20:24; 21:30; 30:2–4; Job 5:9; 9:2, 3, 10, 11; 11:7–9; 15:7–9; 37:5; 23; 42:3.

⁷⁵ Cf. Prov 16:9, 33; 19:21; Job 9:4, 12; 12:14; 42:2.

⁷⁶ Cf. Prov 20:24; Job 1:21; 2:10; 9:22–24, 28–31; 12:16–25; 30:20–23.

⁷⁷ De Jong, "God in the Book of Qoheleth," 167.

⁷⁸ See also Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Song*, 130.

[Eng. 19]).⁷⁹ Qoheleth believes that people should be in control of their attitude towards wealth and abundance, rather than allowing their own prosperity to gain control of their very existence.⁸⁰ God calls for a response from his people to accept their “allotment” and recognize their responsibility in working and finding satisfaction in the fruits their “allotment” will bring (Eccl 5:19 [Eng. 20]). Qoheleth suggests that those who fail to be content and enjoy their life as a gift of God will have to give an account to God (cf. Eccl 11:9).⁸¹

Further, Muffs has helpfully demonstrated that the expression **בשמחה לבו** “with joy in his heart” (Eccl 5:19 [Eng. 20]) functions as a metaphor for willingness and spontaneity.⁸² Qoheleth perceives of enjoyment and satisfaction in human life not just as a possibility but “a religious responsibility that humanity must accept and exercise ‘with gladness of heart,’ that is, willingly and without reservation.”⁸³

A person has to make the choice of either accepting the life God gives him and live it out in a manner pleasing to God (Eccl 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20]), or devoting himself to the life of striving after gain and profit (Eccl 6:2) and be considered “an offender” (**שׂוֹמֵר**; Eccl 2:26). Qoheleth suggests that regardless of the circumstances a person should accept life and everything it brings as a gift of God. Whether a person gets “to eat” from this wealth or not is secondary to his acknowledging that this wealth is not his and treat it as God’s possession entrusted to him for a time (Eccl 5:18 [Eng. 19]; 6:2). Qoheleth could be speaking against the idea of a self-made person in charge of his own destiny.⁸⁴

2.4.2 Preoccupation or Answer? (Eccl 5:19 [Eng. 20])

Qoheleth finds the reason for taking up and enjoying one’s “allotment” in God and his

⁷⁹ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 47. See also Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, lxvi-lxvii; Weeks, *Ecclesiastes and Scepticism*, 83-84.

⁸⁰ See also Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 119.

⁸¹ See also Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 49.

⁸² Yochanan Muffs, *Love and Joy: Law, Language and Religion in Ancient Israel* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 121-193. Muffs also draws parallels between the Akkadian expressions “with goodness of heart” and “with joy of heart” which conveys the idea of free and unforced willingness and similar Hebrew expressions “with goodness of heart” and “with joy of heart” to underscore the enthusiasm and freedom of motivation that they express. See Muff, *Love and Joy*, 122.

⁸³ Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 49.

⁸⁴ De Jung, “Qoheleth and the Ambitious Spirit of the Ptolemaic Period,” 90-96. See also Rudman, *Determinism in the Book of Ecclesiastes*, 135.

actions: “God will keep him busy (מְעַנֶּה)⁸⁵ with joy in his heart” (Eccl 5:19 [Eng. 20]). Instead of being preoccupied with the passing days of human life and its unpredictability, God makes it possible for people to focus on the things that make life worth living. Gerstenberger suggests that the verb עָנָה “to be busy with” reflects gloom and a notion of inevitable death because it is set against the experience of protection, happiness, power, and control.⁸⁶ Qoheleth infuses the verb with a positive, life-celebrating meaning by making God the subject of this verb. Eating and drinking bring people together in community to express companionship and contentment, including the observance of religious holidays (cf. Deut 14:26). In 1 Kings 4:20 the peace and contentment that people experienced during the time of Solomon’s reign is summed up in the phrase “eating and drinking” (cf. Jer 22:15). Thus, contentment is the wise person’s allotment.⁸⁷

God-given joy and pleasure keep humanity away from thinking about the coming death and the finitude of life.⁸⁸ “When someone is happy, the thought of death—precisely the point to which Qoheleth wants to bring his readers—retreats from their consciousness. It becomes rare.”⁸⁹ Qoheleth’s choice of the word מְעַנֶּה “preoccupation” placed in Eccl 5:19 [Eng. 20] looks back at the situation of the oppressed in Eccl 5:7 [Eng. 8] and anticipates the condition of the afflicted⁹⁰ in Eccl 6:8, which suggests that both the rich and the poor can find contentment in life if they accept the “allotment” God has given them.⁹¹ This idea resonates with the advice

⁸⁵ This translation of the Hebrew verb understands the root to be עָנָה III, “to be busy with.” See E. J. Stendebach, “עָנָה III,” *TDOT* 11:215-30. The Septuagint translates it this way. See also Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 117; Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 240; Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 119-20; Bollhagen, *Ecclesiastes*, 211; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 125; Daniel J. Treier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (BTCB; Grand Rapids: Brazos Press; 2011), 176; Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words*, 430-31; Whitley, *Koheleth*, 56; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 103; Ginsburg, *Cohleth*, 356; Luther, *Notes on Ecclesiastes*, 93.

⁸⁶ E. Gerstenberger, “עָנָה III,” *TDOT* 11:231-52 (235).

⁸⁷ See also Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 119.

⁸⁸ See also Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment*, 48.

⁸⁹ Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 85.

⁹⁰ The word עָנִי “poor” or “afflicted” is a derivative of the verb עָנָה III, “to be busy with” or “to be afflicted.” See Stendebach, *TDOT*:11:215. The “oppressed” and the “afflicted” belong to the same group of those deprived of justice (cf. Deut 24:14; Ps 82:3; Prov 22:22; Isa 3:14; Ezek 18:12). See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 216.

⁹¹ This could be Qoheleth’s answer to the problem which he raises in Eccl 4:1 that speaks of neither the oppressed nor their oppressors having a comforter in their situation.

found in Prov 31:6–7 in which the writer speaks of finding joy and satisfaction in eating and drinking and, thus, forgetting poverty and labour.⁹²

A similar notion is found in Egyptian literature as well. The *Song of Antef* counsels the living: “Rejoice in your heart! Forgetfulness profits you, follow the heart as long as you live!”⁹³ Likewise, a Hellenistic tomb inscription from Jerusalem urges tomb visitors: “Rejoice, you who are able; of the rest ... drink and eat!”⁹⁴ Qoheleth is fully aware of the transient nature of life under the sun (Eccl 5:17 [Eng. 18]; cf. 2:3; 3:12, 22) and desires his audience to make the best of it. Therefore, he suggests that God offers humanity a positive preoccupation to fill their days to substitute for the evil one (cf. Eccl 1:13; 3:10).⁹⁵ He intends for humanity to find contentment in their allotment instead of lamenting the passing of their lives and trying to postpone death.

There is, however, a different way to interpret the word **מַעֲנָה** as some commentators, like Rashbam, have noted.⁹⁶ This verbal form may be a derivative of a Hebrew verb **עָנָה** “to answer”⁹⁷ and can be translated as “an answer” or “one who gives an answer.” Delitzsch argues in favour of this reading and understands the gift of God to be the divine answer of joy that solves the problem of human discontent. “This makes the joy a heart-joy, *i.e.* a joy which a man feels not merely externally, but in the deepest recess of his heart, for the joy penetrates his heart and satisfies it.”⁹⁸ This reading of the word **מַעֲנָה** “answer” is supported by numerous passages in the Old Testament.⁹⁹ Following this translation, Gordis avers that Qoheleth intends his

⁹² “Give strong drink to one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress; ⁷ let them drink and forget their poverty, and remember their misery no more” (Prov 31:6–7).

