

QOHELETH ON THE USE AND ABUSE OF POLITICAL POWER

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Qoheleth's insights into political power and its use and abuse have escaped the notice of most interpreters even though he had a great deal to say in this area. Scholars either ignore his political insights altogether or suggest that: his attitude towards the subject borders on indifference.¹ Political oppression and the corruption that exists in high places, however, are the only vices that Qoheleth analyzes in any detail in his book. He hardly concerns himself with other forms of questionable behavior, such as a life of sensuality and pleasure seeking; he only says that in the final analysis these pursuits fail to satisfy (2:4-11).

Qoheleth's concern for political matters and in particular for matters related to oppression is not surprising. In ancient Israel, as elsewhere in the ancient near east, the divinely imposed duty of rulers to protect the poor and easily oppressed is part of the heritage of wisdom.² Moreover, biblical wisdom is often highly political in nature and can frequently be defined as the ability to work successfully in a political situation.³ While wisdom's many roots include the marketplace and ordinary world of folk wisdom, a primary Sitz im Leben of wisdom was the royal court. In Egypt, professional sages instructed young princes and future bureaucrats, and Sumerian and Babylonian scribes similarly had important governmental roles.⁴ While not exclusively devoted to this subject, much of Ecclesiastes addresses the political arena.

Qoheleth examines the use of political power in eight separate passages. These passages, when analyzed and compared, form a coherent statement on political authority and life under it. This statement is carefully woven into the fabric of the whole book of Ecclesiastes and makes up a significant part of Qoheleth's world view.

¹E.g., James L. Crenshaw (*Old Testament Wisdom* [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981] 143) comments that Qoheleth recognized the existence of injustice but says that he, unlike the prophets, felt no need to do battle with it.

²See F. Charles Fensham, "Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in the Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature," *JNES* 21 (1962) 129-39. Cf. *The Protests of the Eloquent Peasant*, *ANET* 407-10, and the following passage from *The Instructions for King Meri-Ka-Re* (*ANET*, 415): "Do justice whilst thou endurest upon earth. Quiet the weeper; do not oppress the widow; supplant no man in the property of his father. . . ."

³Cf. R. B. Y. Scott, "Solomon and the Beginnings of Wisdom," *VTSup* 3 (1955) 270.

⁴Crenshaw, *Wisdom* 28. Cf. *The Instructions of Vizier Ptah-Hotep*, *A NET* 412-14.

I. 3:15c-17

The first important passage is 3: 15c-17. This passage seems out of place as it appears in most translations. In the preceding passage, 3:9-15b, Qoheleth contrasts the transitory nature of human accomplishments with the eternity of God's works. He then suddenly moves into a brief discourse on corruption and injustice (3: 16-17). The apparent abruptness of this change of topic is greatly reduced if one understands 3:15c to be transitional.

The meaning of 15c, **וְהָאֱלֹהִים יִבְּשׁ אֶת־נַדְדָּךְ**, is notoriously difficult. Most translations render it something like, "God looks for what has passed by."⁵ The central problem is the meaning of the niphal of **נָדַד** here. In the qal of biblical Hebrew it always means "pursue" or "chase," and thus by extension from the idea of pursuit with hostile intent, "to persecute."⁶ It is found in the niphal only here and in Lam 5:5, where it means "to be pursued."⁷ Most scholars assume that the natural translation, "God looks for the persecuted," would be out of place in the context, of Eccl 3:9-15, and so render ~"3 as "that which has passed by" or something similar. This and other such translations, however, neither accurately render the Hebrew nor make theological sense.⁸ The line is best understood as meaning "God seeks the persecuted." The use of the piel **בִּקֵּשׁ** supports this rendition. S. Wagner says that this verb is generally used in three ways. Sometimes it simply means to seek objects, as in I Sam 9:3 and I Kgs 2:40. Sometimes it is used with an auxiliary verb in a figurative sense, as in "to seek to kill" (I Sam 19: 10). But **בִּקֵּשׁ** is also;

⁵Cf. NIV, NASB, NEB, TEV, and RSV.

⁶E.g. Amos 1:11; Ezek 35:6.

⁷Literally "We are pursued upon our necks," the line may mean something like, "Our pursuers are on our heels," or it could mean, "We are driven hard," i.e. we are oppressed.

⁸See George Aaron Barton, *Ecclesiastes* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912) 107; Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1983) 83; Franz Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.) 264; and Robert Gordis, *Koheleth - The Man and His World* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 156, 234. "

Barton argues that in Josh 8: 16 and Jer 29; 18 **נָדַד** means to drive and that therefore the passive can mean "that which has been driven off," i.e. things in the past. However, in those passages the subjects of the verbs are personal, and interpreting the word as "things in the past" is strained.

