In the Wrong Place:
Qohelet’s Despairing Social Justice with Consideration to the
King, Wealth, and Creation

by

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Wycliffe College
and the Biblical Department of the Toronto School of Theology
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Master of Arts in Theology
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Abstract
This thesis is an exegetical study of social justice passages in the Book of Ecclesiastes. The aim of the study is to determine whether or not Qohelet is despairing in his reflections about injustice and oppression. To answer this, six passages are examined, divided into three primary and three secondary passages. The three primary passages are 3:16–22; 4:1-3; and 5:7–8 (Eng 8–9), in which Qohelet explicitly mentions injustice or oppression. The three secondary passages are 7:7; 7:15–18; and 8:14–15, in which he is more terse and abstract in his comments. In addition, considerations of passages that deal with the king and political realm, wealth and possessions, and death within creation are surveyed to understand better Qohelet’s writing on the issue of injustice.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Qohelet laments solitary misery, and upholds the strength of community. I have found such strength with a number of people.

There are those who guided me through my early academic years, instilling a love of theology and scholarship, and who prove that the academy and the Church are not separate worlds. Thanks to Dr. Van Johnson for being who he is, Dr. Jonathan Kienzler for sharing his heart and mind and helping me navigate my academic path, as well as the rest of the faculty and staff at Vanguard College in Edmonton, AB for providing me with a great foundation.

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Lastly, I would not have been able to write this without the love and support of my family and friends. Mark and Pamela MacKnight, Rachel and Jeremy Gifford, Kirstyn Krause, and others have encouraged me every step of the way. I thank God for such wonderful community.
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## ABREVIATIONS

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<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AB</td>
<td>The Anchor Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACCS</td>
<td>Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bib</td>
<td><em>Biblica</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSac</td>
<td><em>Bibliotheca Sacra</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>BTB</td>
<td><em>Biblical Theology Bulletin</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BZAW</td>
<td>Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die altestamentliche Wissenschaft</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBQ</td>
<td><em>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HCOT</td>
<td>Historical Commentary on the Old Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS</td>
<td><em>Hebrew Studies</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICC</td>
<td>The International Critical Commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>JBL</td>
<td><em>Journal of Biblical Literature</em></td>
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<td>Abbreviation</td>
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<tr>
<td>JSOT</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</td>
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<tr>
<td>JSOTSup</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series</td>
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<tr>
<td>LXX</td>
<td>Septuagint</td>
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<tr>
<td>MT</td>
<td>Masoretic Text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NASB</td>
<td>New American Standard Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCB</td>
<td>New Century Bible Commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>NICOT</td>
<td>New International Commentary on the Old Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBO</td>
<td>Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTL</td>
<td>Old Testament Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>RE</td>
<td><em>Religious Education</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>SBLDS</td>
<td>SBL Dissertation Series</td>
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<tr>
<td>SJOT</td>
<td><em>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>THOTC</td>
<td>The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>TJ</td>
<td><em>Trinity Journal</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTC</td>
<td>The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UBSHS</td>
<td>UBS Handbook Series</td>
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<tr>
<td>VT</td>
<td><em>Vetus Testamentum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WBC</td>
<td>Word Biblical Commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZAW</td>
<td><em>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</em></td>
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INTRODUCTION

When searching the Christian Scriptures for teaching on social justice issues, one is not likely to look at wisdom literature. This is partly due to the different perspective wisdom literature offers in comparison to the rest of Scripture, a perspective that often focuses emphatically on retribution.¹ Instead of law and instruction about God’s design, or prophetic utterances calling people to repent of injustices and turn back to God’s design, the wisdom literature records the sages’ observations on creation and human experience.² They do not write about God’s saving acts in history. The prominence of the natural world in this literature could be because wisdom writing was more popular in the post-exilic community who experienced a failure of salvation history.³ That wisdom writers didn’t record historic events, but portrayed more archetypal scenarios with universal reach, is beneficial to such a study as it provides easy application for readers today.⁴

Even within the wisdom literature, one is more likely to turn to Proverbs or Job for material about social justice. Qohelet is understandably overlooked as he has the least to say, and though he does prescribe enjoyment of life, he gives no hope in overcoming injustice.⁵ The purpose of this study is to look at what Qohelet has to say about justice and oppression in a single analysis. Is he trapped in total despair? Does he offer any perspectives and insights for

¹ Michael V. Fox, A Time to Tear Down & A Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 59.
³ Further, Qohelet frames his observations as occurring יָעֵבְרָה, a signature idiom for Qohelet, occurring 29 times in this book and absent from the rest of the MT (J. Gerald Janzen, “Qoheleth on Life [Under the Sun],” CBQ 70 [2008]: 465). It literally means “under the sun” but shows that he is commenting about the observable world.
the reader? What is his solution or response to injustice and oppression? How do these issues factor into his teachings as a whole?

To address these questions, I will conduct an exegetical study of six passages scattered throughout Qohelet’s book in which he addresses this topic. I have divided the passages into primary passages and secondary passages. The three main passages that speak about injustice and oppression are 3:16–22; 4:1–3; and 5:7–8 (Eng 8–9). They are terse, but they are distinct from the surrounding contexts and they address issues of social justice directly. The three secondary passages are 7:7; 7:15–18; and 8:14–15. Whereas the primary passages delve into more concrete issues of justice and oppression accompanied by some meaningful discussion, these passages speak about the issues with greater brevity and abstraction.

In 3:16–22, Qohelet observes wickedness where there should be justice, and where there should be righteousness, he finds wickedness. Immediately following this, Qohelet observes acts of oppression and the tears of the oppressed, stating that there is no one to comfort them (4:1–3). Next, Qohelet instructs the reader not to be shocked at witnessing oppression and injustice (5:7–8 [Eng 8–9]). In the secondary passages, oppression and bribes corrupt the heart (7:7), and Qohelet complains about the failure of proper retribution (7:15–18; 8:15). In each of these, Qohelet observes people in the wrong place according to his expectations.

Qohelet’s writings about injustice are not isolated from the rest of his teaching. To this end, three considerations will be examined in these passages and the book as a whole. The first consideration is how Qohelet writes about the king and political power. The second is what he writes about wealth and possessions. The final consideration is death as part of creation, about which Qohelet has a lot to say. Each of these aspects play a role in the injustice passages and in Qohelet’s thought in general.
In all of this, Qohelet’s distinctive frustration and despair are present in his writing about injustice and oppression, where he comments about how injustice is inevitable, present, frustrating, and without solution, but that life is still worth living.

**Procedure and Methodology**

I have organized the thesis as follows:

**Chapter One: Translation and Exegesis of Primary Passages**

The basis for the exegetical study is my translation of the Hebrew Text. In the first chapter I translate the three primary passages (3:16–22; 4:1–3; 5:7–8 [Eng 8–9]) based on *BHS*. In addition to the apparatus notes in *BHS*, I compare the MT with other ancient versions. I have consulted different grammars and lexicons listed in the bibliography, as well as translations offered in modern commentaries. I have provided detailed notes that explain how I arrived at my translation, and what resources I consulted in making translational choices. Immediately following the translation of each of these passages I provide my exegetical work. Here I comment on the Hebrew text as well as previous scholarship and interpretation.

**Chapter Two: Translation and Exegesis of Secondary Passages**

Here I employ the same methods and organization of the first chapter to secondary passages (7:7; 7:15–18; 8:14–15).

**Chapter Three: Considerations of the King, Wealth, and Creation**

I have divided the third chapter into three sections for the three considerations: king, wealth, and death. For each consideration I provide a summary of that aspect found in the thesis passages, and then a survey of other relevant texts throughout Qohelet’s book before offering concluding thoughts.

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6 Such as the LXX, Targum, Peshitta, Latin Vulgate, etc.
In the conclusion, insights gained through the exegetical study as well as the
considerations chapter are brought together to summarize all Qohelet has to say about the subject
of injustice and oppression. Implications for the academic and modern faith communities are
also discussed.
CHAPTER ONE:  
TRANSLATION AND EXEGESIS OF PRIMARY PASSAGES

I have opted for a more literal approach to translation. Although this results in a more wooden translation–appearing awkward at times–it reflects the word order and syntax of the original Hebrew. I present the MT as it is found in BHS for convenience, but I note any deviations from the text in the translation footnotes. In this first chapter I have translated each of the primary passages and provided my exegesis directly following the translation of each passage.

I. Qohelet 3:16–22

A. Translation

16 וְﬠָוֹד.
17 וְﬠָוֹד.
18 וְﬠָוֹד.
19 וְﬠָוֹד.
20 וְﬠָוֹד.
21 וְﬠָוֹד.
22 וְﬠָוֹד.

And furthermore¹ I have seen under the sun:

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¹ וְﬠָוֹד can mean “ongoing” or “continually.” Krüger cites Gallying (Kurt Galling, “Das Rätsel der Zeit: Im Urteil Kohelets [Koh 3:1–15],” ZThK 58 [1961]: 1–15) as translating it as “constantly” and Murphy follows with an adverbial understanding, translating it “continually” (Roland E. Murphy, Ecclesiastes, WBC, vol. 23A [Dallas: Word Books, 1992], 29). However, Krüger suggests that, following v. 10, it is speaking to a further observation, similar to 4:1 and 4:7 (Thomas Krüger, Qoheleth: A Commentary, trans. O. C. Dean Jr., Hermeneia [Minneapolis:
17 I, myself,7 said in my heart,8
   “The righteous and the wicked9 God will judge:10
   For there is a time for11 every matter and every deed there.”12

Fortress Press, 2004], 81). Whybray earlier suggested that it was a connecting particle added by a later editor to connect sections that are otherwise separate (R. N. Whybray, Ecclesiastes, NCB [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 77).

2 The LXX and Vulgate take ἡ ἀσεβής (the Peshitta reflects this as well), but the athnabh separates it from the first clause (C. L. Seow, Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, AB, vol. 18C [Toronto: Doubleday, 1997], 166). The NJPS follows the Masoretes in formatting this as a distinct saying. The parallelism and structure in the Hebrew is clear and intentional.

3 Lohfink translates each ἀσεβ谁都 “lawlessness” (Norbert Lohfink, Qoheleth, A Continental Commentary, trans. Sean McEvenue [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003], 63). While this fits the context of a court of law, I have kept the more general translation of “wickedness.”

4 The LXX reads τοῦ δικαίου and the Targum נבذهא (“the righteous”), which also presumes a connection to “the wicked,” but the MT is preferable (Seow, Ecclesiastes, 166).

5 The LXX’s ὁ ἁρφᾶξ and the Targum’s נבذهא יתב א (“wickedness”) but this is unnecessary considering the similar repetition in 4:1 (“none to comfort them”) (Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 77; Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 30). The unique spelling here is the result of being in pausal form (Seow, Ecclesiastes, 166).

6 As in 1:16, the pronoun may be pleonastic (Tremper Longman III, The Book of Ecclesiastes, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 83). Waltke and O’Connor discuss the sense achieved here by placing the pronoun after the verb (IBHS 296; cf. GKC §135b).

7 Translated literally here, this phrase is common in Qohelet’s reflection passages (1:16; 2:11; 3:18).

8 The NASB seeks to clarify this by reading “the righteous man and the wicked man” but this is unnecessary. The definite article here is a general article, referring to an entire class of people or things (GKC §126m; Williams §92; IBHS 244; cf. BHRG 24.4.4[iid]).

9 While the NJPS reads “God will doom,” שפתי does not need to mean condemnation or punishment, but rather impartial judicial decisions, and may be speaking of the present world (Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 77) and not a future eschatological event (Seow, Ecclesiastes, 166), although Gordis presents it as a future retribution (Robert Gordis, Koheleth—The Man and his World: A Study of Ecclesiastes, 3rd ed. [New York: Schocken Books, 1968], 234).


11 The most difficult word in this passage is the שפתי found at the end of this verse. The LXX keeps “there” but moves ἀκεί to the beginning of the next verse. The Peshitta keeps “there”
I, myself, said in my heart, "Concerning humans, surely God tests them, to show that they are but beasts, they themselves."

but understands it with “a time” and the NJPS also renders “for there is a time.” The Targum, followed by the Vulgate, assumes “there” or “then” in speaking of a future time, possibly even Sheol or the other world (Gordis, Koheleth, 235) but this is problematic and unconvincing (Seow, Ecclesiastes, 166–67). Whitley also interprets שָׁאֶל as an asseverative particle, with the nuance of “too, also” (Whitley, Koheleth, 36). Some commentators emend שָׁאֶל, which dramatically changes the reading of the verse, as reflected by the NRSV “for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work” (George Aaron Barton, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes, ICC [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1959], 107, 111; R. B. Y. Scott, Proverbs • Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, AB, vol. 18 [Garden City: Doubleday, 1965], 222; and others). Still others connect שָׁאֶל with the previous verse where “wickedness” is found (Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 78; Graham S. Ogden, Qoheleth, 2nd ed. Readings: A New Biblical Commentary [Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007], 65). It can also be understood generally with “For there is a time for every matter, and concerning every deed there/under the sun” (Peter Enns, Ecclesiastes, THOTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011], 57). I take it to refer back to the place where wickedness is observed in v. 16.

Literally “concerning the matter of,” the phrase על הדבר is found also in 7:14 (with a slight variation), 8:2 and in Psa 110:4 (“after the order of Melchizedek”). It has a direct linguistic connection with the Aramaic of Dan 2:30 but is also related to the earlier Hebrew על הדבר, which means “because of, concerning” (Whitley, Koheleth, 36. cf. Krüger, Qoheleth, 82; Seow, Ecclesiastes, 167; Gordis, Koheleth, 235–36; James L. Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, OTL [London: SCM Press LTD, 1988], 102–103). Fredricks finds more cognates with early Biblical Hebrew than with late Biblical Hebrew (Daniel C. Fredericks, Qoheleth’s Language: Re-Evaluating Its Nature and Date [Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 1988], 204–206).

Literally “the sons of mankind,” I have translated it as “humanity” throughout for inclusivity and ease of reading.