⁹³ Lichtheim, “The Song from the Tomb of King Intef,” (*AEL* I:196). Fox offers a different translation: “Be hale! While your heart is directed toward self-forgetfulness, which performs the *sthr*-rites for you. Follow your heart while you exist.” See Fox, “A Study of Antef,” 404. Fox’s translation emphasizes the need to make oneself forget about the pain and brevity of life and concentrate on the pleasures of the living.

⁹⁴ P. Benoit, “L’Inscription grecque du tombeau de Jason,” *IEJ* 17 (1967): 112-13. Benoit states: “The theme of ‘drinking and eating’ found here fits well with a kind of epitaph genre that invites people to enjoy life while they have it.”

⁹⁵ The verbal form in Eccl 5:20 is **מַעֲנָה**, which is Hiphil participial form of the verb **עָנָה** III, “to be busy with”, “to be occupied with.” The noun that Qoheleth uses in Eccl 1:13; 3:10 is **עֲנִי**, “business,” “occupation,” which is derived from the same verb **עָנָה** III.

⁹⁶ Rashbam, *The Commentary on Qoheleth*, 142.

⁹⁷ Stendebach, *TDOT* 11:215.

⁹⁸ Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 303-304. Delitzsch further argues against the reading of this form as “preoccupation” because he believes that in Ecclesiastes the verb **עָנָה** III can be understood only as “to weary oneself with something” instead of the general sense of “to be busy with something.” Thus, God’s gift cannot cause weariness in human life.

⁹⁹ Cf. Prov 15:1, 23; 16:1; 29:19; Job 32:3, 5.

readers to see “that it is God’s *will*, not merely His *consent*, that man enjoys life (cf. Eccl 2:24; 5:18; 9:7).”¹⁰⁰

Lohfink takes this understanding of מַעֲנֶה further and suggests that God reveals himself through the joy that he gives to humanity; through the experience of joy people are able to relate to God on a higher and deeper level. Therefore, the divine “answer” is a “revelation” of God’s perfect activity in the world.¹⁰¹ While Lohfink’s proposition is interesting, it extends the meaning of the word מַעֲנֶה too far, especially because this word is not used to signify a revelation unless it is a response to a request.¹⁰² Besides, Qoheleth never says that God reveals himself anywhere else in his work.¹⁰³

Translating מַעֲנֶה as “answer” brings a resolution to the contradictions Qoheleth observes in life: God responds to the issue of the brevity of human existence by providing joy that distracts one from focusing on one’s limitations. However, the notion of joy that helps people to cope with their humanity and impending death is present in the meaning of מַעֲנֶה as “preoccupation” as well. The ambiguity that is so characteristic of Qoheleth can be at play here causing his readers to think of both “an answer” and “a preoccupation” that come together in the possibility of joy. Regardless of the particular translation of this word Qoheleth clearly states that it is God who imparts joy to human hearts and it is humanity’s responsibility to recognize the divine gift and learn to appreciate it. Luther believes that Eccl 5:19 [Eng. 20] is the climax of the book’s argument and the lens through which Qoheleth’s message should be interpreted. Luther suggests that Qoheleth discourages his readers to dwell on things they do not have and admonishes them to enjoy the things they already have. Thus, they are able to find joy in their labour and “here in the midst of evil [Qoheleth] enters into Paradise.”¹⁰⁴

Both sections C and C' (Eccl 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20] and 6:1–2) further develop the theme of contentment in Qoheleth’s work. Qoheleth encourages his readers to accept the fact that God is ultimately in control of everything that they possess or do

¹⁰⁰ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 255-56. Gordis also argues against reading מַעֲנֶה as “occupation” as he does not find support anywhere in the rest of the book for the idea that “joy deadens man’s sensibility to the brevity of life.”

¹⁰¹ Lohfink, “Qoheleth 5:17–19,” 634. See also Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 85.

¹⁰² John A. Beck, “מַעֲנֶה,” *NIDOTTE* 3:447.

¹⁰³ See also Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 240-41.

¹⁰⁴ Luther, *Notes on Ecclesiastes*, 93.

not possess and everything that happens in their life. He believes that humanity has control only over the choice of how to spend every brief moment of their life under the sun. He encourages his audience to learn to be content with less rather than “to amass wealth and miss the point of having lived, which is the real profit or allotment available to humanity.”¹⁰⁵ The conduct of the wise and the knowledge that the poor have speak of their attitude to see life as good and of their choice to accept their existence and labour as gifts (cf. Eccl 6:9).

With the help of the chiasmic structure in Eccl 5:7 [Eng. 8]–6:9 Qoheleth masterfully develops an answer to his programmatic question about finding profit in one's labour by pointing out that true profit is found in a life of contentment that is good and pleasing to God. He is able to demonstrate to his audience in sections A–A' and B–B' that riches prove inadequate in life only when they fail to bring satisfaction and joy to their owners. Learning to find contentment and fulfilment in one's labour as well as enjoying the fruit of this labour constitutes a true blessing of God as the central section C–C' emphasizes. This section serves as a focal point in Qoheleth's discussion as the negative scenarios in sections A and B move the discussion toward it and then sections B' and A' look back to it. This pivotal section also provides Qoheleth's reasoning for a life of contentment which permeates the whole of his teaching—the sovereign will of the inscrutable God (cf. Eccl 1:15; 3:11, 14; 7:13–14; 8:16; 11:5).¹⁰⁶

It is hard not to notice the fact that Qoheleth keeps asking the same question, “What advantage does the wise have over the fool?” (Eccl 6:8). He has answered it already several times (cf. Eccl 2:24–26; 3:12–13; 4:9–12; 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20]). Qoheleth's rhetorical questions are believed to presuppose a negative answer because nobody knows what is good for man, just as nobody knows what will happen after death.¹⁰⁷ Could it be that Qoheleth is purposefully repeating the question and the answer to make a greater impression on his readers in order to persuade them to follow his line of thought as far as the life of contentment is concerned? Could it be that the implied answer to the questions about who knows what is the good for people and what events will take place after their death is God? If so, Qoheleth has already shown what God considers to be good—contentment. Putting one's allotment to use

¹⁰⁵ Saylor, *Vain Rhetoric*, 324.

¹⁰⁶ See also Fredericks, “Chiasm and Parallel Structure in Qoheleth 5:9–6:9,” 26–27.

¹⁰⁷ See Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 242–43; Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 123; Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 178–79.

without expecting profitable results and investing in work without the security of the future will be discussed next.

3. Contentment and the Joy of Work (Eccl 11:1–6)

Qoheleth's quest to find the answer to his programmatic question, "what profit is there for a man in all his labour?" (Eccl 1:3) has resulted in the same conclusion over and over again: profit is found in the ability to accept life as a gift of God and live every moment to the fullest (Eccl 2:24–26; 3:12–13; 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–19]; 9:7–10). Profit is also found in one's labour; not in the benefits it may bring, but rather in the process of working itself (cf. Eccl 2:24–26; 3:12–13; 5:17–19 [Eng.18–20]; 9:7–10). In Ecclesiastes 11:1–6 Qoheleth offers his final call to wise labour and to an attitude of contentment in one's labour before death robs a person of life itself. Qoheleth encourages his audience to be spontaneous and adventurous in their generosity and hospitality in order to share their God-given gifts with others, for in giving away and sharing they will find joy and fulfilment.