Eaton says that in late Hebrew **נָדַד** can mean "hurry along" and thus argues that 3:15c means that God watches over the flurry of human activity. This too stretches the meaning of the words; even if a meaning "hurry along" is conceded, the translation "God seeks that ; which (or, 'he who') hurries along" makes little sense.

Delitzsch says that the line means, "God seeks that which is crowded out," on the basis of the Arabic words *mudarif* and *mutaradifat*, but he admits that the ancient cognates are wanting, and that the LXX, Symmachus, the Targum, and the Syriac all render the line, "God seeks the persecuted." And Delitzsch's translation really does not make sense. Gordis similarly interprets the line as, "God always seeks to repeat the past," on the basis of Arabic and Medieval Hebrew cognates. This rendition, while appearing to be perfect harmony with its context, actually confuses the issue. Qoheleth's point in 3:14-15b is that man is trapped in that nothing he does is lasting or original ("new under the sun"), whereas God is free since he alone is able to be truly creative, and only his work is eternal. Gordis's translation makes it appear that God is an arch-conservative who rigorously stamps out any human innovation in order to maintain a safe level of repetition and monotony. This is surely not Qoheleth's message; he nowhere blames God for the limitations of human life.

used in a legal sense.⁹ For example, in 2 Sam 4:11, "I will seek his blood from you," means, "I will require justice for the shedding of his blood from you."¹⁰ Similarly, when Judah took Benjamin down to Egypt, he said to Jacob, "Seek him from my hand" (Gen 43:9), in other words, "Consider me to be accountable for his life." When Ecc13:15c says that God seeks the persecuted, it means that he holds their persecutors accountable.

As mentioned above, however, the translation, "God seeks the persecuted," appears strange in its context, a discussion of the temporality of humanity and the timelessness of God. This problem could be solved immediately if 15c were treated as belonging to the next section, a brief discussion of corruption and oppression (vv 16-17), but this solution appears impossible since the opening words of v 16 ("And I saw something else. ..") clearly begin a new paragraph. While dealing with the same subject matter as vv 16-17, 15c is outside of and immediately before that text.

Qoheleth, however, often uses both prolepticism and transitional passages. Sometimes he gives a short, proleptic summary of a topic he is about to discuss or of a conclusion he will reach before he actually begins a detailed discourse. Sometimes, as here, when he is about to move on to a new paragraph with a new topic, Qoheleth proleptically introduces the new topic at the end of the paragraph before the new one. The proleptic line therefore serves as a transition between the two paragraphs that deal with unrelated topics. Other examples of prolepticism are 1:2 (which proleptically gives the theme of the whole book), 2:1b-2a (which states in advance his conclusions, found in v 11, regarding the life of sensuality), 8: 1 (a proleptic introduction to the matter of political prudence, discussed in 8:2-8c), and 8:8d, which prepares the reader for a discourse on the problem of theodicy (8:9-17). A major transitional passage appears in 10:18-20.¹¹ Observe also how 3:17 anticipates the final conclusion of the work (12: 13-14).

All of this implies that while the paragraph division of the present text is at the end of v 15, one must regard 15c as part of the following paragraph, 3:16-17, with respect to the topic of the discourse. The first passage to deal with the issue of political oppression, therefore, is 3:15c-17.

As mentioned above, 15c is best translated, "God seeks the persecuted." Humans, Qoheleth asserts, are creatures of time: all of their activities are governed by time (3:1-8), are transitory and give no lasting benefit (v 9), and are never able to move beyond the banal and ordinary (v 15b). Only God's work is eternal, and the best people can do is try to find a measure of happiness and contentment in this life (vv 11-14). At this point, the discussion turns on the line, "and God seeks the oppressed." Why does he here introduce the concept of political injustice? The reason is surely that oppression and injustice, more than anything else, fill a man's heart with bitterness and sorrow and make it impossible for anyone to live

⁹Siegfried Wagner, "Biqqesh," *TDOT* 2 (1975) 233-5.

¹⁰See also Ezek 3:18,20.

¹¹See discussion below.

according to the philosophy, recommended in vv 11-14, of accepting one's lot in life with contentment. Wherever the legalized plundering of people exists, no one can pass through the cycles of life (3:1-8) with serenity. At times weeping and mourning are appropriate, Qoheleth says, but joy and dancing also have their seasons. In understanding and accepting the limitations imposed by time, one gains the possibility of living with a heart at peace. But all this is rendered meaningless when people live under the weight of oppression.