Gordis has rightly pointed out that לְבָרָם is an ancient crux (Gordis, Koheleth, 236). It appears to be ב + qal infinitive construct from בָּרָה with a 3ms pronominal suffix. While this root originally meant “to purify,” late Hebrew expands this to mean “to select, choose.” This is reflected in the LXX’s διακρινεῖ, with close variations found in the Targum and Vulgate. The Peshitta took the root as בָּרָה, meaning “to create” (Whitley, Koheleth, 36). One would expect a finite verb in this clause (Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 78), and this has led some to suggest that it is an emphatic or assertive ב meaning “surely, indeed.” (Gordis, Koheleth, 236; Seow, Ecclesiastes, 137; cf. Longman, The Book of Ecclesiastes, 128; Whitley, Koheleth, 37). This could justify the translation “Surely God tests them.” Aron Pinker argues for לְבָרָה מַעָלָה, meaning “apart from God,” but this is unconvincing (Aron Pinker, “Qohelet 3,18–A Test?” SJOT 23 [2009]: 282–96). Fox leaves this untranslated (Michael V. Fox, Qohelet and his Contradictions, JSOTSup 71 [Decatur: Almond, Press 1989]. 196; idem, A Time to Tear Down & A Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 214).
19 For the fate\(^{21}\) of humans\(^{22}\) and\(^{23}\) the fate of the beasts, there is one fate\(^{24}\) for them: as this one dies, so that one dies, and there is but one life breath\(^{25}\) for each; there is no\(^{26}\) advantage\(^{27}\) of humans from the beast; all\(^{28}\) is transient.\(^{29}\)

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17 too is problematic. Whitley notes the Targum and connects this with the opening which would read “But I recognized” (Whitley, Koheleth, 37). Other versions read a hiphil גלואות “to make known,” or “to show” (LXX = καὶ τοῦ δεινοῦ); cf. the Vulgate, Peshitta, Jerome (see the discussions in Whitley, Koheleth, 37; Barton, Ecclesiastes, 112; Seow, Ecclesiastes, 167; Krüger, Qoheleth, 82). This is the preferable reading.

18 The relative pronoun ש here is found alongside אŝר and is a common feature of Qohelet. Here the use of לְאֵם is unique (GKC §36).

19 The Hebrew simply reads “beast” but I am adding emphasis here to Qohelet’s comparison. He is removing any majesty there is in being human by comparing it with being “but a beast.”

20 Seow suggests that תְּפֹֽאָה be deleted as dittography (Seow, Ecclesiastes, 168), and Fox removes לְאֵם, seeing no function for it in the sentence (Fox, A Time to Tear Down & a Time to Build Up, 216). However these final words show playful alliteration on the part of Qohelet (Gordis, Koheleth, 237; Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 30; Enns, Ecclesiastes, 58). Krüger suggests this means that while God has set humans apart from beast, humans act towards themselves just as beasts (Krüger, Qoheleth, 82). Whitley suggests an emphatic ב, ending the verse with “that they are beasts, they indeed” (Whitley, Koheleth, 38). Although it may be unlikely to have two emphatic lameds in the same verse, the alliteration does emphasize Qohelet’s point to this end.

21 It is best to read both instances of פָּרַק as construct forms by pointing them with a serē instead of the segol as found in 2:15 and as the LXX, Peshitta, Targum, and Vulgate read it (Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 103; Seow, Ecclesiastes, 168; Krüger, Qoheleth, 83). Murphy suggests the reason for the pointing here is so the Masoretes could avoid Qohelet’s implications (Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 30).

22 See note 15.

23 Krüger assumes it is a comparative ו (GKC §161a) and renders the sentence “There is a fate of human beings and there is a fate of animals, yet both have the same fate” (Krüger, Qoheleth, 82).

24 Multiple manuscripts do not have the ו conjunction and this is reflected in the LXX and the Targum; this supports taking the first two words מִכְּרוּ הָא as construct form (Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 30). However, the ו does not need to be deleted if it is understood with Gordis as emphasizing the predicate (Gordis, Koheleth, 237). Seow thinks it is a wāw apodosis (GKC §143d) introducing a casus pendens (Seow, Ecclesiastes, 168; Krüger, Qoheleth, 82).

25 אֱלֹהֵי here is referring to the breath or spirit of life (Gordis, Koheleth, 238; Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 79; Enns, Ecclesiastes, 58).

26 The negation פִּלְפִּל is found at the end of the Hebrew clause, adding great emphasis (Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 79; Seow, Ecclesiastes, 168).

27 only occurs once in Qohelet and twice more in the Hebrew Bible (Prov 14:23; 21:3) but is related to תְּפֹֽאָה (1:3) and תְרֶם ( Cf. Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 79; Seow, Ecclesiastes, 168).
20. All go to one place; All come to be\textsuperscript{30} from the dust and all return to the dust.
21. Who\textsuperscript{31} knows\textsuperscript{32} the breath\textsuperscript{33} of humans, whether\textsuperscript{34} it ascends upwards; and the breath of the beast, whether it descends downwards to the earth?
22. But I have seen that there is nothing better than that humankind be glad in its works\textsuperscript{35} for it is its portion,\textsuperscript{36} for:
   who will bring one\textsuperscript{37} to see what will be after one?\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{28} here might not be general as it is in 1:2, but means “both,” as in v. 20, therefore referring to the fate of both human and beast (Fox, \textit{Qoheleth and his Contradictions}, 199).
\textsuperscript{29} is an important word for understanding Qohelet. Here it carries not the literal meaning of “vapour” or “breath,” but the metaphysical “ephemeral” or “transient” (Crenshaw, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 104; Whybray, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 79).
\textsuperscript{30} “become” but for a closer parallel to “All go” I have translated it “come to be,” speaking of how a person comes to exist.
\textsuperscript{31} Multiple Hebrew manuscripts have מִי, which is reflected in the Targum and the LXX, but the \textit{waw} is not necessary.
\textsuperscript{32} This expression could anticipate a negative response or be translated “No one knows” cf. 1:3; 2:2; 2:19; 3:22; 6:8; 6:12 (Crenshaw, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 104; Murphy, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 31).
\textsuperscript{33} Whybray says the רוח should be translated the same here as in v. 19, speaking of the breath or the spirit of the person (Whybray, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 80). Longman points out that “spirit” would not work in the context of v. 19 but could be used in this verse (Longman, \textit{The Book of Ecclesiastes}, 130).
\textsuperscript{34} It is well accepted that the text should be emended to read as indirect questions and not definite articles. תִּרְצֵֿי would then be pointed with ל and בּוֹרִיִם with ר. This is attested in many manuscripts as well as other ancient versions such as the LXX, Peshitta, Vulgate, and Targum. It is also possible to read the current MT forms as interrogatives GKC §100m (Gordis, \textit{Koheleth}, 238; Seow, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 168; Crenshaw, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 104). Some note that the pointing as definite articles could have been done by later scribes or editors on orthodox or dogmatic grounds (Whybray, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 80; Murphy, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 31; Lohfink, \textit{Qoheleth}, 63; Krüger, \textit{Qoheleth}, 82).
\textsuperscript{35} Crenshaw suggests that בּמִים here is equivalent to בּמִים in 2:24 (Crenshaw, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 105; Whybray, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 80, 63).
\textsuperscript{36} As in 2:10, מִי does not indicate an inheritance or assigned land, but rather the area of human existence and all that has been given for them to do. Qohelet uses it in a positive sense (Seow, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 168, 132; Whybray, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 80, 54).
\textsuperscript{37} The question here functions similarly to מִי יִדְעֶֿךְ in v. 21 in that it anticipates a negative response (Crenshaw, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 105; Whybray, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 81; cf. Ogden, \textit{Qoheleth}, 67).
\textsuperscript{38} Literally this is “after/behind him” (Krüger, \textit{Qoheleth}, 82). Gordis proposes an adverb with a petrified suffix (Gordis, \textit{Koheleth}, 238) but it is more likely an ellipsis to be rendered “after his death” (Crenshaw, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 105).
B. Exegesis

The first passage is the longest. It speaks of injustice in the law courts, the very place where there should be justice. However, Qohelet does not present any adequate solution or position of hope. The observation is followed by a statement that God will judge all: the righteous and the wicked. However, this statement seems out of place, for as we will see, elsewhere he will again write that he sees no just retribution in life (7:15; 8:14). This initial statement, that there is wickedness where there should be justice, is accompanied by a comparison of human and beast, with the conclusion that they share the same fate. This sobering observation is not without resolve, even if Qohelet’s only word of advice on the matter is to be glad in one’s work, for no one can see what will come after death. While our main purpose in looking at this text is to understand Qohelet’s observation about injustice and his response to it, it is also necessary to look at other interpretive issues in this passage, including God’s judgment, and the comparison of human and beast.

The passage describes things “under the sun,” a staple of Qohelet. This frames his observation as being within the realm of all human existence, all that is done on the earth. It is all-encompassing. In v. 16, “there” refers to the courts, or the place of law. It is there that one expects to find or receive justice and righteousness, for that was where the public came for justice. Instead, Qohelet observes wickedness. While the Midrash Rabbah presents a number of examples offered by different Rabbis connecting this verse with other passages in the Old Testament and Israel’s history, it is easy to see this as a general observation, one that does not

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speak conclusively of a particular point in time.\textsuperscript{40} We should also note that there is great emphasis through the repetition of הָתַּשׁ, just as Qohelet uses repetition for emphasis in 4:1.\textsuperscript{41} In the realm of human existence, Qohelet has seen wickedness where he expects to find justice and righteousness.\textsuperscript{42}

The two difficulties that follow this observation are the statement that God will judge the righteous and the wicked, and the comparison of human and beast. First, considering the rest of Qohelet’s complaints throughout the book, it is odd to find the reassurance of divine justice here. It is clear that any such justice or retribution does not take place in the present life, although Qohelet would not be expected to believe in the afterlife.\textsuperscript{43} Instead, Qohelet claims that there is an appointed time for every matter and every deed, an allusion to 3:1. There is much discussion about this part of the verse. The phrase translated literally is awkward, and there is uncertainty about what to do with שָׁם. A number of commentators read it as meaning “appointed” and Schoors sees this as most probable, unless “there” is referring to the courts mentioned in v. 16.\textsuperscript{44} I do see a connection between this verse and the poem that begins in 3:1, but if Qohelet wanted to say clearly that God also appointed a time for proper judgment, he could have done so with clearer parallels or connections in the Hebrew. This passage starts with the observation of injustice in the courts, where we find the repetition of הרָשׁ. Though it is in a different form, looking back at the observation in the previous verse, it is easy to see the connection in verse 17. God will judge every matter and every deed that takes place in the unjust law courts.

\textsuperscript{40} Murphy, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 36.
\textsuperscript{41} See footnote 65.
\textsuperscript{42} I examine this verse in connection to political power in Chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{43} He mentions Sheol in 9:10, but here speaks of life ending with a return to the dust from which life came, and does the same in 12:7 as well.
\textsuperscript{44} Antoon Schoors, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, HCOT (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 293–94.
Following Whybray, it is easy to see the emphatic thrust in the Hebrew word order. It is the righteous and the wicked whom God will judge.\(^45\) We need not see this as a later orthodox addition, or as a problem. Qohelet is striving to reconcile his wisdom tradition with the realities of life. He sees injustice where there should be justice, and sees no present, earthly consequence for this. While the wicked escape judgment in the present life, God will still judge all things at the appropriate time; it simply is not our time.\(^46\) Later, in 5:7 he will again speak of how there is no present change to the oppression seen in society. What we see is Qohelet struggling to reconcile his understanding of God and what he has been taught in the wisdom tradition with what he observes in the world. While he does not provide a thorough reconciliation of the two, he still trusts that God is at work in some way.

The next issue starts in v. 18, where God tests people to show that they are but beasts. The comparison of human and beast unsettled many early readers, leaving both Jewish and Christian interpreters to employ a variety of understandings.\(^47\) In making this comparison, Qohelet sees that both human and beast come from the dust, have the same life-breath in them, and both return to the dust. Whybray argues that Qohelet is only comparing the two on the basis of their mortality,\(^48\) and the comparison is centred on the physical reality. Such a comparison may be justified, as Qohelet is witnessing the loss of justice, and so what separation between

\(^{45}\) Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 77.
\(^{46}\) Ibid., 77–78.
\(^{47}\) Didymus the Blind clarifies that humans have reason, whereas animals do not, and Olympiodorus thinks that Qohelet is telling us to tend the spiritual over the physical. Shenoute sees this comparison as the result of human sin, and Evagrius of Pontus sees this comparison between human and beast as meaning there is no difference between the righteous and the ungodly until the final judgment. Ambrose goes further and mentions the resurrection after stating that all things crumble into the earth (J. Robert Wright, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, ACCS, vol. 9 [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005], 232–33).
\(^{48}\) Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 79.
human and beast is there? All will die. The interpretation of this, however, hinges on our understanding of God testing humans in v. 18.

As mentioned in note 16, there are some issues in translating לְבָרָם. If taken as God testing humans, then it would be reasonable that such a comparison between human and beast would bring about something that was unknown beforehand. In this regard, God would be finding a result from the comparison, one that he did not know beforehand. Another option is to understand it as “set apart,” meaning God set humans apart, but even here we have more than one option in understanding this. Kruger gives two interpretations, both looking back at the primeval story. Either humans are set apart, but their behaviour is no different from beasts, i.e., they commit injustice, or they are only set apart in being able to know that they are no different from beasts.⁴⁹ I follow Whybray in understanding the qal infinitive as referring to humans, that they will see something as a result of this testing.⁵⁰ This is preferable because it means that it is humans, and not God, who are ignorant of this knowledge.