11:1	שֶׁלַח לַחֲמֶךְ עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם כִּי־רַב־בַּיָּמִים תִּמְצְאוּנוּ	Send away your bread upon the waters, For in many days you will find it.
11:2	תִּן־חֶלֶק לַשְּׁבַעַה וְגַם לַשְּׁמוֹנָה כִּי לֹא תֹדַע מַה־יְהִיֶּה רָעָה עַל־הָאָרֶץ	Give an allotment to seven and even to eight, for you do not know what disaster will happen upon the earth.
11:3	אִם־יִמְלֵאוּ הָעַבִּים גֶּשֶׁם לַעֲדָרָא יִרְקוּ וְאִם־יִפֹּל עֵץ בְּדָרוֹם וְאִם בְּצָפוֹן מִקּוֹם שִׁיפּוֹל הָעֵץ שָׁם יִהְיֶה	When clouds are full, they empty rain upon the earth, and when a tree falls to the south or to the north, the tree will be in the place where it fell.
11:4	שֹׁמֵר רוּחַ לֹא יִזְרַע וְרֹאֵה בַעֲבִים לֹא יִקְצוֹר	Who watches the wind does not sow and who watches the clouds does not harvest.
11:5	כַּאֲשֶׁר אֵינְךָ יוֹדֵעַ מַה־הַדֶּרֶךְ הָרוּחַ כַּעֲצָמִים בְּבֶטֶן הַמְּלֵאָה כִּכֹּה לֹא תֹדַע אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אֶת־הַכֹּל	Just as you do not know the way of the breath or how the bones [grow] in the womb of a pregnant [woman], so you do not know the works of God who does everything.
11:6	בְּבֹקֶר זֵרַע אֶת־זֵרְעֶךָ וּלְעֶרֶב אַל־תִּנַּח יָדְךָ כִּי אֵינְךָ יוֹדֵעַ אִי זֶה יִכְשֵׁר הַזֶּה	In the morning sow your seed and in the evening do not rest your hand, for you do not know if this or that will

אוֹזֶה וְאִם־שְׁנֵיהֶם כְּאֶחָד טוֹבִים succeed or if both alike will be good.

Qoheleth builds on his own experience of work to advise his readers about an appropriate attitude to their business enterprises (Eccl 11:1–6; cf. Eccl 2:1–10). He reminds them that there are fitting times for every activity (Eccl 11:4, 6) because God has set appointed times for them (cf. Eccl 3:1–11a; 8:6). Once again Qoheleth draws their attention to humanity's inability to know or predict the future (Eccl 11:6; cf. 3:11, 21; 6:5, 10,12; 7:14; 8:7) because of human limitations in comprehending God's work in the world under the sun (Eccl 11:5; cf. 3:11b; 7:13–14). Qoheleth connects his experience and previous advice on contentment in life with his admonition to find joy in work with the help of several key words that he has been using throughout his teaching (see the chart below). These terms will be analyzed in the following sections.

Hebrew		Ecclesiastes 1–2 Qoheleth's Autobiography	Ecclesiastes 11:1–6	Ecclesiastes 3–10
English				
רוּחַ	wind	1:6	11:4–5	8:8
יָדַעַ	know	1:17; 2:18–19	11:2, 5–6	3:21; 6:5, 10,12; 8:7
חֶלֶקַ	allotment	2:10	11:2	3:22; 5:17–18 [Eng. 18–19]; 9:9
טוֹבַ	good	2:3	11:6	4:9; 5:17 [Eng. 18]; 6:3, 6, 12; 7:1, 11, 18, 20; 9:2, 18

In the world where there is so much unknown and mysterious dangers and misfortunes, Qoheleth offers his advice on contentment and wise living from his personal experience. This study will now demonstrate that Qoheleth's admonitions on developing an attitude of spontaneity and hospitality should enable his audience to find joy and contentment in their labour. Then it will look at the reasons why Qoheleth believes that lack of control over one's enterprise and fear of failure should not deter his audience from experiencing satisfaction and fulfilment in their work.

3.1 Call for Spontaneity (Eccl 11:1–2)

Qoheleth begins his advice on a proper attitude to one's labour by suggesting to his audience to “send away your bread upon the waters” and to “give an allotment to seven and even to eight” (Eccl 11:1–2). These two verses have been interpreted in different ways. A common understanding is that they speak about the wisdom of

being a skilled entrepreneur.¹⁰⁸ According to this view, Eccl 11:1 encourages foreign maritime trade and Eccl 11:2 promotes variety of investments to protect one's capital in case of a disaster.¹⁰⁹ Gordis states: "This is, by all odds, the most likely view of the passage."¹¹⁰

The reason for such interpretation lies in the translation of the phrase **שְׁלַח לַחֲמֶךְ עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם** "send away your bread upon the waters" (Eccl 11:1). The Piel of **שְׁלַח** means "to send away, to release, to let go."¹¹¹ The Hebrew phrase **עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם** "on/upon the surface of the waters" is rather common and is found in other Old Testament passages.¹¹² Crenshaw finds the phrase "who sends (**שְׁלַח**) ambassadors on the Nile (**בְּיָם**) and in papyrus vessels on the waters (**עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם**)" in Isa 18:2 to be parallel in meaning to Eccl 11:1 because **שְׁלַח** appears in proximity with **בְּיָם** and **עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם**.¹¹³ Delitzsch suggests that the phrase "do business in great waters" in Ps 57:33 offers an explanation of Qoheleth's words in Eccl 11:1 as it reminds the audience of Solomon's economic policies which included trade by ships with Tarshish and Ophir.¹¹⁴ Both scholars have to look at a different material in other contexts to find explanation to Qoheleth's words, which is not convincing as it is hard to find any evidence for such reading within the book of Ecclesiastes.

Moreover, Crenshaw's and Delitzsch's readings of Eccl 11:1–2 do not take into consideration the resumptive pronoun at the end of the verse **תִּמְצְאוּנוּ** "you will find it." If **לַחֲמֶךְ** "bread" is understood metaphorically to denote foreign trade, as in the case of "bread" meaning "grain" (cf. Isa 28:28; 30:23) or "food" (cf. Prov 28:3),¹¹⁵ one should expect to collect a profit rather than only "it" after a long process

¹⁰⁸ Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 391-93; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 329-30; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 178-79; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 106-107.

¹⁰⁹ See Gordis, *Koheleth*, 330. He argues that Qoheleth endorses the overseas commerce as the profits would be large and diversification of undertakings to reduce one's risks. Delitzsch suggests that trade with foreign countries naturally requires a long period of waiting to obtain profits and in order to diminish one's loss one should not invest all of one's money in the same sea voyage, but rather have one's merchandise on several shiPs See Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 392-93.

¹¹⁰ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 330.

¹¹¹ C. John Collins, "שְׁלַח," *NIDOTTE* 4:120. Cf.. Gen 3:23; Ex 5:2; 6:1; 11:1; Neh 8:12.

¹¹² Cf. Gen 1:2; 7:18; Ex 32:20; Prov 8:27; Job 24:18; 26:10; Isa 18:2; Hos 10:7. See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 334.

¹¹³ Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 178. See also Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 106.

¹¹⁴ Delitzsch, *The Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 392.

¹¹⁵ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 106; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 178; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 392; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 159.

of waiting.¹¹⁶ And if profit is the referent of “it,” then it is not clearly stated but assumed, which is unnecessary if Qoheleth speaks about economic enterprise in this passage.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, as Seow helpfully points out, the word לֶחֶם “bread” is not used as a designation for merchandise in the Bible. Proverbs 31:14 makes use of לֶחֶם to mean “food” in the context of portraying a capable wife and mother who, like a ship, brings her food from afar.¹¹⁸ Overall, the rationale for such interpretation of Eccl 11:1–2 can be found in the attempt to search for profit and to secure one's future in one's financial situation, an idea with which Qoheleth strongly disagrees in his work.¹¹⁹

It should also be noted that understanding Eccl 11:1–2 as advice on wise financial practices in the world where one does not know what future holds is foreign in ancient and medieval interpretations of this passage. Traditionally, this passage was understood as a teaching on alms-giving and charity,¹²⁰ with Prov 19:17 making a similar point: “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and will be repaid in full.” Likewise, the book of Nehemiah speaks of the inhabitants of Jerusalem who are told to celebrate a day dedicated to the Lord by sharing their provision with those who have none: “Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send (שְׁלַח) allotments of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord” (Neh 8:10; cf. 8:12). Rashbam sees the act of casting one's bread on the waters as doing a favour for a person who is the least likely to respond in a similar fashion and, yet, such action may turn out to be beneficial for the doer: “so it is impossible that you will not benefit from those to whom you give a share of what is yours.”¹²¹ The Targum of Qoheleth encourages alms-giving to the poor because there is a reward in “the world to come.”¹²² The Targum also cites Rabbi Akiba's story about a man who was saved from drowning because he had shared his bread with a poor man. The

¹¹⁶ Whybray chooses to translate תַּמְצִיחַ as “you might make a profit” because in Hos 12:9 [Eng. 8] and Job 31:25 the verb תַּצַּח means “to acquire wealth.” Yet, even with this evidence Whybray finds his own interpretation “doubtful.” See Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 159.