The meaning of 3:16 is both clear and familiar. Qoheleth looks to the law courts--the gates--and there sees injustice and oppression where righteousness ought to triumph and the rights of the poor ought to be protected. The frequent reference in the prophets to the abuse and plundering of the defenseless demonstrates that such was all too common in ancient Israel, as indeed throughout history. Although he does not cry out his indignity in the streets, Qoheleth is no less moved by what he sees. Like the prophets, he considers the hopelessness of the situation (for he knows that no one, neither king nor preacher, can stop this universal crime), and looks for their vindicator in God (v 17). Qoheleth is not a prophet, however, and he issues no stern warnings of a terrible day of wrath that will overwhelm the wicked and drive them away like dust. Nor does he offer any clear vision of a day when the righteous will be gathered to Zion to enjoy its peace and joy. He can only speak, in terms that are more abstract and philosophical than prophetic, of a coming divine if judgement.

The precise meaning of v 17, especially 17b, is somewhat debated. The MT can be rendered: "I said in my heart, 'God will judge both the righteous and the wicked, for a time for everything and every deed is there.'" What does he mean by "there" (אֵינָם)? Barton amends the pointing to אֵינָם and so reads, "He has set a time for every matter,"¹² but as Gordis notes, the position of the word at the end of the line and the unanimous testimony of the versions oppose this solution.¹³ Delitzsch, citing Gen 49:24, says that אֵינָם here means "with God,"¹⁴ but that text hardly proves that אֵינָם here carries that sense. Eaton compares Isa 48:16 to Eccl 3: 17 and argues that it can mean, "with reference to those events,"¹⁵ but here again the comparison is weak and Eaton's interpretation is unsubstantiated.

Since the present text is eschatological (its primary concern is with the issue of God's judgment of oppressors), another eschatological use of אֵינָם could help clarify the present text. Such a usage is found in Ps 14:5a, "There they [the wicked] are in great fear." The psalm deals with the fool who says there is no God and therefore feels free to commit acts of cruelty and oppression against God's people. V 4 asks, "Do all the evildoers not know?" and follows this query with the somewhat enigmatic line in 5a, f cited above. In context, the line must refer to some day of judgment and vindication of his people by Yahweh. "There" is either shorthand for the

¹²Barton, *Ecclesiastes* 111.

¹³Gordis, *Koheleth* 235.

¹⁴Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes* 266.

¹⁵Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* 85.

time and place of judgment or refers to Sheol, in which case the ideas of the grave and judgment have been merged. A related usage is found in Job 3: 17-19, where "there" clearly refers to the grave. In this passage Job presents the idea of judgment in the sense that death is the great leveler and treats the mighty and the weak alike.

A pattern of the use of **אֵלֶּה** thus emerges: "there" refers to the expectation of an eschatological divine judgment on those who have oppressed the poor and weak of God's people. The time and place of this judgment is uncertain, but it is related to the idea of death and the grave. Beyond that, this "eschatological hope" is remarkably undefined. It is only "there," with no clear indication of how or when this judgment will take place. Qoheleth does not speculate about what type of punishment the wicked will receive. Eccl 3:15c-17 acknowledges that political oppression is a universal and unrestrainable phenomenon, but offers the hope, albeit an undefined one, of divine judgment and vindication.

II. 4:1-3

Qoheleth here grieves over the hopelessness of the poor. So far is he from having a solution to political oppression that he confesses that in his mind a person is better off dead--or more than that, never having been born--that to be alive and have to face this heartbreaking reality. The candor of this passage should not be taken as a recommendation of suicide. Qoheleth is openly describing what he has felt. He is not here offering the conclusions of his inquiries; still less is he acting as a prophet giving a Word from Yahweh on the situation. His words therefore should not be regarded as if they posed some theological problem or contradiction to biblical ethics: Who, in looking on the misery of the poor and oppressed, has not sometime felt what Qoheleth has felt?

There are several grammatical and interpretive problems in this text. In v 2a, the word **מִיָּדָהּ** (lit.: "from [the] hand") strikes the reader as a little odd. Gordis is probably correct in explaining that it is better to take it in the sense, "in the hands of," than to presume an understood verb. such as, "goes forth."¹⁶ The meaning of **כֹּחַ** (2a) has also been debated. Delitzsch said that only in this passage does the word, normally translated "power," mean "violence." This interpretation is unlikely. The word **כֹּחַ** often describes the ability to produce, be it sexually (Job 40:16; Gen 49:3) or with respect to the earth's fertility (Gen 4:12; Job 31:39). It can refer to sheer physical strength (Judg 16:5) or to the ability to cope with various situations Deut 8:17-18; 1 Chr 29:14; Ezra 10:13). As applied to God, it describes his ability to create (Jer 10: 12) and to deliver his people (Exod 9:16; Isa 63:1).¹⁷ God's power is his absolute freedom to act in history and even to create history. The "power" in the hands of the oppressors in Eccl 4:1 is more than their acts of violence toward the poor; it is the unrestrained freedom they have to do as they wish. The politics of power

¹⁶Gordis, *Koheleth* 238. See also Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* 91.