The action taken here by God is to show humans that they are no better than beasts. The comparison speaks of how both humans and beasts come from dust, have the same breath, and return to dust. There is no sense of morality or justice within them that challenges this fact. As mentioned, Qohelet would not have many thoughts about the afterlife, and yet in this passage Qohelet claims “all go to one place,” and that no one will be made to see what comes after them. The first, that all go to one place, refers to death; as Enns notes, Qohelet frequently uses מָרָם with connotations of death.⁵¹ The following line also speaks of death, and possibly refers to Sheol, as

⁴⁹ Krüger, Qoheleth, 92.
⁵⁰ Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 78.
⁵¹ Enns, Ecclesiastes, 58.
in 9:10.\textsuperscript{52} He speaks of death but has not yet resolved when God will judge all, leaving the possibility of considering something after death. The passage concludes with “for who will bring one to see what will be after him?” Seow relates it to an Akkadian phrase “after him/after his departure (from life),” being certain it is a point after death and not simply a future point in a person’s life. He sees evidence for this in the Targum.\textsuperscript{53} That it is an eschatological future is also shared by other authors.\textsuperscript{54} Qohelet is arguing that no one knows what will happen upon death, phrasing the question “who knows” to express skepticism.\textsuperscript{55} Still, he leaves open the possibility that there is something afterwards, maybe even a time when God will judge both the righteous and the wicked. However cynical all this may be, Qohelet still concludes that humans should be happy in their activities, for there is no way to know what will come as a result of the injustice, the testing, and the comparison. The conclusion is similar to one he has made before (2:24; 3:12–13) but here has a slight variation in reasoning.\textsuperscript{56}

\section*{II. Qohelet 4:1–3}

\textit{A. Translation}

\begin{quote}
ָוָ֣שַׁ֤בְתִּֽי אֲנִ֗י וָאֶרְאֶה֙ אֶת־כָּל־הָ֣ﬠֲשֻׁקִ֔ים אֲשֶׁ֥ר נַﬠֲשִׂ֖ים תַּ֣חַת הַשָּׁ֑מֶשׁ
ורָאֵ֣ה דִּמְﬠַ֣ת הָﬠֲשֻׁקִ֗ים וְאֵ֤ין לָהֶֽם מְנַחֵ֔ם
לָהֶ֖ם וְאֵ֥ין כֹּ֔חַﬠֹֽשְׁקֵיהֶם֙
וְשַׁ֣בְחַ אֲנִ֛י אֶת־הַמֵּתִ֖ים שֶׁכְּבָ֣ר מֵ֑תוּ
שֶׁכְּבָ֣ר מֵ֑תוּ מִן־הַ֣חַיִּ֔ים אֲשֶׁ֛ר הֵ֥מָּה חַיִּ֖יםﬠֲדֶֽנָה׃

1 וְשַׁ֣בְתִּֽי אֲנִ֗י וָאֶרְאֶה֙ אֶת־כָּל־הָ֣ﬠֲשֻׁקִ֔ים אֲשֶׁ֥ר נַﬠֲשִׂ֖ים תַּ֣חַת הַשָּׁ֑מֶשׁ
ורָאֵ֣ה דִּמְﬠַ֣ת הָﬠֲשֻׁקִ֗ים וְאֵ֤ין לָהֶֽם מְנַחֵ֔ם
לָהֶ֖ם וְאֵ֥ין כֹּ֔חַﬠֹֽשְׁקֵיהֶם֙
וְשַׁ֣בְחַ אֲנִ֛י אֶת־הַמֵּתִ֖ים שֶׁכְּבָ֣ר מֵ֑תוּ
שֶׁכְּבָ֣ר מֵ֑תוּ מִן־הַ֣חַיִּ֔ים אֲשֶׁ֛ר הֵ֥מָּה חַיִּ֖יםﬠֲדֶֽנָה׃

2 וְטֹב֙ מִשְּׁנֵיהֶ֔ם אֵ֥ת אֲשֶׁר־ﬠֲדֶ֖נָה לֹ֣א הָיָ֑ה

3 וְכֹֽוָּו מַשֵּׁנִ֣י אֶת־אָשְׁרֵיהֶ֑ם לֹא הָיָ֑ה

\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{52} Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 80.
\textsuperscript{53} Seow, Ecclesiastes, 168.
\textsuperscript{54} Lohfink, Qoheleth, 35–36; Fox, Qohelet and his Contradictions, 199; Marie Maussion, Le mal, le bien et le jugement de Dieu dans le livre de Qohélet, OBO, vol. 190 (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires Fribourg, 2003), 134.
\textsuperscript{56} Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 80; Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 105. I examine the enjoyment passages in Chapter 3.
So I myself turned and observed all of the oppressions that are done under the sun; and behold:

the tears of the oppressed—but there is none to comfort them

and from the hand of their oppressors, power—but there is none to comfort them.

So I congratulated the dead who already are dead, more than the living; those who are still living.

See note 7 for use of the pronoun following a verb.

Crenshaw suggests that אָרָה is functioning adverbially here similar to Eph. 5:14 (Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 106; cf. Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 81). However, it should not be translated “again” as Qohelet has not yet mentioned or observed “oppression” (Fox, Qoheleth and his Contradictions, 201; A Time to Tear Down & a Time to Build Up, 219; Longman, The Book of Ecclesiastes, 133).

אָרָה is one of three waw consecutive verbs in Qohelet (cf. 1:17; 4:7 where we again find אָרָה) (Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 31; Seow, Ecclesiastes, 177; Krüger, Qoheleth, 82). The use of the perfect and imperfect consecutive is noted in GKC §120e.

לֹא אָרָה here carries the idea of perception or recognition (Fox, Qoheleth and his Contradictions 201; A Time to Tear Down & a Time to Build Up 219).

The root לָשֵׁק is found three times in this verse and each time carries a different nuance (Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 105). Here it is best understood as an abstract noun pointing to concrete acts of oppression (Seow, Ecclesiastes, 177). Similarly, Longman treats it as a collective plural (Longman, The Book of Ecclesiastes, 133).

Lohfink translates this entire phrase as “all that is carried out under the sun in order to exploit people,” probably as a way of dealing with the abstract form of לָשֵׁק. (Lohfink, Qoheleth, 68).

Fox suggests emending בֵּל to בֵּל מְדִּי, which renders this literal translation: “And in their oppressors’ hand is power” (Fox, Qoheleth and his Contradictions, 201; A Time to Tear Down & a Time to Build Up, 219). However, this is not attested in ancient versions (except Jerome, which may be a paraphrase [Seow, Ecclesiastes, 177–78]) and is an otherwise unconvincing emendation (Luca Mazzinghi, “The Divine Violence in the Book of Qoheleth,” Bib 90 [2009]: 545–46).

Some commentators supply a verb here (A. H. McNeile, An Introduction to Ecclesiastes, With Notes and Appendices [Cambridge: University Press, 1904], 65, 100; Seow, Ecclesiastes, 177), but the sentence can be understood from the Hebrew word order and accents. Gordis connects מְדִּי to מַעֲשֶׂה, which then yields “behold the tears, and behold the power out of the hands of their oppressors” (Gordis, Koheleth, 238; cf. Whitley, Koheleth, 39).

Scott proposes emending מַעֲשֶׂה to מְמַעֲשֵׁה on grounds of dittography (Scott, Proverbs • Ecclesiastes, 222). Others have suggested further possibilities, but there is no problem to be solved. The repetition is intentional on the part of Qohelet to add emphasis as in 3:16. (See the discussion in Seow, Ecclesiastes, 178; Whitley, Koheleth 39; Gordis, Koheleth, 239).

It is rare to find a personal pronoun following an infinitive absolute, the only other occurrence in the Hebrew Bible being Esth 9:1 (Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 106). Gordis notes the
3 But better than the two of them, is one who yet does not exist, who will not see the evil deed that is done under the sun.

B. Exegesis

Qohelet moves on to his second observation of injustice directly following the first. He observes that there is no one to comfort the oppressed, stating this twice for emphasis. There is no explanation as to the cause of the oppression other than the awkward phrase about power from the hands of the oppressors. Nor does Qohelet provide a solution to this problem, or an explanation as to why there is no one to comfort them. I think it could be in part due to the loss of public justice observed in 3:16. Instead of speaking about the oppression itself, or about the different ways it has been interpreted (Gordis, Koheleth, 239), but it is most definitely in the form of a piel infinitive absolute functioning in place of a finite verb (Krüger, Qoheleth, 82; Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 106; Seow, Ecclesiastes, 178; Ogden, Qoheleth, 70). This construction is discussed in GKC §113gg; IHG §88R5; Williams §210; IBHS 596 n60; cf. Schoors, The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words, Vol. I, 178. Whitley discusses possible connections with other Semitic languages, but does not draw any conclusions (Whitley, Koheleth, 39–41).

67 Fox says that שבעת is declarative, and therefore not to be understood as “praising” but as proclaiming as “better than” (Fox, A Time to Tear Down & A Time to Build Up, 219; cf. Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 82).

68 שַׁבֵּחַ is a hapax legmonenon along with the related שִׁבְעַת in v. 3 and has been thought to be a contraction of שִׁבַּעַת and שִׁבַּעַת (BDB). Whitley suggests that the two words have separate origins (Whitley, Koheleth, 41–42). Gordis looks at Mishnaic Hebrew to suggest old orthography (Gordis, Koheleth, 239). Still, the contraction of שִׁבַּעַת and שִׁבַּעַת seems to be the simplest and most likely understanding (Seow, Ecclesiastes, 178).

69 שִׁבַּעַת is the most difficult text of this verse. It may be the accusative of שָׁבַע in v. 2 (Barton, Ecclesiastes, 117; Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 82–83; Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 31); the Vulgate is similar in supplying the verb judicavi (cf. Krüger, Qoheleth, 82). The LXX and Peshitta both took it to be nominative (Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 106; Seow, Ecclesiastes, 178). This construction, though familiar in Mishnaic Hebrew (שָׁבַע Whitley, Koheleth, 42; Gordis, Koheleth, 239), is very rare in Biblical Hebrew (Crenshaw Ecclesiastes, 106; Whitley, Koheleth, 42).

70 For the origin of שִׁבַּעַת see note 68. The meaning of “yet” here is not perfectly clear (Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 82).

71 Seow notes how the MT has the Perfect and then uses the Peshitta and Targum to justify rendering it as “has been done” (Seow, Ecclesiastes, 178). I think context says the evil deeds are ongoing and observable.
tears of the oppressed and the fact that they receive no comfort, he goes into a “better than”
segment, making two successive claims. It is better to be dead than alive, for then one no longer
sees oppression, but further, it is better not yet to be born, or never to have existed, because then
one has no knowledge of oppression.

Hengstenberg points out that Qohelet is not complaining here, but considers the
oppression and in response offers facts. Further, Ogden sees no criticism, but a reflection of
what is wrong with the world. Still, it is easy to see some level of emotion within this passage.
There is something wrong in this life that leads Qohelet to declare it better to be dead. The
person who is not yet born is best off because he or she does not see the evil done under the sun.
To what evil acts is Qohelet referring? Though Fox ponders the possibility of interpreting this as
“the fact that people suffer oppression yet have no one to comfort them” or all the wrongful
events in life, it most likely refers to human, evil acts of oppression. It is better not to have to
witness the evil acts of oppression. While the syntax of the verse is a little unclear, I agree with
Whybray that the “general sense is not affected.” It would be troubling to have Qohelet portray
such a low view of life, but Murphy suggests this current statement is paradoxically rooted in a
“high appreciation of life. Because life is not what it should be— in the face of human oppression,
he can praise the dead and the unborn.” How one expects life to be, with justice in its proper
place and the oppressed comforted, is not how one experiences life, and so it is better not to have

72 E. W. Hengstenberg, Ecclesiastes: With Other Treatises, trans. by D. W. Simon
(Philadelphia: Smith, 1860), 122.
73 Graham S. Ogden, “The Mathematics of Wisdom,” VT 34 (1984): 448–49; see also the
discussion in Schoors, Ecclesiastes, 331.
74 Fox, A Time to Tear Down & a Time to Build Up, 220
75 Barton, Ecclesiastes, 117; E. Podechard, L'Ecclesiaste (Paris: Victor Lecoffre, 1912),
332; Ogden, Qoheleth, 330.
76 Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 83.
77 Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 38.
knowledge of this. Just as in the first passage, Qohelet gives us no solution to the issue of injustice. We receive no wisdom on how to address this within society.

III. Qohelet 5:7–8 (Eng 8–9)

A. Translation

7 If oppression of the poor and theft⁷⁸ of judgement and righteousness you see⁷⁹ in the province,⁸⁰ do not be astounded over the matter, for:
   a high one⁸¹ above a high one watches and higher ones⁸² are over them.
8 But the advantage⁸³ of a land⁸⁴ is in all⁸⁵ this:⁸⁶ (even)⁸⁷ a king by a field is served.⁸⁸

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⁷⁸ I have chosen a literal translation of גָּבֹהַּ but the meaning here is deprivation or loss of what you should have (Longman, Ecclesiastes, 157; Fox, A Time to Tear Down & a Time to Build Up, 233–34). Ogden sees this as the “violent removal of law and justice” (Ogden, Qohelet, 84).

⁷⁹ Most translators move the verb to the beginning of the verse for ease in reading, but I have kept the Hebrew order here intentionally.

⁸⁰ With the definite article, בבגדה could be referring to a proper province of Judah, maybe during the Persian period (Longman, The Book of Ecclesiastes, 157). Murphy concurs, noting that it is an Aramaic word (Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 46). Seow finds a word play involved with the root פֶּרֶשׁ, which gives this phrase a more judicial understanding and relates better with 3:16 (Seow, Ecclesiastes, 202–3).

⁸¹ The Hebrew simply has the adjective בבגדה, meaning “high,” but it is likely referring to someone who has high socioeconomic or political standing. Taken with the LXX ψηλός, it can carry the idea of an arrogant one or haughty one. Seow examines James Kugel’s assertion that בבגדה never means high official, but is unconvinced by Kugel’s conclusion and method (James Kugel, “Qohelet and Money,” CBQ 50 [1989]: 35–38; cf. Seow, Ecclesiastes, 203–4).

⁸² The plural here could be a plural of majesty but is not likely referring to God (Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 118; Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 46). It may also refer to a collective group of highest ones (GKC §124h).

⁸³ התרון can be “advantage” or “profit,” as discussed in note 27.

⁸⁴ “Land” here may be best understood in relation to the “province” in v. 7 (Fox, A Time to Tear Down & a Time to Build Up, 234).

⁸⁵ הבגד can be understood as in Gen 24:1 and 2 Sam 23:5 as “in every respect” (Fox, A Time to Tear Down & a Time to Build Up, 234; Charles H. H. Wright, The Book of Koheleth, Commonly Called Ecclesiastes: Considered in Relation to Modern Criticism and to the
Doctines of Modern Pessimism, with a Critical and Grammatical Commentary and a Revised Translation [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1888], 365; Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 46). Whitley strongly rejects this on the ground that here we are dealing with people (Whitley, Koheleth, 50). Also see the discussion in A. Schoors, The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words: A Study of the Language of Qoheleth, vol II. [Leuven: Departement Oriëntalistiek, 2004], 5–6).