¹¹⁷ See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 335; Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 234; Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 101-102; Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 192.

¹¹⁸ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 342. See also Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 179.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Eccl 2:17–21; 5:9–10 [Eng. 10–11], 12–16 [Eng. 13–17]; 6:7–10.

¹²⁰ While Whybray, Crenshaw, Gordis, and Delitzsch recognize this interpretation of Eccl 11:1–2 as traditional, they refuse to accept it because find it as not typical of Qoheleth's work on the whole. See Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 158; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 178; Gordis, *Qoheleth*, 330; Delitzsch, *The Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 391.

¹²¹ Rashbam, *The Commentary on Qoheleth*, 200.

¹²² Knobel, *The Targum of Qoheleth*, 50.

words of Qoheleth "send away your bread upon the waters" were applied to this story to teach the Rabbi's students about the importance of generosity.¹²³

Following the Jewish Medieval interpreters, Luther explains the Hebrew expression in the following way: "Be generous to everyone while you can, use your riches wherever you can possibly do any good... For if you live long enough, you will receive back a hundredfold...The fact that you have been generous to others will not perish, even though it seems to perish."¹²⁴ Later Goethe puts Qoheleth's advice (Eccl 11:1–2) into his own words, "Why do you want to explore where benevolence flows! Throw your cakes into the water; who knows who will enjoy it!"¹²⁵

According to this interpretation, the phrase "cast your bread upon the waters" calls for unplanned and uncalculated actions of benevolence and charity. Such treatment of Qoheleth's words fits perfectly with his overall teaching on doing good and sharing the resources given by God in the present. Throughout his work, Qoheleth gradually shifts the meaning of the word "profit" from the economic sphere into the ethical and relational one. Thus, reading Eccl 11:1–2 as advice on foreign trade and diversifications of investments contradicts Qoheleth's thoughts in the rest of the book. "The point of the sayings (11:1–2), then, is not that one must be shrewd in economic planning, but that people ought to take some chances, even if they do not know what will happen."¹²⁶

There is a very remarkable parallel between Qoheleth's words and the words found in the Egyptian *Instruction of Ankhsheshonq*: "Do a good deed and throw it in the water; when it dries you will find it."¹²⁷ While Qoheleth speaks of casting bread into the water that may eventually bring some benefits to the doer, the Egyptian wise man calls for doing good deeds and releasing them upon the waters. In a similar manner, an Arabic proverb "Do good, throw your bread on the waters, and one day you will find it" advocates that in giving out freely something is always given back, even if it is not done immediately.¹²⁸ Therefore, it appears that throwing bread on the waters, which some may find to be "really senseless,"¹²⁹ is an example of doing good,

¹²³ Knobel, *The Targum of Qoheleth*, 51.

¹²⁴ Luther, *Notes on Ecclesiastes*, 171.

¹²⁵ Erich Schmidt, ed., *Goethe's Werke*, (vol. 1; Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1910), 126.

¹²⁶ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 342.

¹²⁷ Lichtheim, "Instruction of Ankhsheshonq," (*AEL* III, 174).

¹²⁸ Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 101-102. See also Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 234; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 343.

¹²⁹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 106.

yet one has to take risks to do it.¹³⁰ Qoheleth calls his readers to be spontaneous and generous towards others without expecting rewards or reciprocity; the reward is found in the act of doing good.

Qoheleth has already shown that hoarding one's wealth is foolish and detrimental to one's existence (cf. Eccl 5:9–16 [Eng. 10–17]). Bread which is the basic element of sustenance and joy in life should be shared and enjoyed in community. He has already entreated his audience to “go, eat with joy your bread” (Eccl 9:7; cf. 2:24; 3:13; 5:17 [Eng. 18]). In Ecclesiastes 11:1–2 Qoheleth suggests that a fulfilled life can be found not only in accepting and using God's gifts in one's life, but also in giving away one's resources and contributing to the sustenance of others. Qoheleth is not concerned with whether one's generosity is rewarded, but with the ethical imperative of being generous and hospitable without expecting anything in return.¹³¹

Qoheleth goes on to say that liberality and generosity should be shown not only to a few, but to many, because nobody knows the tragedies of the future (Eccl 11:2). Nobody knows the future and keeping one's wealth as a safeguard against a possible economic tragedy is not wise (cf. Eccl 5:12–16 [Eng. 13–17]). While risk is always present in life, it should not prevent one from doing good. He also would like for his audience to have a long-term outlook on life that discourages strong attachment to one's possessions, because life brings both good and bad as nobody knows what to expect from the future.¹³² Qoheleth makes use of the key word חלק “allotment” when speaking about sharing one's possessions (Eccl 11:2). It is the same word that he has used to define what God gives humanity as a gift (cf. Eccl 3:22; 5:17–18 [Eng. 18–19]). Thus, Qoheleth is concerned with the appropriate usage of God's possessions pointing out the fact that human beings are stewards of God's creation, not its owners. According to him, one should diversify but “not so much one's assets as one's stewardship!”¹³³ Qoheleth has already established the fact that the inability to know and secure one's future imposes significant limitations on one's life and one's ability to find contentment in life. His teachings on discovering joy and contentment in one's work in the midst of limitations will be discussed next.

¹³⁰ See also Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 178-79; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 342-43.

¹³¹ See also Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 102; Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 234.

¹³² Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 206.

¹³³ Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 103.

3.2 Lack of Human Control and the Fear of Failure (Eccl 11:3–6)

The fact that Qoheleth encourages his audience to share their allotments with many points to the reality of abundance in their lives. He believes they already have more than enough to give away, but he does not want his readers to get an impression that they can find a way to secure their position: releasing their bread does not guarantee its return and keeping it does not guarantee its safety either, “for you do not know what disaster will happen upon the earth” (Eccl 11:2). The idea of limitations of human knowledge is very significant in Qoheleth's writing. He has already established that nobody knows what the future will bring (Eccl 2:18–19; 3:21–22; 6:12; 8:7, 16–17). He addresses this idea one last time in Eccl 11:3–6, yet at this juncture he insists that one's inability to know and, thus, control the future should not stop one from living a full life, working to the best of one's abilities and finding contentment in one's work.

Turning to the natural phenomena of clouds, rain, trees, and wind in Eccl 11:3–4, Qoheleth states obvious truths that seem to point out the dependability and predictability of nature (cf. Eccl 1:4–7). As a person observes the clouds, he can be certain about the possibility of rain, yet he does not know when it will rain (Eccl 11:3–4). Even though one can easily feel the wind, attempting to gain control over it is utterly futile, as it is mentioned in Eccl 8:8: “Nobody has power over the wind to restrain the wind.” When a tree falls in the forest, it does not matter what direction it falls. What matters is that it has fallen and now lies on the ground (Eccl 11:3). Qoheleth brings together two contradictory ideas: on the one hand, a good knowledge of natural phenomena, like wind and clouds, should guide one's wise and timely activities (Eccl 11:3; cf. 3:1–8); on the other hand, organizing one's activities around the natural phenomena reflects an unwise planning for the future, as clouds and wind are highly unpredictable (Eccl 11:4; cf. 1:14; 2:11; 4:6; 6:9).¹³⁴ In the wisdom literature cloud formation and movements are perceived as incomprehensible, as Job makes clear, “Can anyone understand the spreading of the clouds, the thundering of his [God's] dwelling? (Job 36:29) As far as the wind is concerned, it represents things that are unreliable and untrustworthy (cf. Hos 12:2).¹³⁵ It could also be possible that

¹³⁴ See also Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 234–35; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 122, 344.