86 The Ketib/Qere is interesting but not completely surprising, as discussed in GKC §32l. However, the antecedent of this pronoun is uncertain. The Ketib can be understood as a neutral “this” (Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 119; Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 46) and may refer to the “profit.” If it is read with the Masoretes, then one combines it with בַּכֹּל to translate it “in every respect” (Krüger, Qoheleth, 113). Gordis connects it with land (Robert Gordis, The Biblical Text in the Making: A Study of the Kethib-Qere [New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1972], 191, n393), but Schoors does not find this at all possible, wanting to connect it with profit or the king (Schoors, Preacher, vol. II, 34).

87 The addition of “even” helps bring clarity to my awkward translation of this verse.

88 The latter half of this verse has been termed an “insuperable crux” (Gordis, Koheleth, 250). The discussion is largely centred on the translation of נֶﬠֱבָד. Eaton summarizes different translation options (Michael A. Eaton, Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary, TOTC [Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983], 101–2). Krüger cites these and includes some other creative suggestions from other translations (Krüger, Qoheleth, 113). Murphy chooses to follow the LXX, Syriac, Theodotion, and Jerome in connecting נֶﬠֱבָד to שָׂדֶה and therefore translating, “a field that is tilled,” as does Krüger (Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 46; Krüger, Qoheleth, 113). Whitley instead connects נֶﬠֱבָד with מֶלֶ and argues for a middle voice, i.e., that the king is served or is benefited from the field (Whitley, Koheleth, 51). To achieve this translation, Whitley also has to understand the לְ prefix to שָׂדֶה as having the force of “from,” which Crenshaw finds unconvincing (Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 119). One can still translate the לְ prefix as “of” and use the understanding that a king can find benefit of a field.
B. Exegesis

We now turn to the final primary passage. Murphy says that these two verses have no connection with the verses that precede them. Longman, however, sees a similarity to the preceding unit (4:17–5:6 [Eng 5:1–7]), as they are both instructions. While the first unit “urged caution before divine authority, the present one urges resignation before human authority.” Like he did in 3:16, Qohelet speaks of oppression of the poor in the province, that is, in the state. Of the two verses, only the first makes any sense. Within the first verse, it is relatively easy to understand what the oppression is, and to whom it is happening. It is speaking of the poor, the lowest in the society, and the oppression is the theft of justice within the judicial and political system. Ibn Ezra says this is “open and brazen oppression, rather than stealthy and clandestine.” If one sees this, one is instructed by Qohelet not to be astonished. Earlier he observed such oppression happening, but here he instructs the reader not to be surprised by it. He then indicates his reasoning; that there is a hierarchy of officials, and that is where we find a little more difficulty in interpretation.

Before addressing the difficulty of interpreting the hierarchy of officials, I first want to comment on what I have translated as “in the province.” מַדָּה is an Aramaic word that occurs here and in 2:8. The primary definition for it is “province” and could specifically refer to a province of the Babylonian and Persian empires. The DCH adds two other possible definitions

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89 Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 51.
92 BDB, 193.
that appear in Qohelet: “place of judgment” and “prefect.”

Understanding this oppression to be occurring in the judicial courts would connect with 3:16. However, with what follows, it is probably best to understand it as meaning “province,” as Qohelet speaks of a system of officials. Murphy understands it as a “province or section of the administrative division of the Persian empire.

Qohelet cites a hierarchy of officials who watch over others below them in the system. Early Jewish commentators saw God as being the highest official, or that it referred to angels being appointed by God to keep watch. This certainly would provide a more hopeful message, reassuring the oppressed that God is watching over all the officials who perpetuate such oppression. Murphy reminds us, however, that Qohelet never speaks of a divine intervention on behalf of the poor, only that God is a judge (3:17; 5:4–5 [Eng 5–6]).

Lohfink describes the various groups that would be taking advantage of the local inhabitants, from the village authorities to the temple and the king; all of these groups had one purpose: “to take from the inhabitants as much as they could as rapidly as possible.” This gives us a better idea of who these high officials may be. It also prepares us for how to interpret this verse.

The next question is the interpretation of שומר and in what way these officials relate to those beneath them, as שומר can have both positive and negative connotations of either

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93 DCH, 147–48.
94 Schoors, Ecclesiastes, 407.
95 Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 46.
96 Zlotowitz, Koheles = Ecclesiastes, 112. St. Jerome also saw the involvement of angels who could prevent injustice, but understood God as reserving his judgment for the end of the world (Jerome, Richard J. Goodrich, and David Miller, St. Jerome: Commentary on Ecclesiastes, [New York: Newman Press, 2012], 75).
97 Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 51.
98 Lohfink, Qohelet, 79–80.
“guarding/protecting” or “controlling/overseeing.”99 The more widely understood use of שֹׁמֵר is in the positive sense of watching over or looking out for someone in order to guard and protect that person. In this way the different levels of authority look out for the others so as to “insulate officials from discovery and punishment.”100 Schoors agrees that if this is to be an explanation of why one should have no surprise at oppression, then the “hierarchical ‘watching’ is meant to make the oppressive regime more efficient, or to protect all the administrative levels in their endeavour to serve their own profits.”101 Oppression, then, is the loss of justice because the officials are too preoccupied with these other things when they are supposed to be watching out for justice.102 Delitzsch discusses the possibility of interpreting this word in the negative sense. Seeing a hostile use of “watch” in 1 Samuel 19:11–12 and 2 Samuel 11:16, he concludes that over any official stands another “who on his part watches how he can plunder him to his own aggrandisement.”103 He looks further at how in the Persian period, officials were “artfully lurking as spies for an opportunity to accomplish the downfall of each other.”104 Qohelet has already spoken of the loss of justice in the courts, and so I think it makes more sense that the officials are looking out for each other in order to continue receiving the benefit of their oppressive acts. It is for this reason that one should not be surprised that the oppression is at all levels; there is no one who will stop it.

99 Whitley, Koheleth, 97; Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 118.
100 Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 118. Also see Murphy, who sees Qohelet as an ironic observer who is saying that bureaucrats look out for each other (Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 51).
101 Schoors, Ecclesiastes, 408.
102 Longman, The Book of Ecclesiastes, 158.
104 Delitzsch, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, 293.
The second verse is most problematic, having been labeled an “insuperable crux.” Delitzsch exclaims, “What impossibilities have been found here, even by the most recent expositors!” It is easy to agree with Ogden’s conclusion that we may never ascertain the proper interpretation. With all the difficulties in the text, Longman concludes that there is no text-critical solution on which we can base a translation and any helpful interpretation for the present study then may only come from the “context, message, and structure of the book.” As Crenshaw notes, “one expects an observation that partially resolves the tension of a never-ending hierarchy of officials who squeeze revenues from those below them.” However, such an observation is not clear here, leaving us with the possibility of either a positive or a negative interpretation.

Some translate this verse in a positive sense, such as Lohfink (who does not discuss the difficulties of the Hebrew), who translates it “But still it profits the land when a king takes care of its fields.” Eaton also surveys it positively, suggesting that a revolution against the king is not the answer to the oppression. Delitzsch suggests that it is rather a praise of a “patriarchal kingdom based on agriculture.” Murphy thinks that it is the king’s rule that brings advantage to farmers but this is far-fetched. Thus, even within the positive evaluation, we find a variety of interpretations.

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107 Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 81.
110 Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, 78.
113 Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 51.
Longman argues for a negative translation by connecting it with the hopeless cause of v. 7, and noting that Qohelet does not portray the king or other political leaders as saviours of the land.\textsuperscript{114} Fox, too, connects “land” in v. 8 with the “state” in v. 7 to bring a negative evaluation.\textsuperscript{115} Schoors studies the various ambiguities and interpretations of this passage as a whole and concludes with two possible and contradictory translations. Either this verse stands as “an apology of the system of hierarchic government,” or as “a thorough critique of this system of government.”\textsuperscript{116} Krüger also looks at the possibility of interpreting these two verses in a positive or negative way, reading either “do not be frightened. For a higher one watches over a high one,” or “do not be surprised. For a higher one protects a high one.”\textsuperscript{117}

In understanding the first verse to speak of officials watching the backs of other officials, I have chosen to follow a negative evaluation of this verse as though Qohelet is throwing his arms up in the air declaring “even the king benefits from such corruption!” Through this system, where officials watch over officials, even the king receives the benefit of oppression leading back down to the field, where the lowest people are working. In this, Qohelet has truly resigned to the current political situation and thus asks that no one be astounded by this. It is too thorough and far reaching.

**Conclusion**

Qohelet, a student and teacher of wisdom, is confronted with the reality of existence, and how this is different from the expectations he has derived from the wisdom tradition. His reaction is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{114} Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 159.
\item \textsuperscript{115} Fox, *A Time to Tear Down & a Time to Build Up*, 234.
\item \textsuperscript{116} Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 416.
\item \textsuperscript{117} Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 114. He sees the two interpretations of v. 8 as well (Ibid., 115).
\end{itemize}
somewhat underwhelming. First he compares human to beast after finding injustice in the courts, although he still says that there is nothing better than to be glad in one’s work. This is followed by claims that it is better to be dead, or better still not yet to be born, than to be alive, where one sees oppression. Then he includes the instruction not to be surprised when one sees oppression, for it is rampant. In none of these instances does Qohelet offer a path forward against oppressors. He does not call the reader to take up action against the oppression. Instead, he is more matter-of-fact in reporting that oppression exists.
CHAPTER TWO:
TRANSLATION AND EXEGESIS OF SECONDARY PASSAGES

In comparison to the primary passages, the secondary passages speak about issues of injustice with greater brevity and abstraction. The same approach and organization of the translation and exegesis used in the first chapter applies here.

II. Qohelet 7:7

A. Translation

Surely the act of oppression makes a fool of a wise man,

1 One would normally translate כִּי יַפְסֹ֥ד הַשָּׁמְיָ֥ם יִאֵ֖בֶד אַחֵלֹ֑ל מֹאֵֽה׃

7 Surely the act of oppression makes a fool of a wise man,

2 Whybray finds some evidence to understand יַפָּ֣סֹד as “extortion” or “slander” rather than “oppression” (Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 115). Gordis, wanting to achieve proper parallelism in the verse, follows other scholars in emending the text to read “bribe, gift” (Robert Gordis, Koheleth—The Man and his World: A Study of the Language of Qoheleth, vol. I [Leuven: Departement Oriëntalistiek, 1992], 105–106). Working from the MT, I have translated it “Surely” in that Qohelet turns to another proverb in this verse, saying something that is unconnected (though not unrelated) to the verses preceding it. I discuss this further on page 29.

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And the heart is made corrupt by a bribe.

B. Exegesis

First it is necessary to look at the context of this solitary verse because of the question of its connection to the preceding verses and the overall function of these proverbs in the book of Qohelet. Qohelet asks rhetorically “For who knows what is good for a man during his lifetime, during the few years of his futile life?” (Qoh 6:12a). Qohelet argues that nothing is absolutely good. Following this we find a collection of proverbs (7:1–14) that show that there are still some things that are better than others. The Midrash sees the first part of 7:1 as the answer to

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3 Scholars have suggested different roots for הוללה. The best conclusion is to translate it as a Po’el meaning “makes foolish” (Ogden, Qoheleth, 113; Tremper Longman III, The Book of Ecclesiastes, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 186). Seow connects the noun הוללה with לך, meaning “folly” and ends up with the same translation (Seow, Ecclesiastes, 237). In paralleling the second half, Whybray intensifies this, suggesting “drives mad” (Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 116). Schoors finds both verbs in this verse (מָלַל and הָלָל) to be examples of Qohelet’s use of the imperfect to signify frequent or habitual actions (Schoors, Preacher, vol. I, 175–76).

4 Qumran changes this verb to mean “perverts,” which Fox suggests was an attempt to bring more specificity to the verse (Michael V. Fox, Qohelet and his Contradictions, JSOTSup 71 [Decatur: Almond, Press 1989], 229–30). Murphy sees no reason to modify the MT to this end (Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 61).

5 does not agree in gender with the verb, which has led some (including Aquila, Theodotion, and the Vulgate) to interpret it as the object of the clause. Also, interpreting the noun with Mishnaic Hebrew, they render the translation, “and destroys his strong heart” (Whitley, Koheleth, 62–63; Gordis, Koheleth, 270–71; Murphy Ecclesiastes, 61). Fredricks confidently disputes this, adding that the noun’s place at the end of the verse makes it emphatic (Daniel C. Fredericks, Qoheleth’s Language: Re–Evaluating Its Nature and Date [Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 1988], 187–88). Further, disagreement of gender between nouns and verbs is not uncommon in the Hebrew Bible (§GKC 145o) and is not uncommon to Qohelet (Schoors, Preacher, vol. I, 159).

what is best. Delitzsch sees a connection with the previous section by stating that the first three proverbs, “continue the lowly and dark estimate of the earthly life contained in vi. 3 ff.” These proverbs evaluate the good in life.

What of the organization of the proverbs themselves? Whybray sees no logical progression of thought through the section, but does provide statistics on the unity achieved through word repetition. Various structures have been suggested. Longman sees two themes that unify vv. 1–12 (death and wisdom versus folly) and understands vv. 13–14 as a conclusion to these sayings. It may also be possible to see the section as consisting of “seven utterances, each beginning with tobh.” It is here that we find Qohelet’s characteristic personality as he dialogues with traditional proverbs, modifying them with original thoughts. Mazzinghi divides the passage in the same manner as Ogden and Zogbo, but with different titles.

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9 Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 112.
Table 2.1 Outline of Qohelet 7:1–14

<table>
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<th></th>
<th>Ogden &amp; Zogbo</th>
<th>Mazzinghi</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. 7:1–4</td>
<td>Reflecting on Death is Better than Just Having Fun</td>
<td>Criticism on the theme of the “good name”</td>
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<tr>
<td>II. 7:5–7</td>
<td>The Wise Man and the Fool</td>
<td>Criticism on the theme of the education of the sage</td>
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<tr>
<td>III. 7:8–10</td>
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<td>IV. 7:11–12</td>
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<td>V. 7:13–14</td>
<td>Call To Reflection</td>
<td>Theological conclusion: God’s acting.</td>
</tr>
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Our verse begins with כִּי, naturally leading different commentators to seek a connection with the preceding verse, a verse that speaks of how it is better to listen to the wise than to the fool. Delitzsch examines some of these attempts but decides, “We do not further continue the account of the many vain attempts that have been made to bring ver. 7 into connection with ver. 6 and 5.”¹⁴ Instead, v. 7 is seen as the second half of a tetrameter, the first half of which is missing.¹⁵ There is some evidence of this in the Dead Sea Scrolls, which show a space between vv. 6 and 7.¹⁶ Crenshaw, however, looks beyond this problem (as no ancient versions give us any glimpse at a possible missing line) to see a proverb speaking of the shortfall of wisdom, and that even the wise can be corrupted.¹⁷ This, for us, is the focus: that even wisdom can be corrupted to foolishness through oppression and bribes.

Rabbi Samuel Ben Meir, in relating this proverb to 7:4, writes that the wise one should stay away from fools, “because the fool who is full of folly and oppression makes the wise man

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¹⁴ Delitzsch, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, 317.
¹⁵ Ibid.
¹⁶ Seow, Ecclesiastes, 237.
¹⁷ Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 136.
mad.” For him the corruption comes from the fool who brings oppression upon the wise person and who bribes the wise person. It is more reasonable to read that it is oppression that causes the wise one to become a fool and it is a bribe that corrupts the heart of that same person. To understand this we need to define עֹשֶׁק and מַתָּנָה, and understand their relationship to each other.

I define עֹשֶׁק as the act of oppression. While some scholars have emended the text, the word denotes “oppression” or “extortion.” There is the challenge of understanding who is producing and receiving the oppression. Is it the wise person who suffers from the act of oppression and becomes a fool? Just as a bribe is a temptation, oppression here should be understood as the act of oppression on others. In this vein, Delitzsch argues that the missing first half of the verse is about the duties of a judge, and therefore the oppression consists of the judge withholding legal aid to those who need it. It is the temptation to abuse the power one has by oppressing or extorting others. This is what brings about madness.

As noted above, מַתָּנָה has led to different translations as readers deal with the lack of agreement in gender between this word and the verb as well as the desire to develop a proper parallel to עֹשֶׁק. Without changing anything, we do have a loose sense of parallelism, and

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20 Murphy understands it in this sense (Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 64). Also see Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 111. Longman also translates this as extortion but is unclear who is being extorted (Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 186–87).
22 Cf. note 5.
Schoors reminds us that “Parallelism does not demand dull synonymy.” Still there is a great connection between the two stichs here.

In his metaprase, Gregory Thaumaturgus understands Qohelet as saying that oppression intrigues the soul of the wise to ruin the noble way of life. Here even wisdom can be overtaken and the wise can fall to foolishness. While Qohelet’s main point may be about wisdom and foolishness, he is still speaking of oppression itself. Elsewhere, as we have seen, he speaks of observing oppression as from the perspective of being oppressed. Here it is the act of oppression that brings about foolishness and corruption.

II. Qohelet 7:15–18

A. Translation

15 כלonne יֵֽשׁ צַדִּיק אֹבֵ֣ד בְּצִדְק֔וֹ וְיֵ֣שׁ רָשָׁ֔ע מַאֲרִ֖י! בְּרָﬠָתוֹֽ׃
16 אַל־תְּהִ֤י צַדִּיק֙ הַרְבֵּ֔ה וְאַל־תִּתְחַכַּ֖ם יוֹתֵ֑ר לָ֖מה תִּשּׁוֹמֵֽם׃
17 אַל־תִּרְשַׁ֥ע הַרְבֵּ֖ה וְאַל־תְּהִ֣י סָכָ֑ל לָ֥מה תָמ֖וּת בְּלֹ֥א ﻋِיַּתֶּֽ"׃
18 טוב אֲשֶׁ֣ר תֶּאֱחֹ֣ז בָּזֶ֔וּ וְגַם־מִזֶּ֖ה אַל־תַּנַּ֣ח אֶת־יָדֶ֑ו! כִּֽי־יְרֵ֥א אֱ&הִ֖ים יֵצֵ֥א אֶת־כֻּלָּֽם׃

15 Each one of these I have seen in my transient days;

23 Schoors, Ecclesiastes, 513.
25 כל here may be referring to everything listed in the previous verses (vv. 1–14), or may be speaking of the observations yet to come in these verses. Having both a retrospective and anticipatory perspective would not be unfamiliar to Qoh 2:14; 3:19–20 (Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 140; Seow, Ecclesiastes, 252; cf Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 69; Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 120).
26 הבָּל here may be speaking of the brevity of life (Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 140; Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 120). Seow agrees and sees it as elliptical for יֵֽשׁ בָּלָן in 6:12; 9:9 (Seow,
There is a righteous\textsuperscript{27} person who perishes in\textsuperscript{28} his or her righteousness\textsuperscript{29}
And there is a wicked person who prolongs\textsuperscript{30} in his or her evil.

16 Do not be abundantly\textsuperscript{31} righteous, nor make yourself overly wise; why desolate\textsuperscript{32} yourself?
17 Do not be abundantly\textsuperscript{33} wicked and do not be a fool; Why\textsuperscript{34} should you die when\textsuperscript{35} it is not your time?\textsuperscript{36}

\textit{Ecclesiastes}, 252; Gordis, \textit{Koheleth}, 277). Ogden finds no warrant for this use, claiming that Qohelet is presenting another area of his life where he has found great frustration (Ogden, \textit{Koheleth}, 122).

\textsuperscript{27} Scott translates this as “the innocent” but does not parallel it with “guilty” in the second half (R. B. Y. Scott, \textit{Proverbs \& Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary}, AB, vol. 18 [Garden City: Doubleday, 1965], 236).

\textsuperscript{28} The ב is best understood as “In spite of” and not “because of” (Gordis, \textit{Koheleth}, 276; Murphy, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 68; Seow, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 252). For a similar understanding, Fox offers “In the state of” (Fox, \textit{Qohelet and his Contradictions}, 235). Both of these take the ב as descriptive of the situation and not as an explanation of a cause.

\textsuperscript{29} The use of ב with מַאֲרִי and מַאֲרִי with מַאֲרִי is untraditional and makes obvious Qohelet’s reversal of the expectation here (Crenshaw, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 140).

\textsuperscript{30} We would expect to find מַאֲרִי but this meaning can also be understood here as in Prov 28:2 (E. Podechard, \textit{L’Ecclesiaste} [Paris: Victor Lecoffre, 1912], 374; Longman, \textit{The Book of Ecclesiastes}, 192; Seow, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 252; Gordis, \textit{Koheleth}, 277).

\textsuperscript{31} As Whybray has argued (R. N. Whybray, “Qohelet the Immoralist? [Qoh 7:16–17],” in \textit{Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien}, ed. John G. Gammie, Walter A. Brueggemann, W. Lee Humphreys, and James M. Ward [Ann Arbor: Scholars Press for Union Theological Seminary, 1978], 191–204), the adverb here is better understood as modifying the verb than the adjective, and this has found some level of acceptance (Crenshaw, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 141; Seow, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 252–53).

\textsuperscript{32} Whitley appeals to Sir 43:24 to translate the Hithpael שָׁם as “embarrassed” or “surprised” (Whitely, \textit{Koheleth}, 66). The LXX and Syriac translators followed this understanding (Murphy, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 66). However, in paralleling the question at the end of v. 17, it is best understood as an undesirable consequence if someone does not heed the preceding warning (Whybray, “Qohelet the Immoralist?” 197).

\textsuperscript{33} This parallels v. 16 (Whybray, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 121); however it is not structurally parallel as v. 17 lacks יִשָּׁר (Crenshaw, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 141).

\textsuperscript{34} Seow argues that Qohelet is not considering possible outcomes and so it is better to translate יִשָּׁר as “lest” or “otherwise” (Seow, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 254). This sense can still be achieved when thinking of this as a rhetorical question (which is also the case with the end of v. 16).

\textsuperscript{35} Longman cites Williams §241 to show the use of ב in a temporal sense (Longman, \textit{The Book of Ecclesiastes}, 192).

\textsuperscript{36} This phrase could be translated “Why should you die before it is your time” or “when your time has not yet come.” Whitley connects this with Job 22:16 as well as Ahijar 102 and the Phoenician Eshmunazar inscription (Whitely, \textit{Koheleth}, 66; cf. Longman, \textit{The Book of Ecclesiastes}, 192).
18 It is good that you grasp\(^\text{37}\) onto this,\(^\text{38}\) and from that do not rest\(^\text{39}\) your hand,\(^\text{40}\) for one who fears God will come out\(^\text{41}\) with both.\(^\text{42}\)

B. Exegesis

Here and in 8:14, Qoheleth points out that people don’t receive what they deserve according to their deeds. The advice that follows is to be neither overly righteous and wise nor overly wicked and foolish. While the passage does not mention oppression or injustice, it picks up on his observation in our first passage (3:16). Qoheleth has an expectation, much like in 3:16, that things should be in a certain place, that life should be a certain way. In 3:16 this was the expectation of justice and injustice within the judicial courts, but here it is the more generic expectation that

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\(^{37}\) Seow adds a comparison to Akkadian ina la umesu, which also speaks of premature death (Seow, Ecclesiastes, 255).

\(^{38}\) Seow relates this to an Akkadian word to mean “teach, learn, or grasp” but this is unnecessary as the Hebrew word already carries the idea of physically or intellectually taking hold of something (Seow, Ecclesiastes, 255).

\(^{39}\) “This . . . that” possibly refers to the advice given in vv. 16 and 17 (Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 142; Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 121; Ogden, Qoheleth, 125).

\(^{40}\) The LXX’s Vorlage may have a possible dittographical error leading to the meaning “to defile” (Longman, The Book of Ecclesiastes, 193; also see the discussion in Seow, Ecclesiastes, 252).

\(^{41}\) Multiple Hebrew manuscripts have נֶאְרָיָה.

\(^{42}\) Wright suggested that נָפַל could mean “escape” or “flee” (Charles H. H. Wright, The Book of Koheleth, Commonly Called Ecclesiastes: Considered in Relation to Modern Criticism and to the Doctrines of Modern Pessimism, with a Critical and Grammatical Commentary and a Revised Translation [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1888], 390; cf. “should be quit” in Wright, The Book of Koheleth, 105). Gordis more plausibly suggests a connection with a Mishnaic Hebrew idiom meaning “do one’s duty” (Gordis, Koheleth, 277; also see the discussion in Whitely, Koheleth, 67). There is some agreement about this idea of fulfilling something (Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 121; Seow, Ecclesiastes, 255; Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 68–9; Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 142; Thomas Krüger, Qoheleth: A Commentary, trans. O. C. Dean Jr., Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004], 139; Podechard, L’Ecclesiaste 377).

As in v. 15, כָּנָה here can have the meaning “both.”
righteousness and wickedness should show a proper cause-and-effect relationship in terms of the length of one’s life. This is followed by Qohelet speaking out against two orthodox doctrines.43

The observation is simple enough but the advice that follows requires an explanation. On the one hand, one is to avoid over-righteousness. Is this an indication of not wanting to be overly wise, or being excessive in speaking of one’s righteousness? Whybray argues that the sense given in the first phrase is not to be self-righteous, making this a denunciation of hypocrisy.44 In the second phrase, Whybray understands the clause to warn against the pretensions of wisdom.45 Murphy finds a similar parallel with Ezekiel 13:17 (“play the prophet”) and translates the Hitpael here as “play the wise man.”46 Seow gives a lengthy response to Whybray’s essay, and concludes that the parallel of self-righteousness and pretension to wisdom falls apart when looking at v. 17.47 Others also argue for restraint in the pursuit of wisdom and righteousness.48 In considering the previous verse, a warning against working too hard to be righteous or wicked seems acceptable as neither of those avenues get you to where you expect. On the other hand, one is not to give into wickedness. It is worth including Delitzsch’s paraphrase, “be not a narrow rigorist,—enjoy life, accommodate thyself to life; but let not the reins be too loose; and be no fool who wantonly places himself above law and discipline.”49 In this way, Qohelet warns against burnout, which may be the result of trying to be too righteous,50 while also speaking out against

43 One is that the righteous have long lives and the other that the wicked do not live out a full life. (George Aaron Barton, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes, ICC [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1959], 143; Schoors, Ecclesiastes, 540).
44 Whybray, “Qoheleth the Immoralist?” 191–204.
45 Ibid., 197. Also see Schoors, Ecclesiastes, 542.
46 Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 68.
47 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 252–54.
48 Longman, The Book of Ecclesiastes, 195–96; Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 70.
abandoning law and discipline. Qohelet is not arguing against the rule itself, but speaks to the fact that the rule has real, observable exceptions\(^{51}\) and therefore one should not unnecessarily bring about an untimely death.

In the final verse of this passage, Qohelet implores the reader to grasp hold of “one thing” while not letting go of “the other.” The reason for doing so is that one who fears God will accomplish both. But what does Qohelet mean by “one thing” and “the other?” Just as he advised against astonishment when witnessing oppression (5:7–8), and concluded that humans are no better than a beast and death is better than life (3:16–22; 4:1–3), he now sees that there is no benefit in striving after wisdom in excess, but also there is no benefit in giving in to wickedness. Just because righteousness does not give one the expected benefit in life does not mean one should give up and pursue wickedness and oppression.

### III. Qohelet 8:14–15

**A. Translation**

14 יש חבל יאשר נעשה על הארץ אשר יש צדקים אشعر מבושי במשפט הרשעים והרשעים ישמשו כל יום לפי צדיקים אמרתי שלא זה הבבל

15 ושיבחת אני את השם המשיח אשר ירשע לאשה קיימה תחת השמש כי לא רבים יושבים בלשון

14 There is a transient thing\(^{52}\) that is done upon the earth: there are righteous ones to whom it befalls\(^{53}\) them according to the deeds\(^{54}\) of the

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\(^{51}\) Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, 545.

\(^{52}\) Different translators use different English words for הבבל, to reflect the changing context and nuance in which Qohelet uses the word. I use the same word throughout, but agree that the awkwardness needs to be resolved by understanding it as an act of transience, or an example of something meaningless (Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 220).
wicked ones,\(^{55}\)
and there are wicked ones to whom it befalls them according to the deeds of the righteous ones:
\[\text{I say that indeed this is transient.}\] {\text{\(^{56}\)}}

15 So I myself commend\(^{57}\) pleasure: For\(^{58}\) there is nothing better for people under the sun except to eat and to drink and to be glad. And these\(^{59}\) can accompany\(^{60}\) in their \(^{61}\) labouring\(^{62}\) during the days of their life that God gave them\(^{63}\) under the sun.