¹³⁵ See Seow, “Hosea 14:10 and the Foolish People Motif,” *CBQ* 44 (1982): 221–22. See also Prov 11:29; 27:16, 30:4; Job 15:2; 16:3 that compare activities which are meaningless and futile to an attempt to control wind.

Qoheleth is addressing “ironically prognosticating techniques that claim to draw indications of the future from the clouds and from the falling of the tree....”¹³⁶

Observing clouds and wind teaches nothing about the future.

Nevertheless, Qoheleth desires his audience to understand that there is an inevitable certainty to natural processes. He has mentioned in the opening poem the ever-repeating circle of nature with winds constantly blowing, the rivers flowing and the sun moving across the sky which speak to the existing laws of nature (Eccl 1:4–10; cf. 3:15). Yet, one's decision whether to sow or reap should not be made on the basis of these laws (Eccl 11:4). Farmers, whom Qoheleth has in mind, may tend to postpone their agricultural activities for the fear that bad weather would damage their produce. Their desire to find perfect weather for planting their crops in order to reap the most harvest keeps them from acting in the present.¹³⁷ Identifying appropriate times is a sign of wisdom for Qoheleth (cf. Eccl 3:1–15), thus waiting for perfect conditions can cause one to miss the appropriate time for sowing or reaping or finding joy and contentment in what one possesses in the present.¹³⁸ Qoheleth believes that taking risks and being spontaneous are part of human existence in light of complete unpredictability of the future and lack of human control over it (Eccl 11:6).

Qoheleth develops this thought further in Eccl 11:5–6. He uses the expression “you do not know” three times in these two verses to emphasize the limits of human knowledge as it relates to the laws of nature: nobody knows how or when life enters the body of a foetus; nobody knows or understands what God is doing; and nobody knows what results any action will bring. In Ecclesiastes 11:4 Qoheleth speaks of “wind” using the Hebrew word **רוּחַ**, and in Eccl 11:5 he employs the same Hebrew word to mean human “breath.” Qoheleth portrays a pregnant woman as **הַמַּלְאָה**, “the

¹³⁶ Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 193. Crenshaw mentions a possible translation of **עֵץ** “tree” as divining rod, similar to Hos 4:12 “my people inquire with a rod (**בַּעֲצָוָה**),” but leaves this suggestion open. See Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 179. It seems that such interpretation echoes The Targum of Qoheleth which understands Eccl 11:4 to speak about divination and astrology, which never bring out a good reward: “For sorcery and divination are compared to the wind which are not to be seized in the human hands and the constellations are compared to the clouds of heaven which go and do not return.” See Knobel, *The Targum of Qoheleth*, 50.

¹³⁷ Rashbam understands Qoheleth to speak against idleness that is caused by being overly cautious in Eccl 11:4. Nobody can find profit in being too guarded and careful. See Rashbam, *The Commentary on Qoheleth*, 200-202. Crenshaw follows this line of thinking in his interpretation of Eccl 11:4 and draws parallel with Prov 26:1, “Like snow in summer or rain in harvest, so honor is not fitting for a fool,” concluding that not sowing or harvesting when the possibility of rain is highly unlikely comes close to foolishness. See Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 180. See also Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 395-96.

¹³⁸ See also Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 194; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 345.

full one” in Eccl 11:5, a word he previously mentions in Eccl 11:3 when describing clouds becoming full with rain **יִמְלֵא**. The repetition of these words moves the audience to interpret Eccl 11:3–5 together as they point to the same mystery: everybody can observe clouds and see that they are “full”, but whether it will rain or not is unpredictable. In the same way, when a woman is “full”, everybody knows a child will be born. Yet, it is a mystery as to how the life is being formed in the womb and when this child will be delivered.¹³⁹ Humanity has no control over the wind, **רוּחַ**, or the breath of life, **רוּחַ**, which “serve as metonyms for the mystery of creation.”¹⁴⁰

Qoheleth uses these two examples to manifest human ignorance and to show that God’s activity defy human comprehension (Eccl 11:5b).¹⁴¹ While human beings can only observe the nature around them, they have no control over the natural process, they are actively involved in creating and participating in human processes. Nevertheless, this participation does not impart understanding of the work of God, who is behind everything. Qoheleth moves seamlessly from nature (clouds and wind) to creation (human breath) to theology (the acts of God) to bring home to his audience the notion of the complete inscrutability of God (Eccl 11:5).¹⁴²

Since God’s work is incomprehensible and unpredictable, one should be busy sowing and reaping because nobody knows what will prosper. Qoheleth does not suggest that people should work all the time without rest in hopes of securing at least some profit. He endorses work as opposed to idleness and avoidance of labour, “In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not let your hands be idle” (Eccl 11:6a). Fox helpfully points out that the phrase **בבקר... ולערב** “in morning... and in the evening” should be understood to mean “at any time” or “regularly.”¹⁴³ This pair of words serves as merism for the whole day; therefore Qoheleth encourages his audience to work whenever an opportune time arises, instead of waiting and trying to

¹³⁹ Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 345.

¹⁴⁰ Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 103. The mysterious behavior of the wind and human birth are mentioned in the New Testament in a similar manner by Jesus who explains to Nicodemus the mystery of spiritual rebirth: “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

¹⁴¹ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 162. See also A. H. Konkel, “**בִּקְרָא**,” *NIDOTTE* 1:716.

¹⁴² See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 346; Fredericks and Estes, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, 234-35.

¹⁴³ Fox, *Contradictions*, 277. See also Gen 49:27; Ps 90:6, 1 Chr 23:30 where the same phrase is used to identify regular activities rather than the duration of those activities. See also Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 338.

determine the best time, “for you do not know if his or that will succeed or if both alike will be good” (Eccl 11:6b).¹⁴⁴

Qoheleth ties his statement in Eccl 11:6 with the advice he has given in the beginning of this chapter: take risks, get involved, work, live a full life. A similar notion is found in the Aramaic text *Words of Ahiqar*: “take every trouble and do every labour, then wilt thou eat and be satisfied and give to thy children.”¹⁴⁵ Not knowing the future should not prevent one from finding contentment in the present. His exhortation echoes the words of Eccl 9:10: “Whatever your hands find to do, do it with all your might.” Qoheleth desires his audience to accept the fact that they cannot control their future. They are to rise to every opportunity that comes their way, because there exists always a possibility of reward. However, if they choose to think that can find ways to control their destiny and avoid risks present in human existence, they will not know any reward.¹⁴⁶ Not knowing the future also suggests great ignorance about the day of death, which nobody has power over as Qoheleth has already noted (cf. Eccl 8:8). Therefore, being spontaneous and living life to the fullest has to happen in the shadow of death (cf. Eccl 11:7–12:8), and should be done in a responsible and diligent way as opposed to all-consuming obsession (cf. Eccl 4:8; 5:11 [Eng. 12]).¹⁴⁷

4. Conclusion

This chapter has examined the ways in which Qoheleth further develops the theme of contentment in his teaching. He advises his audience to accept their allotment as well as engage in spontaneous and at times risky life style of generosity and hospitality. In Ecclesiastes 5:7 [Eng. 8]–6:9 Qoheleth emphasizes the idea of finding profit in daily activities instead of searching for it in acquisition of wealth, because he has found profit in simple joys of life in his autobiography (Eccl 2:10, 24–26). He clearly states that possessions are a gift from God and should be enjoyed as such (Eccl 5:18 [Eng. 19]; 6:2), as he has already mentioned in his autobiography (Eccl 2:24–25). “The lesson the audience learns as they accompany Qoheleth in his meditations is similar to that taught by the story of God’s giving manna to Israel in the wilderness. God intends

¹⁴⁴ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 315.

¹⁴⁵ H. L. Ginsberg, “The Words of Ahiqar,” (*ANET* 1:245-49, [247-48]).