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\(^{53}\) The *hiphil* participle מָנִיעָה is used here twice impersonally (Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 81). From the root מָנַע, meaning “to reach,” Ogden argues that it can mean “extend as far as” and therefore “befall” (Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 150).

\(^{54}\) Though מָנַע is singular in form, it is best understood as collective (Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, 253; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 288). It likely has the sense of “reward” or “recompense,” speaking to the consequences of these human actions (Gordis, *Koheleth*, 298; Whitley, *Koheleth*, 76; Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 156; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 138).

\(^{55}\) Seow suggests the translation “acted wickedly . . . acted righteously” but admits that this is not a literal translation (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 288).

\(^{56}\) In trying to interpret Qohelet’s use of חָרֵב, Scott translates this final clause “makes no sense” (Scott, *Proverbs • Ecclesiastes*, 243).

\(^{57}\) The recommendation of pleasure also occurs in Qoh 2:24; 3:12, 13; 5:18; 9:7, and is elevated each time. Elsewhere in the Old Testament שֵׁם means “praise” (Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 138).

\(^{58}\) For this understanding of רָאָה here see Gordis, *Koheleth*, 298.

\(^{59}\) Though רָאָה is a singular personal pronoun, its antecedent here is most likely the preceding infinitives “eating, drinking, being glad” and so is changed to a plural demonstrative pronoun for a clearer translation (Gordis, *Koheleth*, 298; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 288).

\(^{60}\) Only used in the *niphal* elsewhere in the MT, the *qal* imperfect of חָרֵב here is best understood as “accompany” (Podechard; *L’Écclésiaste*, 404; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 298). Maussion agrees with Podechard that the imperfect here is most likely a jussive (Podechard: *L’Écclésiaste*, 404; Marie Maussion, *Le mal, le bien et le jugement de Dieu dans le livre de Qohélet*, OBO, vol. 190 [Fribourg: Editions Universitaires Fribourg, 2003], 140). Whitley properly evaluates contrary suggestions and finds supporting evidence in Ben Sira and the Mishnah (Whitley, *Koheleth*, 76–77). Murphy translates the phrase as “This can be his part” but admits that it can also be rendered in the indicative mood (Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 80–81). Seow also finds a connection with Persian period Aramaic in *Proverbs of Ahigar* (Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 288).

\(^{61}\) This literally reads “in his labour” but is adjusted here for gender neutrality and to connect with the collective “people” used in the first half of the verse.

\(^{62}\) Scott translates עָלַל as “struggle” (Scott, *Proverbs • Ecclesiastes*, 243), but it may be better rendered as “toil” in a broad sense, speaking to the recommendation to find pleasure in all of life’s activities and efforts (Fox, *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, 253).

\(^{63}\) See note 61.
**B. Exegesis**

This final passage, like the previous passage, does not refer to oppression or injustice, but in it Qohelet again questions divine retribution while still concluding that life is good. The observation and final conclusion are similar to those components in the first main passage (3:16–22). There are two elements involved. The first is frustration at the failure of divine retribution, and the second is advice about how to deal with this fact. Unlike 7:15–18, here Qohelet prescribes enjoyment in life. While Rabbinic interpreters may have seen this as the beginning of a new section ending in 9:12, modern scholars have read it as being in the middle or at the end of a pericope. 

Qohelet’s complaint has to do with what befalls the righteous or the wicked, “in a context which deals with the deed-consequence relationship.” One expects that if they perform righteous deeds, there should be certain consequences, and if one performs wicked deeds, one should expect a different set of consequences or outcomes. In the previous passage the outcome was the length of one’s life. If you were righteous, you would live a longer life, and if you were wicked, you would meet an early demise. Coming from the wisdom tradition, Qohelet may expect this. However, in real life he observes that a person receives what would be expected of the other kind of person. If a connection exists at all between deeds and the length of one’s life,

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64 8:14 is similar to 3:16 and 8:15 is similar to 3:22.  
it is “only as a rule with exceptions.”68 We find a harsher judgment of divine retribution in Malachi 3:14-15, and in comparison, Qohelet is not being antagonistic. Provan argues that Qohelet is not ultimately doubting the justice of God, but is unable to understand how that justice is worked out in the world.69 And so, unsure of how to deal with this directly, Qohelet humbly prescribes a solution.

At the end of the first passage, Qohelet simply says that there is nothing better than for a human to be glad in one’s work. Here Qohelet commends pleasure: that there is nothing better for people in the realm of existence than to eat and drink and be glad. Lohfink points out that in debating wisdom on the principle of deed-consequence relationship, Qohelet refrains from naming God, only mentioning Him at the very end in the context of speaking of enjoyment of life.70 Although Qohelet has just stated that the days of a person’s life are filled with a level of randomness (in the sense that you do not receive what is just based on your actions), he also adds that the days of a person’s life are given by God. The commendation of enjoyment is not Qohelet’s first statement in this vein. Whybray argues that with each one Qohelet has increasing confidence.71 Longman, in considering the context, sees more desperation or resignation in Qohelet’s tone.72 In either case, Qohelet is not speaking of a life free from any suffering or the frustration of injustice. He speaks of one who takes enjoyment in God-given days, even with

68 Krüger, Qoheleth, 161; Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 137.
70 Lohfink, Qoheleth, 105–6; Schoors, Ecclesiastes, 639.
life’s limitations and labour.\textsuperscript{73} Despite how Qohelet finds aspects of life to be transient (הֶבֶל), he is not disillusioned, but is able to see that one should still enjoy life.

**Conclusion**

In the primary passages, Qohelet observes oppression. In the secondary passages, he continues observing the realities of life and how they compare to expectations that come from wisdom. Qohelet adds that oppression can corrupt the wise person. Then he complains of the loss of divine retribution, warning against striving after too much righteousness or wickedness. Then he comments again about the failure of the deed-consequence relationship but prescribes enjoyment of life in all one’s labouring days. He still does not speak out against wicked oppressors, nor does he offer a solution to the problem of oppression directly. Instead, he prescribes that one just learn to live with it and still enjoy life. This is all there is to do.

\textsuperscript{73} Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 86.
CHAPTER THREE: CONSIDERATIONS OF THE KING, WEALTH, AND DEATH

It is beneficial to place the primary and secondary passages within the broader context of Qohelet’s teaching as a whole. To do so, I will consider three areas of Qohelet’s writing that are in some way present within the studied passages. First I will consider the king and the political realm. In this I want to know Qohelet’s attitude toward the political world and its role in oppression. Second I will consider what Qohelet writes concerning wealth and possessions. In this I want to evaluate if he condemns wealth for its association with oppression and injustice. Third I will consider death within the context of creation. The question here is not how death is present in oppression, but the role it plays in Qohelet’s response to oppression. For each consideration, I begin with a summary from the exegetical study in the first two chapters of how that consideration connects with the primary and secondary passages. Here I speak about the connections to our overall theme of injustice before leaving that theme in order to develop Qohelet’s understanding of each consideration through the rest of his writing. I return to how this connects with the theme of injustice in the conclusion to each consideration. It is here that I draw together what Qohelet has to say about that consideration as a whole and how that affects his writing about injustice.

I. The King

At times within Israelite history the task of establishing justice and righteousness is given to the king (e.g., 2 Sam 8:15; 23:3; 1 Kings 10:9; Psa 72:2). There is often a legal obligation associated with issues of justice as responsibilities are divided and given to judges, scribes and heads of
tribes (Deut 1:13, 15; 16:18). In the thesis passages, there is a resigned attitude towards the political realm. Qohelet observes corruption and injustice in the legal courts (3:16–22). Where one expects righteousness from the courts, judges, and scribes, there is lawlessness. However, Qohelet offers no critique of—or apology for—the political power. In the second primary passage (4:1–3), there is observable oppression, but there is no one to comfort the oppressed. If the political and religious powers are to establish justice, then this is a failure on their part. Qohelet even writes that there are levels of authority who receive benefits from the poor (5:7–8 [Eng 8–9]). As I noted in the first chapter, this hierarchical system was one that provided protection to various levels of officials, officials who derived profit through oppressive acts. The secondary passages are nearly silent on this consideration, with just a proverb about oppression corrupting wisdom (7:7). These brief passages give little information about the current political situation. Where Qohelet has the opportunity to rebuke the political system for the failure of justice, he offers no such response. Instead, his view of the political realm connects with the transience ( Heb) theme throughout the book.

These are not the only instances where Qohelet speaks about this consideration. Garrett identifies eight passages in which Qohelet comments on political power (3:15c–17; 4:1–3; 4:13–16; 5:7–8; 7:6–9; 8:1–8; 8:9–9:6; 9:13–10:20). We have already examined two of these

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1 This task was even to be carried by the entire Israelite people. For the purposes of this section, however, I am looking at injustice and political power. Though Qohelet does not continue to present himself as king throughout the rest of the book, I am more interested in where his writings about injustice connect with power and authority, not with everyday citizens.
2 See Chapter 1, note 4.
3 Qohelet repeats that there is no one to comfort the oppressed. cf. Chapter 1, note 65.
passages (3:16–22; 4:1–3), but here I will survey the remainder. Before looking at these texts, I will briefly comment on the presentation of Qohelet as king found in the first chapter (1:1, 12).

Qohelet claims to rule as king at the beginning of his work, but this persona recedes after Chapter 2 and a tension between Qohelet and the king stands in its place. This kingly claim is found both in the authorial subscription (1:1), in which the narrator says Qohelet is son of David, and at the start of Qohelet’s autobiographical speech (1:12). Invoking the line of David denotes royal lineage. In the autobiographical speech, Qohelet makes explicit this claim to be king over Israel in Jerusalem. However, there needs to be a reason for this persona. The purpose of this kingly claim is to add weight to Qohelet’s observations of life. If we were to hold to the identification of Qohelet as king, we would want to hold him to account over the injustice and oppression he observes.

4:13–16. In both 4:13–16 and 9:13–16, we find anecdotes of interest. The story in 4:13–16 lacks clarity, but moving beyond the details, a clear moral is that each king will be forgotten. This is reminiscent of the opening cycle of generations (1:4) where the generations are forgotten. Indeed, the opening cycle of repetition is also found here, as the “youngster’s” advantage will not last, and history will certainly repeat itself. Garrett comes to three

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7 Enns, *Ecclesiastes*, 133.
8 Weisman labels them as such because they are both brief tales with no apparent connection to their immediate context, and they both contain a moral. Ze’ev Weisman, “Elements of Political Satire in Koheleth 4,13–16; 9,13–16,” *ZAW* 111 (1999): 547–60.
10 Seow notes the use of יֶלֶד which he translates “a youngster,” as it usually assumes immaturity, adding weight to this conclusion; C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB, vol. 18C (Toronto: Doubleday, 1997), 190–92.
conclusions about this passage. First, the weak but aware person is better off, politically speaking, than the inflexible person who is cut off from what is around him. Second, this tale points out how unstable the political world is. Third, political ambition is transient (הֶבֶל). That politics are unstable may be why Qohelet doesn’t endorse political revolt. That political ambition does not bring any lasting impact is a theme throughout the book, for this too is transient (הֶבֶל). Even if the entrance of a political power or ruler is marked with hope, in time there is little to choose between different kings and reigns. Qohelet does not hope that political power will bring about change, for it too will not be remembered.

7:6–9. As noted in our treatment of 7:7, there is no clear connection with the surrounding verses. Garrett attempts to connect v. 7 with v. 6 and expands the section by suggesting that vv. 8 and 9 act as conclusions to the statement about bribes. The first conclusion is a warning about appearances, for a person may appear to have success and prestige, but in reality has a corrupt heart. Also, one should not become too angry over these acts. However, I do not find Garrett’s conclusions convincing as he does not present a thorough examination of this passage. Verse 8 praises the end as better than the beginning, and patience as better than arrogance. Seow notes that in the many occasions where the Hebrew Bible compares “end” and “beginning,” it is always a contrast between a former situation and what will eventually come. I find this understanding to be more in line with what we have seen from Qohelet as he stresses the dead

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over the living, and enjoyment over arrogance.\textsuperscript{15} In this way, again, Qohelet expresses little hope in political change.

\textbf{8:1–8.} In this next passage, Qohelet deals with how properly to approach those who hold power. There is a question over whether v. 1 belongs to the previous section or the following verses. Either way, the two share affinities.\textsuperscript{16} I see a slight echo of 5:1 (Eng 2) in terms of a person’s approach to authority: one is to keep the commands of the king (8:2). There are some textual difficulties in the next verse (v. 3). The first phrase is an instruction not to leave the king hastily. Garrett comments that Qohelet is prescribing endurance in the face of any political troubles.\textsuperscript{17} Longman and Fox defy the MT breakup of verses to put the negated verb אַל־תִּבָּהֵל with the previous verse. Qohelet’s advice would then be to leave the king’s presence when the king is angry, so as not to provoke further frustration.\textsuperscript{18} The next phrase is also difficult to understand. Scott understands Qohelet as having no hesitation in leaving “when the errand is distasteful,”\textsuperscript{19} and Delitzsch sees it as a warning against political conspiracy or revolution.\textsuperscript{20} Garrett rejects these approaches, seeing instead instruction on proper court behaviour. If the king opposes your idea, do not persist, for the king does whatever he wants.\textsuperscript{21} This seems contradictory to 4:1 where Qohelet laments about oppression, the evil done by those with power.

\textsuperscript{15} In this sense, Qohelet proscribes enjoyment of what one has instead of the futile desire to accumulate more. This conclusion will be drawn from the other two considerations below.
\textsuperscript{16} Whybray, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, 129.
\textsuperscript{17} Garrett, “Qoheleth on the Use and Abuse of Political Power,” 169.
\textsuperscript{21} Garrett, “Qoheleth on the Use and Abuse of Political Power,” 169.
I understand Qohelet as saying that it is futile to reject or contradict the king’s commands because there is no victory in doing so.

Further, the words of the king are supreme; there is no going against them (v. 4). The word שִׁלְטוֹן is late Hebrew, only occurring here, in v. 8, and in Sir 4:7. The root is used in the MT and it signifies power, authority, or law. Qohelet goes on to say that if one keeps the royal commands, one will not experience trouble (v. 5). Just as there is an appointed time for everything (3:1–8), so here, Qohelet again claims there is a proper time for each thing in obeying the king’s command. Qohelet’s posture towards the king is one of submission and patience. One is not to approach authority with “a hot head” but to do so carefully, and with patience.

8:9–9:6. Here Qohelet shifts his attention to one who wields authority over another person to that person’s harm (8:9). Qohelet compares the fate of the oppressor with that of the oppressed. Instead of connecting this verse with the previous section, Garrett sees it as introducing the next, “that wrestles with sin, retribution and theodicy.” The major question of this section is whether God really judges the wicked. Qohelet’s answer is one of uncertainty, as one cannot observe all the works of God. As noted earlier, there is only the appearance of God not participating. In this, Crenshaw sees Qohelet as giving in to despair and criticism. Instead, Garrett concludes that the human reaction is not against God’s authority, but to the lack

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24 Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 293.
26 Exegesis of 3:16–22, Chapter 1, pages 11–12.
of appearance of God’s judgment. Not even the wise sages are able to see divine judgment, and this, according to Garrett, causes insanity to fill peoples’ hearts (v. 11).  

9:13–10:20. We find mention of a king in another anecdote. A great king who is expected to win a battle is unable to capture a city because of a poor wise man. However, the story is not speaking of the role of the king, but of the poor wise man, who will also be forgotten, making no long term impact. Here, wisdom does not trump position or prestige. As a result, a dead fly can ruin the oil (10:1). A little folly (siding with a position of prestige over wisdom from the humble), can bring about destruction. Qohelet is not extolling wisdom over the system of position and power, but “recognizes that this is how the world often works.”  

Qohelet goes further in comparing the wise, humble person, and the fool. While the fool is obviously a fool to all, the king does not see this, and elevates the fool to many exalted places (10:6). What follows is a series of proverbs comparing wisdom and folly. He advocates that the king and the land would benefit from hearing the wise man over the fool (vv. 16–17). However, the passage ends with Qohelet’s instructions not to curse the king (v. 20), which seems to contradict what has come earlier.

Conclusion. Throughout his book, Qohelet does not present a positive view of the king or political power. This is in part due to the fact that not even the king can find lasting meaning or significance. The king, too, will be forgotten. Qohelet does not observe much competence in the political realm, instead seeing fools in places of authority. He does not have hope that the political world can bring about any change. I believe this helps explain why Qohelet’s references to injustice and oppression come without a criticism of those responsible. Qohelet

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29 Ibid., 173.
30 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 338.
does not subscribe to rebellion or political upheaval. He instead speaks of loyalty, commitment, and patience. Where one expects Qohelet to rebuke the people responsible for injustice and oppression, he is silent. Qohelet is truly concerned for the condition of the oppressed, but “he does not reject the idea of government or working in government.”

II. Wealth

Having looked at politics in Qohelet, we now turn to wealth and possessions. Oppression and injustice often involve wealth. Whether it is by extortion, bribery, or other means, the accumulation of wealth often can come at the expense of others. Within the primary and secondary passages, there is little in the way of explicit references to wealth and possessions. It is quite possible that people are profiting from the injustice done in the law courts (3:16–22), but this is not made explicit.

Qohelet 5:7–8 (Eng 8–9) alludes to some sort of profit or advantage that is given to various levels of officials. As I noted in chapter 1, it is not simply denial of justice, but theft of justice from the poor and oppressed. This includes some sort of financial or material benefit, coming from the lowest people all the way up to the king. Qohelet does not condemn wealth in this passage, but neither does he condone these unethical means of gaining wealth. Instead, he tells the reader not to be surprised when observing such oppression. This passage is then followed by a report about riches (examined below). Then there is 7:7, which states, “And the heart is made corrupt by a bribe.” Here the parallel is made between oppression and a bribe, and how each of these brings a negative effect. These passages all suggest a

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32 One could also guess at such profit being made by the oppression found in 4:1–3.
33 See Chapter 1, note 78.
negative perspective on wealth, but are far from the sum total of Qohelet’s writing about this topic. Therefore we need to look elsewhere at what he says about wealth and possessions.

Before I delve into this analysis, it should be noted that it is connected with the subsequent consideration on death in Part III. Rindge claims, “Death and possessions are virtually inseparable in Qoheleth. Thinking about one invariably leads to considering the other.”

34 He adds another important comparison, that of wealth or possessions and enjoyment, where he sees wealth and possessions functioning as “instruments of enjoyment” for Qohelet. I will survey passages dealing with death in the third section of this chapter. It is there and in the conclusion that I will also examine the connection between wealth and death. Beneficial to the current consideration is Rindge’s comparison between death and wealth, in which he aligns explicit death passages with joy passages as identified and defined by Lee (2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:17–19; 7:14; 8:15; 9:7–10; 11:7–12:7). 35 I have briefly mentioned these enjoyment passages in previous chapters of this study, but will survey them more closely at the end of this section.

Early on in the work, Qohelet gives an impressive list of possessions and achievements. I will survey that passage (2:1–23) first. I will also survey the larger section of 5:9 (Eng 10)–6:9, as it is the most direct and lengthy commentary on wealth. Following that, I will survey Qoheleth 7:11, 12 and 14.

36 Other writers do not include 7:14 in this list, but Lee argues for it to be included in his list of “Joy Passages.” Eunny P. Lee, The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qohelet’s Theological Rhetoric, BZAW, vol. 353 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 3.
In this section of the book, Qohelet sets out to pursue pleasure and enjoyment. His conclusion is stated right at the beginning (v. 1), in that this too will be transient ( Hebēl). He has already asked a similar question in 1:3, “What advantage does one have from all of one’s work done under the sun?” His experiment took him through laughter (v. 2), the enjoyment of drinking wine (v. 3), and acquiring a great number of things (vv. 4–9). This leads to a semi–conclusion (vv. 10–11), and then a reflection about wisdom, folly and death (vv. 12–17). Before ending with an enjoyment passage (vv. 24–26; examined below), Qohelet laments the transience ( Hebēl) of his labour (vv. 18–24).

The list of things acquired includes houses, vineyards and gardens, ponds, male and female slaves, flocks and herds, silver and gold and other treasures, as well as male and female singers and many concubines (vv. 4–9). In all of this, Qohelet became greater than any other. All of these achievements “read like a resumé of the king.” Further, he did not pass up anything his eyes desired, or any pleasure from his heart (v. 10). What were the results of the experiment? Rindge points out that while Qohelet found enjoyment, he still claimed it all to be transient ( Hebēl) because there was no meaningful benefit other than the enjoyment. This pursuit for true happiness, done by an individual who should be able to achieve more than anyone else (in terms of wealth, possessions, and accumulation), comes up empty. From all his work—or anyone’s work for that matter—there is no lasting meaning or significance. This is established in the following verses about death (vv. 12–17). His other major complaint is that for all his labour, all that he has gained will be inherited by someone else (vv. 18–13). What will come of his wealth and possessions is out of his control.

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37 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 150.
38 Rindge, “Morality and Enjoyment,” 269.
39 Delitzsch, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, 243.
5:9 (Eng 10)–6:9. This is the main section from which we can gain insight into Qohelet’s perspective on wealth. Although Whybray suggests 6:1–9 is a related but separate passage, it is possible to understand this entire section together under the topic of wealth. Krüger outlines the structure of this passage for us. Qohelet starts with the claim that a rich person will never be satisfied with riches (5:9–11 [Eng 10–12]). Here we find irony, as a labourer does not experience the same prosperity as the rich man, and yet is able to sleep soundly. Qohelet sees this as being transient (חַלֶּל), and then launches into the next grievous thing (5:12–16 [Eng 13–17]). It is the loss of accumulated riches that now sparks his frustration. He is angered by how the rich man found no enjoyment. In the centre we have a passage about eating and drinking and enjoying life (5:17–19 [Eng 18–20]). Qohelet returns to the lack of enjoyment a wealthy person may have and how this too is an evil (6:1–6). The section is then bookended with some more proverbs (6:7–9).

7:11, 12, 14. Following Ogden’s and Zogbo’s structure of 7:1–14, we can look at 7:11–12 as being proverbs on “the advantages of wisdom.” Verse 14, however, is part of a call to reflection encompassing v. 13 and v. 14. The first part of v. 14 is a second exhortation, and the second half is a conclusion. Hollinshead understands vv. 11–12 as further answers to the

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41 Thomas Krüger, Qohelet: Commentary, trans. O. C. Dean Jr., Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 118.
43 Krüger, Qoheleth, 121.
44 My comment on this passage is found below.
question posed in 6:12, “who knows what is good?”47 The first answer connects wisdom and inheritance (7:11). Wisdom is made better when connected with wealth.48 Money and wisdom are then connected again, this time regarding “protection” (7:12).49 This proverb is speaking of wisdom, saying that it brings protection, or shade, but it does not bring lasting relief or permanent protection, just as wealth is not completely reliable.50

The call to reflection in v. 13 is to consider the works of God. This leads to two aspects of v. 14. In days of prosperity one is to enjoy goodness. But in days of evil, one is to stop and reflect on how God has made both the good and the bad days. Further, if one experiences prosperity, and also experiences adversity, Qohelet claims God has made both conditions so that one will not know what comes after (7:14). Qohelet has made this point before (3:22; cf. 6:12).


Seven times Qohelet prescribes enjoyment. The first instance (2:24–26) comes after a complaint about the failings of labouring under the sun. Qohelet still proclaims that there is nothing better than to eat and drink and tell oneself that one’s labour is good, because it is from God. Lee adds that while it is from God, it still is up to mortals to “see” the enjoyment.51 The next passage (3:22) is the final verse of our first primary passage. Where there is a great lack of control, Qohelet again prescribes enjoyment of one’s activities. Rindge follows Lee in connecting this

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50 Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 250.
51 Lee, *The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qohelet’s Theological Rhetoric*, 37.
prescription with 3:12, 13, as another instance of God being the one to give the ability to enjoy these activities.\textsuperscript{52} In the midst of a negative assessment of wealth, Qohelet again prescribes enjoyment of eating and drinking, and to rejoice in one’s labours (5:17–19 [Eng 18–20]). Qohelet expands that God’s gift of enjoyment is a distraction from life’s brevity and perils.\textsuperscript{53} Qohelet again says to enjoy the days of prosperity (7:14) and this, too, is connected with God’s doing. As we saw in the previous chapter, Qohelet prescribes enjoyment of life (eating and drinking) for God has given a person the days of that person’s life (8:15). In response to “death as the inevitable destiny of everyone,” Qohelet again advises enjoyment (9:7–10).\textsuperscript{54} Here the prescription has further details, including the possessions of clothes and oil for the head, as well as the enjoyment of a woman. The final passage begins with enjoyment and is then contrasted with death (11:7–12:7). There is no explicit reference to wealth or possessions, but the counsel to enjoyment is that one follows the desires of one’s eyes (11:9). Lee finds this instruction to be “unparalleled in its validation of youthful spontaneity.”\textsuperscript{55} In all of these, Qohelet says that there can be enjoyment in material things.

\textit{Conclusion.} Overall, Qohelet does not disregard wealth. Wealth and possessions are only valuable if they can bring about enjoyment in this life. His criticism of wealth is not to do with injustice or oppression, but how wealth brings no lasting significance. He thus spoke of the troubles in pursuing riches and accumulating possessions. Although he sees futility in wealth gained from labour, he does not endorse unethical means of accumulating wealth through the oppression of others. One is not to be surprised how a king finds profit through the levels of

\textsuperscript{52} Rindge, “Morality and Enjoyment,” 271; cf. Lee, \textit{The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qohelet’s Theological Rhetoric}, 40–44.
\textsuperscript{53} Lee, \textit{The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qohelet’s Theological Rhetoric}, 47–48.
\textsuperscript{54} Rindge, “Morality and Enjoyment,” 274.
\textsuperscript{55} Lee, \textit{The Vitality of Enjoyment in Qohelet’s Theological Rhetoric}, 75.
authority who oppress people in the land. But that does not mean it is okay to participate, for a bribe can corrupt the heart. While there is injustice and oppression involving wealth, Qohelet does not mean one is no longer able to enjoy wealth. One is to enjoy what one has. The ability to enjoy is in recognizing that what one has is from God.

III. Death

Death, as part of the created order, is an important aspect for Qohelet. The book is introduced around a creation cycle. The theme of the book is set in 1:2: all is transient ( Heb ). This is followed by a prologue  that sets “the mood for what is to follow.” For the present study, vv. 4 and 11 are most important. In them, Qohelet outlines that generations pass away and new generations arrive to take their place, but the earth–creation remains. While the earth remains, there is no remembrance of earlier things (v. 11). His experiments and observations are also framed as being “under the sun,” which is to say that everything is placed within the observable, natural world. Further, at the conclusion of the book is a reflection on death and decay that ends with the claim that humans will return to dust, from which humans came, and the spirit will return to God, who sent it (12:1–8). Qohelet includes similar reflections throughout the text.

One such reflection is found in the first primary passage (3:16–22). After observing lawlessness in the courts, Qohelet compares humans to beasts, saying that they have the same life-breath and they will both return to the dust from which they came (3:18–19). This has to do with their mortality. All will die, going to one place in death (3:20). In the first chapter of this

56 There is disagreement over the start of the prologue, whether it is v. 3 or v. 4. Finding an answer to this question is not needed for our discussion.
58 Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 79; cf. Chapter 1, page 12.
study I also noted that while Qohelet states this common end, no one is able to know what will come after death.\textsuperscript{59} Qohelet observes oppression in the second primary passage (4:1–3), and again he turns to talk involving death.\textsuperscript{60} With respect to creation in general, the benefits derived from a field are mentioned in 5:7–8. The main thrust of creation talk in the first two passages, however, has to do with death. Even in one of the secondary passages (7:15–18), Qohelet mentions that the life span of an individual is seemingly unconnected to one’s conduct. Still, he cautions not to become too much a fool and die before your time.\textsuperscript{61} In his observations of oppression and injustice, Qohelet’s response involves reflection on the cycle of life and death. This is why the consideration of death is important in this study.

What else does Qohelet have to say about death? According to Burkes, we find nine texts with explicit references to death (2:14–16; 3:2,19–21; 4:2–3; 5:14–15 [Eng 15–16]; 6:3–6; 7:1–2, 4, 17, 26; 8:8; 9:2–12; 11:8).\textsuperscript{62} Two of the primary passages of this study appear on this list, but I will focus on the remaining texts. It will be necessary to look at each of these texts within their given contexts. Related to passages about death are those where Qohelet questions what “will come after.” In 6:12; 7:14, 15; and 10:14, Qohelet asks this question. This establishes that Qohelet does not know what death will look like, or what will come after.\textsuperscript{63} In

\textsuperscript{59} I related this to Qohelet’s claim that God will judge everything. Qohelet sees no justice in life, but because all return to dust, and no one knows what comes after, there is the possibility that God will judge all in that time. See Chapter 1, pages 13–14.