¹⁴⁶ Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 206. Provan even calls such attitude to life “enthusiastic abandon.”

¹⁴⁷ See also Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 103; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 346.

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for us to use and enjoy the gifts that we are given, not to hoard them or to store them up for the future.”¹⁴⁸

The desire to accumulate riches fosters greed that leads to oppression and injustice (Eccl 5:7 [Eng. 8]). It also results in a death-like existence in this world (Eccl 5:16 [Eng. 17]; 6:3, 6). Throughout his work Qoheleth impresses upon his audience the need to find satisfaction and contentment in this life, for death will inevitably come and put an end to every thought and deed. As compared to the duration of death, life is brief and passing, so Qoheleth finds it foolish to hasten death and willingly accept its conditions. A life of abundance can bring satisfaction and contentment to one's existence if one learns to enjoy the wealth for the joy it can bring without turning it into obsession or taking it for granted.¹⁴⁹

Looking through the lens of his autobiography at the situation of his readers, Qoheleth demonstrates that the life of contentment is a theological imperative. Those who choose to acknowledge and take the allotment that God has given them are enabled by God to live a life of contentment and satisfaction (Eccl 5:19 [Eng. 20]), just as he has learned to do in his autobiography (Eccl 2:25–26). God has made everything “appropriate” (Eccl 3:11); therefore, it is “appropriate” for humanity to enjoy the simple things in life and live fully in the present (Eccl 5:17 [Eng. 18]). Yet, Qoheleth also understands that contentment is a gift from God and it should be accepted and treasured as such (Eccl 5:18 [Eng. 19]; 6:2). It is God's privilege and prerogative to bestow the gift of contentment on those whom he chooses.

Qoheleth encourages his audience to accept the fact that human beings' knowledge and comprehension of the world and of God's activity in it are limited. He also implores them to give up their desire to predict and control the future (Eccl 11:1–6). Humanity's inability to know the future underscores the fact that people do not have any security in life (Eccl 11:2). While this is true, Qoheleth does not wish his readers to use this fact as a reason not to get engaged in different activities or to minimize one's losses. In Ecclesiastes 11:1–6 he recapitulates the imperative “whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might” (Eccl 9:10) fully recognizing that success and failure are in the hands of God.¹⁵⁰ At the heart of

¹⁴⁸ Farmer, *Who Knows What is Good?* 153.

¹⁴⁹ See also Whybray, “Qoheleth as a Theologian,” in *Qoheleth in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors; Leuven: Leuven University Press; 1998), 239–65 (256).

¹⁵⁰ Whybray is correct in suggesting that the Book of Ecclesiastes does not present “a systematic body of belief. Rather [Qoheleth's] primary aim was a practical one: to impress on his

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Qoheleth's message of contentment is his belief that God gives life for living, and humanity must learn to acknowledge, accept and appreciate the gift of this brief and passing life because God has created the human heart with a capacity for gratification and joy.¹⁵¹

readers the necessity to accept the world as it is with all its shortcomings." See Whybray, "Qoheleth as a Theologian," (254).

¹⁵¹ See also Bergant, "Israel's Wisdom Literature," 121-22.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

1. Summary and Contribution of this Study

The aim of this thesis was to examine through the lens of Qoheleth's autobiography the thematic development of his teaching on contentment with the primary focus on embracing life given by God and nurturing an attitude of contentment in the face of unpredictability of death. Before highlighting the contribution of this work, a brief summary of the thesis will demonstrate how this aim was pursued. Chapter 1 surveyed the history of interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes and identified a lack of scholarly analysis on the interplay between the major themes of death, the role of God, and the theme of contentment in Qoheleth's thought. The history of research pointed out that more could be done to demonstrate the ways in which Qoheleth's autobiography influences his message and serves as a lens to read the book of Ecclesiastes. Chapter 2 investigated Qoheleth's view of the brevity of life and his understanding of death as a natural end of human existence. It demonstrated the ways in which the concept of death influenced his message and permeated his teaching. It established that Qoheleth's concept of death was in line with how death is presented in the Old Testament writings and in the wider context of ancient Near Eastern literature. It determined the significance of the notion of the brevity of life and the urgency to live in the present moment because of the uncertainty of the afterlife.

Chapter 3 analyzed the genre of royal autobiography which Qoheleth employed to present his own autobiography to gain helpful insights about the purpose and significance of Qoheleth's royal persona in the book of Ecclesiastes (Eccl 1:12–2:26). This chapter established the ways in which Qoheleth's view of death and the role of God in his life influenced his own experience. It also presented the ways in which Qoheleth's understanding of his limitations and the allotment, given to him by God moved him to adopt an attitude of contentment in his own life. Using Qoheleth's autobiography and his experience of limitations in his own life as a lens to read his message in the rest of the book of Ecclesiastes, Chapter 4 traced the ways in which Qoheleth further developed the theme of contentment in the midst of limitations imposed by impossibility to control time, inscrutability of God and inevitability of death. His teaching sought to empower his audience to

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follow his example in acknowledging the reality of death and learning to celebrate life. Chapter 5 focused on Qoheleth's advice to embrace the allotment bestowed by God. Qoheleth's autobiography and, in particular, his experience of the allotment as the gift from God served as a lens to read his exhortations on accepting both joys and tragedies, being fully engaged in one's work, and practising hospitality and generosity. Qoheleth's teaching implored his audience to find contentment in the allotment God had given them and live with urgency and zeal.

This study has sought to contribute to the scholarship on the book of Ecclesiastes by providing a corrective to the strongly pessimistic readings of Ecclesiastes in current scholarship in the following areas. First, it has demonstrated that contentment is the central message of Qoheleth's teaching as can be attested throughout the book. According to Qoheleth, contentment consists of embracing life as a gift from God, which may include both good and bad things, and being fully engaged and present in every moment of life in the face of the inscrutability of God and the inevitability of death. Such reading of the book of Ecclesiastes allows the reader to understand better and accept the life's contradictions that Qoheleth addresses in his teaching. Contentment is not resignation. It is more than a coping mechanism. It is an attitude of active involvement and participation in the present moment in spite of uncertainties. Contentment encompasses enjoyment and is a more appropriate response in every situation in life. For example, tragedies are not enjoyable; yet, Qoheleth teaches how to be content in such situations because God is in control of all the circumstances in life.

In addition, this thesis has demonstrated that Qoheleth develops his teaching on contentment through the interplay of the themes of death, the role of God, and contentment. This research has elaborated on Qoheleth's advice on how to live a life of contentment in the face of limitations imposed by the impossibility to control time, the inscrutability of God and the inevitability of death. Qoheleth implores his audience to give up attempts to control or secure the future. Rather they need to be attentive to what God is doing in the world. He also admonishes his readers to accept the inability to comprehend God's plan and purposes, and to experience every moment that God provides. In the face of the inevitability of death Qoheleth teaches to celebrate life, one day at a time.

Second, this study has shed light on the purpose of Qoheleth's royal autobiography in the book of Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth is not an impartial observer of

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life who simply reports his experiences, as proposed by Christianson. The royal autobiography helps convey Qoheleth's message rather than simply narrating his experiences. Further, Qoheleth does not offer a sad commentary on the injustices of his society, as Isaksson suggests. Rather, Qoheleth's royal autobiography serves as a lens to read his message of contentment in the book of Ecclesiastes. This study has shown the way Qoheleth's autobiography imbues him with the authority and respect needed to address his audience and ensure their attention and acceptance of his instruction. With the help of his royal autobiography Qoheleth is able to demonstrate that even the wisest king *par excellence* has to accept his limitations and choose to live with his allotment. In a world governed by the inscrutable God the best advice that Qoheleth can give his readers is only what he has found to be true—accepting life and everything that it brings as a gift from God and learning to be content with it. Qoheleth uses his autobiography to prove that simple pleasures of eating, drinking, spending time in relationships, and finding contentment and pleasure in his labour constitute a good life that is pleasing to God.