\textsuperscript{60} I examined how Qohelet said it was better to be dead, or not yet to be born as then one does not have to witness such oppression. See Chapter 1, pages 17–18.

\textsuperscript{61} See Chapter 2, note 36.

\textsuperscript{62} Shannon Burkes, Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period, SBLDS, vol. 170 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 59 n. 100; cf. Rindge, “Morality and Enjoyment,” 266.

\textsuperscript{63} This repeated question establishes that Qohelet does not know what will come after death, and so a further examination of these passages is unnecessary. See Chapter 1, pages 13–14.
analyzing death passages we will see the juxtaposition of human life, which is fleeting (leaving no memory once gone) to the cycle, power, and permanence of the earth. This is established in the opening prologue of the book.

2:14–16. These verses are in a segment from 2:12–17 that contrasts wisdom and folly, but also in the larger section of 1:12–2:26 that Crenshaw has titled, “The Royal Experiment.”64 The section at large includes reflections on Qohelet’s experiences “that have brought him to the conviction that all striving for accomplishment, possessions, wisdom, and happiness are absurd.”65 In v. 14, Qohelet observes that both the wise man and the fool will receive the same fate, meaning death. But what of Qohelet who is so wise? He too will experience the same fate, and so this is transient (ֶבֶל) (v. 15). The wise sage reasons that there is no “long-lasting significance to wisdom.”66 Before resolving to hate life—a conclusion a fool would make67—Qohelet exclaims that the fool and the wise person die the same. Delitzsch sees this as the “pointed, sarcastic אֵי”68 which points to Qohelet’s frustration and gives weight to the conclusion he draws.

3:2, 19–21. I have already examined 3:19–21 as part of the first primary passage, but I will also briefly note 3:2. Here Qohelet claims that all of life has a beginning and an end, comparing human life to that of a plant. The significance is that the appointed time is not known to the human, and the human has no control over it.

64 Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 68.
65 Krüger, Qoheleth, 59.
66 Longman, The Book of Ecclesiastes, 94. This is interesting, as Whybray compares this pronouncement of being forgotten to how 1 Kings 5:9–14 (Eng 4:29–34) and the Book of Proverbs “make much of Solomon’s lasting fame as a paragon of wisdom” (Whybray, Ecclesiastes, 58).
67 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 155.
68 Delitzsch, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, 248.
5:15–16. These verses are part of the larger section previously studied concerning wealth (5:9 [Eng 10]–6:9). Part of the pain of wealth has to do with death. All die. But more than that, just as all are born naked from the mother’s womb, so each will return. Nobody is able to take any riches or possessions to the grave. Qohelet sees this as a “sickening evil.”69 There is no gain from such striving after the wind, from toiling under the sun. As noted earlier, wealth can bring about trouble for the living, as they may be worried over it, and unable to find enjoyment. But with death, it is meaningless if it does not enable one to eat and drink and find pleasure in life.70 Seow offers a discussion on interpreting darkness figuratively, meaning these people are living as though they are dead; they have no enjoyment.71

6:3–6. Following Krüger’s structure for this larger section, these verses also represent negative cases as did the previous verses (5:12–16 [Eng 13–17]). It starts off with אִם, which introduces a fictitious, hypothetical situation.72 Taken in context with the previous verses, there is a man who is given a different kind of riches in life (numerous children), but is unable to find any enjoyment. Seow notes that things like “wealth, progeny, and longevity are the items that humans, even kings, most commonly requested from the deity” in the Near East.73 However, all these things are meaningless if they are not enjoyed. Qohelet compares this with a stillborn, whom he claims is much better off than the man who lives long or has many children. The reason for such a comparison is that at least the stillborn doesn’t waste time not having enjoyment, and does not see the evils of the world.

70 Krüger, Qoheleth, 118–19.
71 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 221–22.
72 Krüger, Qoheleth, 125.
73 Seow, Ecclesiastes, 225.
7:1–2, 4, 17, 26. We have already analyzed v. 17, but will consider the other verses of this chapter. Qohelet starts the first in this list of “better than” proverbs with something that sounds traditional. Verse 1a is similar to Proverbs 22:1. However, in the second line, Qohelet has a dark twist, claiming that the day of one’s death is better than the day of one’s birth. Longman suggests that this expresses Qohelet’s “relief that life is finally over.”74 One does not have a sense of accomplishment, but no longer suffers the oppression and transience ( Heb) of life. It is this thought that is carried on in the next verse where a funeral is better than a party. Qohelet’s reasoning is that those who go to the house of mourning will take it to heart. They will recognize that life will come to an end and therefore can live with that knowledge and understanding. Verse 4 is similar to v. 2 in comparing the house of mourners to the house of pleasure. However, the purpose of v. 4 is to compare wisdom with folly, which is the main theme of these proverbs. In that vein, it may be that the person at the house of mourners has knowledge instead of ignorance.75 We move now to the final verse included in the section (v. 26). Here Qohelet uses death as a way of speaking about a seductive woman. That this woman is “more bitter” than death is saying more about the woman than about death.76

8:8. I examined the first few verses of chapter 8 above in reference to what Qohelet had to say about the king.77 But here we also find reference to death. In 8:7, Qohelet, through a rhetorical question, claims again that no one is able to see what will happen. Verse 8 follows, giving four examples of how the human is impotent.78 The second of the four examples is that

75 Burkes, Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period, 67.
76 To be sure, Qohelet is not saying this of all women, but of a seductive woman.
77 See pages 45–46.
no one has authority over the day of death. It is inevitable and unknown. A person “can neither prolong his life nor determine when he will die.”

9:2–12. The full section is 9:1–12, but there are many questions as to the meaning of the first verse. The final verses (vv. 11–12) are often treated separately, but they are connected. Qohelet picks up the theme he has mentioned before, that there is but one fate for all. Here, after the sections about the righteous and wicked not receiving what they deserve (7:15–16; 8:14–15), Qohelet states that there is one fate for both. While this speaks to an equalizing fate, there is still injustice, for the wicked do not have to pay for their wickedness. Although Qohelet sees this as an evil, he still sees benefit in being alive. This is because the living know that they will die, whereas the dead know nothing (v. 5). In this section we find a prescription to enjoy life (vv. 7–9). Qohelet arrives at this conclusion because everyone will die and receive the same fate. Therefore, one is to enjoy life while one still can. However, this section ends (vv. 11–12) with Qohelet holding optimism at bay by writing about how life “may not be easily manipulated and is subject to frustration and disappointment.”

11:8. In this and the preceding verse, Qohelet turns to the young person to give advice on life. The advice seems to be that life is good (it is good to see the light), but Qohelet follows this with a comment on the days of darkness. Qohelet seems to contradict his advice. This is less explicit in its reference to death, though it is still seen as a reference to time in Sheol.

Krüger considers the difficulties of interpretation, suggesting it is unlikely that “days of

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79 Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 133.
darkness” simply refers to the days of death. They should also include dark days experienced in life. Others see no gloom, but focus on the positives of life, set against the backdrop of inevitable death. As Seow put it, “The threat is not only from death and the darkness of the netherworld, but also from gloom and misery in this world.” Longman has trouble with Qohelet giving this contradictory advice—that one is to enjoy life, but also to remember that one will die—but this is precisely the tension that Qohelet has been navigating for the entire work. The final statement claims that all that is to come is fleeting and absurd.

**Conclusion.** Throughout his book, Qohelet speaks of death as a single fate for all, and as a cause of great frustration. That all die is the reason why he sees many things as transient (הֶבֶל). That death comes to all means there is no lasting significance to wisdom, or wealth, or even righteousness. All come from the dust, and all return to it. Not only that, but there is no control over when death will come. There is also no knowledge of what comes after. In his observations of what happens “under the sun,” Qohelet sees death as an equalizer for all. Yet, in his response to observing oppression, Qohelet turns to thoughts about death in two of the primary passages. Death is both a frustration to Qohelet, as the righteous and wicked die without proper justice, and a relief, as with death, one no longer sees life’s evils. He is resigned to the fact that life includes injustice and evil. While he does not understand it fully, he is still able to see enjoyment in life, prescribing this as the ultimate answer to life’s frustrations.

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88 Crenshaw sees this as a statement about the absurdity of all that will happen in Sheol (Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 183).
Conclusion

The injustice passages in Qohelet are few, and they are spread apart. Going through this chapter, we see how they are connected to the work as a whole. They add to and support Qohelet’s major themes. Those major themes also help us understand the injustice passages. Before moving on, I want to look at the connection between death and wealth, as Rindge is able to connect all but two of the explicit death references to the seven enjoyment passages.\(^{89}\) Death is troubling for Qohelet because it signifies lack of control and meaning. However, “Qoheleth responds to the uncontrollability of death by recommending enjoyment of what one can control.”\(^{90}\) Qohelet also finds lack of control in the political realm and in issues of wealth. He offers no solution to gaining control, but prescribes enjoyment. He does not call the people to political revolution or rebellion, but prescribes patience and enjoyment of what one has. He does not write about the accumulation of excess, but of enjoyment of what one has. Because everything is transient (הֶבֶל), Qohelet advises that one enjoy what one has, while one has it. In this we do not see Qohelet give in to total despair, but instead he turns to life.

\(^{89}\) Rindge, “Morality and Enjoyment,” 266.
\(^{90}\) Ibid., 271.
CONCLUSION

There is a moment in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* where Linda, the wife of Willy the salesman, mentions the cost of the refrigerator repair but adds that they have just one final payment on the 25 year mortgage before the house is theirs. Willy, who perceives that he has not accomplished enough in life, complains of all the construction that had been done over the years to keep the house in good condition. Linda reassures, “Well, it served its purpose,” to which Willy replies, “What purpose? Some stranger’ll come along, move in, and that’s that.”\(^1\) Qohelet can be seen in both of these characters. On the one hand, Qohelet vents his frustrations about real life, for his grandiose expectations of life fail to be realized, much like Willy’s. He finds his labour to be futile as there is no lasting significance or remembrance of a person. On the other hand, he understands that life still serves a purpose, even with frustrations, much like Linda. One is still able to enjoy life. Qohelet realizes that “enjoyment is not about the pursuit of more, but rather is the glad appreciation of what is already in one’s possession by ‘the gift of God.’”\(^2\)

Through this study we have come to see how Qohelet interacts with issues of injustice and oppression. He has expectations of how things should be, but in his observations of real life—that is life “under the sun”—wickedness is often found in the wrong place. It is found where justice should be found. He sees wickedness in the courts where justice is to be upheld (3:16). He sees the tears of the oppressed, but there is no one to comfort them (4:1). Oppression occurs from the ground up through all levels of officials to the king (5:7–8 [Eng 8–9]). He sees righteous people perish in righteousness while the wicked live long lives. Neither group receives what Qohelet expects they deserve (7:15; 8:14).

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Qohelet does not offer a solution to injustice or a way to stop the oppression he observes. At least there is no apparent answer “under the sun.” As we saw, there is no one to comfort the oppressed (4:1), and injustice is so rampant, that one is not to be surprised by it (5:7 [Eng 8]). He does not provide a way for the political and religious powers to be corrected for their roles of injustice. Instead, he speaks of patience and loyalty to the king, while also speaking of the futility of thinking that the political realm will bring about real change. For Qohelet, injustice is present—and will continue to be present. His only hope is that God still judges the wicked and the righteous for every deed (3:17), but even in this, he does not understand it or see it happen in this life.

Complicating this matter is that everyone dies and returns to the dust from which one came. This makes humans no different than beasts (3:19–21). Death is an equalizer, but it also brings relief from life’s evils, for one who is dead no longer experiences oppression or the tears of the oppressed (4:2–3). Still, while one has no control over the time of one’s death and the righteous are unable to prolong their lives, Qohelet cautions against excessive righteousness or wickedness that would lead to an early death.

In regards to social justice issues, does Qohelet give in to despair and hopelessness? No. Instead, he offers an unexpected solution: enjoyment. Certainly one should lament injustice and oppression. Observations of injustice bring frustration and despair to Qohelet, but he does not stop there. He still understands that one’s days are given by God, as well as the ability to enjoy what one has. One should be happy with one’s activities (3:22) and one should be able to eat and drink and be merry (8:15). As mentioned, this is not a striving after excess, for a bribe will corrupt the heart (7:7), and the pursuit of wealth brings about all sorts of issues and frustrations. Qohelet speaks about enjoying what one has, and what one has been given.
In this, Qohelet offers us a response and answer to injustice, though it is one that we do not expect. Indeed, even Qohelet does not understand it himself. One is to find joy and happiness in contentment. I think that if we are content with what we have, we will not commit injustice or oppression, whether in the pursuit of wealth and possessions or political power. This is no guarantee that we will never experience injustice or oppression from others, but that we will not commit injustice ourselves, and we will not oppress others. If everyone lived like this, the tears of the oppressed would be comforted and eventually stop, the hierarchy of officials would no longer contribute to a corrupt system, and some of life’s frustrations would disappear. However, Qohelet does not make it this far in his writing. He simply speaks of a contented enjoyment of life.

I will offer a final note on the implications of this study for the academic and faith communities. Qohelet’s writings about justice are important to his perspective as a whole. They connect to and add to his understanding of life as transient (חֶבֶל), but also the reason and ability to enjoy life. Moreover, this study shows that Qohelet is not completely without hope, but also that he does not endorse hedonistic pleasures. He has a place within the canon of Scripture as his unique voice adds to our understanding of social justice. At the same time, he is in need of the rest of Scripture. For the Christian community, this is also true. Early Christian interpreters often turned to Jesus for answers to Qohelet’s questions. However, Qohelet still has something to offer us. The Christian community can lament injustice and oppression, but can also move towards contentment in life, a contentment and enjoyment of God’s gifts—not a striving after excess. Christians should hear the tears of the oppressed and work towards action, while still recognizing the inability of political change. This is not to overshadow the enjoyment of the
days of one’s life. Even when expectations are found to be in the wrong place, life can still be good.
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