Third, this work has advanced that Qoheleth does not limit the term יִתְרוֹן “profit” only to the financial arena, as has been suggested before. While the idea of material gain is present in Qoheleth's teaching, he implores his audience to go to a higher level of spirituality, where profit is seen in ethical and relational behaviour. Qoheleth equates the terms יִתְרוֹן “profit” and טוֹב “good” in his instruction which emphasize the fact that true profit is found in a moral way of life. Qoheleth calls his audience to a life of ethical profit in every circumstance because it is good to do so and because it is pleasing to God. Qoheleth finds the answer to the thematic question of the book “What profit (יִתְרוֹן) is there for a man in all his labour in which he labours under the sun?” (Eccl 1:3) in accepting the allotment given to him by God, finding pleasure in his work and being content with what he already has. Qoheleth advocates for his audience to follow his example and find profit in the allotment given to them by God. He encourages them to be fully engaged and present at work and to enjoy every living moment spent within the community of faith; a community which is built around table fellowship and hospitality.

This study has proposed that rendering חֵלֶק as “allotment”, rather than “portion”, offers a better understanding of Qoheleth's message in the book of Ecclesiastes. “Allotment” is perceived as the entirety of what one receives or what is

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assigned to a person for a particular purpose.¹ Even though this “allotment” is limited in space and time and is available only to the living, it should be understood in terms of the Levitical inheritance, as a way of God to provide for his people. Qoheleth talks about חלק “allotment” as something very special and treasured which has been assigned to every human being by God. Hence, Qoheleth provides a theological basis for accepting one’s allotment and being content with it: God is in charge of every circumstance in life. Therefore, Qoheleth invites his audience to reflect on the divine activities that occur in their lives and in the world at large and act appropriately.

This thesis has also advanced that the term עמל should be translated as “labour” or “work”. Such translation challenges the traditional translations of עמל as “toil”, which is something burdensome, in Qoheleth’s thematic statement in Eccl 1:3 and throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth speaks of עמל “labour/work” as an activity to be enjoyed and find contentment in because God has allotted it to humanity. Work is a divine gift that brings satisfaction, fulfilment, and dignity. It is a moral duty that should be done with integrity, “with all your might” (Eccl 9:10). Qoheleth makes it clear to this audience that joy and contentment can be found in the work in front of them rather than in searching out God’s activity which is always beyond their grasp.

In conclusion, the attitude of contentment, which is central to Qoheleth’s message, enables people to participate actively in the circumstances of their lives, remain steadfast and entrust God with their lives, rather than withdrawing from the difficulties and constraints they face. Contentment is inclusive of joys as well as tragedies of life; hence, a contented life style is a life that celebrates daily provision of food and work and boldly looks ahead at the unpredictable and the unknown future, because such outlook on life is firmly grounded in faith in God and the faithfulness of God, the Creator and the Sustainer of life. The attitude of contentment should transform a person’s life and behaviour. At this point it is necessary to ponder the theological implications of living a life of contentment and the transformation it can bring.

¹ Stein, “allot, allotment,” *RHDEL* 40; Gove, “allotment,” *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* 1:58.

2. Theological Implications

Qoheleth's teaching on contentment in the book of Ecclesiastes is a theology of life governed by God's activity in the world. It is impossible to discuss the theme of contentment without highlighting the role of God in empowering a person to adopt such an attitude in life. Qoheleth speaks about God throughout his teaching, using the word **אלהים** forty times,² which is more frequent than the well-known **יהוה**, which is used thirty-eight times.³ He expounds the divine activity and involvement in humanity's existence so that people might understand what kind of life they need to lead in view of what God has allotted them. The theme of contentment is also closely connected to the theme of death in Qoheleth's teaching. Therefore, it is important to remember that the attitude of contentment is founded in the reality of death.

Qoheleth offers his teaching on contentment to his audience, because he is convinced that a life guided with the attitude of contentment is pleasing to God and worth leading in any cultural and social context. Moreover, he believes that the attitude of contentment can transform his readers' existence in this world and bring more meaning and worth to it. Further, this attitude is able to change their perception of and response to their own mortality, their work, and their relationships. The following section will offer some theological implications of Qoheleth's teaching on the attitude of contentment toward work and table fellowship. While this study has demonstrated how both concepts are connected in Qoheleth's teaching, the present treatment will focus on the theological implications of each area respectively, for the sake of emphasis and clarity.

2.1 Work

Qoheleth calls his readers to see their work as a blessing and a ministry in this world, done out of gratitude to God's grace and provision. Qoheleth's teaching on contentment elevates every day work to a higher ethical and spiritual level. Qoheleth invites his audience to find value in work itself, rather than seeking after wealth and accumulation of riches.⁴ Labour should not mean "drudgery" or "burden" that people

² Eccl 1:13; 2:24, 26; 3:10, 11, 13, 14 (x2), 15, 17, 18; 4:17; 5:1 (x2), 3, 5, 6, 17, 18 (x2), 19, 6:2 (x2); 7:13, 14, 18, 26, 29; 8:2, 12, 13, 15, 17; 9:1, 7; 11:5, 9; 12:7, 13, 14.

³ Eccl 1:2 (x5), 14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26; 3:19; 4:4, 7, 8, 16; 5:6 [Eng. 7], 9 [Eng. 10]; 6:2, 4, 9, 11, 12; 7:6, 15; 8:10, 14 (x2); 9:9 (x2); 11:8, 10; 12:8 (x3).

⁴ See the discussion on the date of composition in Chapter 1.2.6.1 Authorship. See also Choon-Leong Seow, "Rehabilitating 'the Preacher': Qoheleth's Theological Reflections in Context," in

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have to endure in order to obtain the means to do what they want and like.⁵ Qoheleth argues against seeing work as essential only to provide for the body without engaging the heart and mind of the person (Eccl 2:10; 3:13; 6:3).⁶ Rather, Qoheleth implores his audience to seek dignity and meaning in life in their work because it has been ordained by God (Eccl 5:18 [Eng. 19]; 9:10). People do not need to evaluate the results of work by the wages they get or by the amount of praise and recognition they can garner. Evaluation comes from knowing that the work is done with all of the person's might and it is done well.

This life is fleeting and passing like a breath; yet every breath is necessary to stay alive. In a similar way, work, like breathing, is meant to keep people alive and mindful about their roles as God's stewards over his creation (cf. Gen 2:15).⁷ Work is what God's people are called to do in response to what God has already done in the world. Luther states that human labour is God's mask "behind which he wants to remain concealed and do all things."⁸ Qoheleth inspires his audience to perceive their labour as a contributing part of the larger divine work and as a tangible way of connecting with God. Qoheleth implores his audience to please God with their labour, because God enables those who please him to rejoice and find pleasure in their labour (Eccl 5:18 [Eng. 19]). The lack of knowledge about the future should not deter people from being actively engaged in their work (Eccl 11:1–2, 6). Qoheleth implores his audience to understand that these very limitations should be the impetus for their vigorous commitment to working and doing their best (Eccl 11:4–6).

Qoheleth advocates having good work ethics, because such approach has the power to undermine a culture of oppression and injustice (Eccl 5:7–8 [Eng. 8–9]). People should be actively and meaningfully engaged in their work as part of their allotment which God has bestowed on them in order to have the means to practise hospitality and generosity. Such actions convey God's grace from person to person through work and provide avenues for people to create a culture saturated by the

The Papers of the Henry Luce III Fellows in Theology (Vol. 4; ed. Matthew Zyniewicz; Pittsburgh: Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, 2000), 91-116.

⁵ The English word "labour" has the same etymology as the Latin word *laboro* which means "to exert oneself in any way, take pain, suffer from strain." See P. G. W. Glare, ed., "laboro," *OLD* 1:1091; See also Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 9.

⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas' reflection on work which demonstrates a subservient role of work to the life of contemplation of God. See Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, Q. 182, A. 2, 3, 4.

⁷ See also Ben Witherington III, *Work: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 81-82; Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 69.

⁸ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 14:114.

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divine grace, a culture of interdependence and support (cf. Eccl 4:9–12). Ben Witherington states, “Work done by those in the image of God should mirror the creative, sustaining, and redeeming work of God; indeed, it should be an attempt to be God’s co-labourers in these enterprises.”⁹ Qoheleth calls his readers to adopt a view of work which would enable them to flourish. It would also build harmonious relationships between God and humanity, and within the community of God’s people.¹⁰

2.2 Table Fellowship

Qoheleth invites his audience to consider a connection between eating and the spiritual condition of their beings. In his teaching, he assigns a higher value to food than just nourishing human bodies so that they may continue their worldly existence. Qoheleth speaks of eating and drinking as a gift of a close relationship that God has given humanity (cf. Eccl 2:24–25), alluding to the Creation account which states: “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food” (Gen 1:29). In creating humanity God has provided the means for his creatures to be alive; Qoheleth calls his readers to remember and always be mindful of the fact that eating has been created to foster community and fellowship around the table and to be a sign of the presence of God (Eccl 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20]).¹¹

Eating is an integral part of holistic living because one’s attitude to food reflects one’s faith in God. Food constituted the first divine gift to humanity, and the first sin took place in the context of eating. Adam and Eve saw the fruit of the tree of knowledge “good for food” (Gen 3:6a) and disobedience entered human life through a simple meal (Gen 3:6b–7).¹² Yet, one should not think of eating as just a common meal because God specifically outlined for the first human beings what was good for food and what was forbidden (Gen 1:29; 2:16–17). By prescribing a diet, God intended to help humanity keep their desires simple (eating, drinking, resting) in order

⁹ Witherington, *Work*, 163.

¹⁰ See also Darrell Cosden, *The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 117.

¹¹ Stevens, *Down-to-Earth Spirituality*, 29; Simon Holt, “Eating,” in *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity: An A-to-Z Guide to Following Christ in Every Aspect of Life* (Robert Banks and R. Paul Stevens, eds.; Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 322–28; Brown, “Whatever Your Hand Finds to Do,” 283.

¹² Stevens, *Down-to-Earth Spirituality*, 35.

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to avoid an unnecessary growth of their appetites beyond what is needed which would lead to autonomy, independence and becoming their own gods. Therefore, the punishment for disobedience was set in the context of eating as well: "...cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you will eat from it all the day of your life" (Gen 3:17).¹³

Qoheleth calls his readers to simplify their desires and focus on what is truly necessary for their survival (eating, drinking, and resting; Eccl 2:24–26; 3:12–13; 5:17–19 [Eng. 18–20]; 9:7–10) in order to fall in line with God's plan for his created world. Qoheleth also encourages his audience to rely on God who will take care of their needs and to live with an attitude of contentment and appreciation for the allotment God has already given them (Eccl 2:10, 2:24–26; 3:13; 5:17–18 [Eng. 18–19]). Living with such mindset enables his audience to be the people of obedience and faith, who recognize the every day's blessing of manna, just as the Israelites did in their forty years of wandering in the desert (Ex 16). The daily gathering of manna served as a reminder of God's presence, provision, and pledge of the Promised Land "flowing with milk and honey" (Ex 13:5; Nub 13:27; Deut 6:3).¹⁴

Qoheleth teaches us that food is not just eating and drinking. Alexander Schmemmann states,¹⁵

A meal is still a rite—the last 'natural sacrament' of family and friendship, of life that is more than 'eating' and 'drinking.' To eat is still something more than to maintain bodily functions. People may not understand what that 'something more' is, but they nevertheless desire to celebrate it. They are still hungry and thirsty for sacramental life.

Table fellowship makes people vulnerable and prone to show their true nature (Eccl 5:11 [Eng. 12], 16 [Eng. 17]; 9:7–10). The three strangers to whom Abraham has shown hospitality bless Abraham and Sarah by prophesying the birth of their son, Isaac, after they have enjoyed a meal together (Gen 18:1–15). Esau disregards his birthright over a bowl of stew, because for him without food even God's promise is meaningless (Gen 25:27–35).

Qoheleth encourages his audience to regard table fellowship as part of their religious calling in life. At the table they are given an opportunity to display the

¹³ Leon R. Kass, *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 208-209.

¹⁴ Holt, "Eating," 324.

¹⁵ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), 16.

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character of God through joy and goodness (e.g. Eccl 2:24–25; 8:15). Table fellowship is a place of ministry, because hospitality, according to Qoheleth, is God’s people’s way of sharing the gifts that God has given them with those whom they meet every day (Eccl 11:1–2) and living out their faith in God’s future provision (Eccl 2:25).¹⁶ Above all table fellowship is a time of communion with God, when believers remember the One who has created and provided for them and give thanks to their God for meeting their needs. Qoheleth encourages his readers to think of eating as celebrating their lives in the presence of the Most High God! (Eccl 9:7)¹⁷

3. Suggestions for Further Research

It is my hope that this thesis will open new avenues to study other passages in the book of Ecclesiastes that the scope of this research did not allow me to engage. For example, I have briefly mentioned Qoheleth’s views on suffering and injustice (Eccl 4:1–4) when discussing Qoheleth’s views on death in Chapter 2. It would be worth pursuing further what Qoheleth has to say about finding profit and living a good life in the midst of oppressive circumstances (Eccl 3:16–17; 4:13–16; 7:7, 15–18; 8:10–14). His thoughts on oppression and injustice are important in developing an attitude of contentment and strengthening one’s faith in God’s care and justice.

I have also briefly mentioned Qoheleth’s views towards authorities and kingship (Eccl 5:7–8 [Eng. 8–9]) in Chapter 3 when dealing with the meaning of the word יִרְרָן “profit.” Other passages that address this issue (Eccl 8:2–9; 10:4–7, 16–17, 20) can be examined in detail along the lines of the theme of contentment to demonstrate how the attitude of contentment informs and influences the attitude of purposeful submission to authorities.

Comparative studies between Ecclesiastes and wider wisdom literature may be brought to bear on our understanding of contentment in Qoheleth’s teaching. For example, in Eccl 7:25–29 Qoheleth seems to personify wisdom and folly in this passage and presents them in terms similar to those found in the book of Proverbs

¹⁶ Sharing a meal is a very important event in the Scriptures. Abraham shows hospitality and offers a meal to three strangers at Mamre (Gen 18:2–8); God sustains his people in the wilderness for forty years by giving them manna (Ex 16:32–36); the widow Zarephath shares her last provision with Elijah in the act of hospitality (1 Kgs 17:9–16). See also Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 24–35; Patricia Kerr, “Hospitality,” in *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity: An A-to-Z Guide to Following Christ in Every Aspect of Life* (Robert Banks and R. Paul Stevens, eds.; Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 505–510; Stevens, *Down-to-Earth Spirituality*, 38–39.

¹⁷ Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 14.

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(e.g. 6:23–26; 7:10–27; 8:1–9:12, 13–18; 23:27–28). In this passage Qoheleth brings together the elements of death, the role of God, and the idea of living a good life before God. In Qoheleth's teaching these elements influence and form an attitude of contentment. Qoheleth appears to be content with the situation he is describing. However, further studies could elucidate the meaning of Qoheleth's words in Eccl 7:28.

Not much work has been done on the theme of contentment. It would be encouraging to trace the development of the theme of contentment through the wider corpus of the Old Testament wisdom literature. I have used a number of examples from the book of Job, Psalms, and Proverbs to show similarities in Qoheleth's views of brevity of human existence, death, and the role of God in this world. Further research might show, for example, other ways in which each of these books develop a theme of contentment and then compare these findings with Qoheleth's teaching. In addition, it would be informative to examine how the theme of contentment is formed and then developed throughout the Old Testament. It will also be beneficial to investigate the theology of contentment in Scripture and the relationship between the book of Ecclesiastes and other biblical books.

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