¹⁷John N. Oswalt, "koah," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 1:436-7.

means that the poor do not have the freedom to experience what joy life under the sun offers. The rich, meanwhile, do whatever they want. Another grammatical difficulty is found in 4:3, where אֶת אֲשֶׁר has no governing verb. The solution may be simply to supply a verb, such as קָרָאָהִי, "I called," but Gordis contends that אֶת אֲשֶׁר is a nominative, a usage he says is frequent in Mishnaic Hebrew.¹⁸ In any case, it is clear that Qoheleth considers those who have not yet been born and seen the cruelty of this world to be more fortunate than both the living and those who have lived and died.

Qoheleth expresses the depth of his outrage at the cruelty of the social structure in this passage. It makes him feel that death and even non-existence are to be preferred to life. Here again, the idea of death permeates his reflections on injustice and cruelty. In the former passage, 3:15c-17, death appears as the area of hope for the oppressed; it is "there" that God will judge the oppressor. Here, death is simply the better alternative to life. In a world such as this, how can life be said to be better than death? It is not surprising that in 3:18-22, the passage that comes between these two texts, the focus is death itself. Death, the passage says, reduced man to the level of the animals, and no one, in looking at the dead bodies of people and animals, can see any evidence that man has transcended death. God has shown us by death that we are but animals, and that not only because we all die, but because we too live by the law of the jungle.

III.4:13-16

In this text, Qoheleth asserts political ambitions and their fulfillment c' to be meaningless. In v 13 he claims that a poor but wise youth is better than an old but foolish king. In what sense is the youth "better"? the key is in the infinitive לְהִנָּחֵל (v 13b). Normally translated, "to take advice," the word is better translated, "to take warning."¹⁹ The youth's position is superior in that, unlike the king, he still knows how to protect his own interests. The youth is aware of both danger and opportunity as he moves up. The king, however, is in an entrenched position. He is like a warship that has ceased maneuvering, dropped anchor, and assumed a defensive posture. He is powerful but vulnerable.

Interpreters often assume that v 14 refers to the poor youth mentioned above, but this is not correct. First, the nearer substantive, מֶלֶךְ, is more likely to be the subject of v 14 than יָלֵד. Second, the text has not yet indicated that the youth of v 13 became king. So far; the only king mentioned is the old and foolish one. Therefore, v 14 tells us that the old king too had once been in poverty. More than that, he had actually been in prison -perhaps for political reasons since he "came forth to reign." Now, however, he is no longer astute or resourceful but rigid and cut off from political reality.

¹⁸Gordis, *Koheleth* 239.

¹⁹See 12:12, Ps 19:12, Ezek 33:6.

In due time a second youth²⁰ (the one mentioned in v 13) rises to power and takes the old king's position. Like Absalom in David's old age, he has used his youth and political cunning to gain the hearts of the people who are weary of the now aloof and inflexible aged monarch. Nevertheless, as far as Qoheleth is concerned, the new king's reign will be no more significant than that of the old one. The two together are no more than two points in the long line of history. Just as the masses of people who went before them knew nothing of them, so those who come after them will forget soon them.²¹

Qoheleth makes several points in this passage. First, he asserts that it is better to be politically weak but aware and active than to be powerful but inflexible and isolated from reality. Second, he points out that the political world is highly unstable. Because it is ever changing, it is dangerous, and part of wisdom is the ability to meet these changes. Third, he asserts the fulfillment of political ambitions to be **הַבָּל** meaningless and transitory. The motivation behind political ambition, fame and the praise of the masses is utterly vapid. Politics gives no lasting glory.

IV. 5:7-8

The next passage, 5:7-8 (English translations: 8-9), advises the reader not to be astonished when he first faces the realities of the politics of oppression. The interpretation of both of these verses is much debated. The first problem is why, in v 7, Qoheleth feels his reader should not be shocked at the sight of injustice and corruption in government. His own explanation is, in 7b, "because one bureaucrat [**גַּבִּי** here "describes the hierarchy of those who hinder justice"²²] is over another, and still other bureaucrat; are over them." But why should this fact render the reality of corruption ordinary and not surprising? Some have said that Qoheleth's point is that bureaucrats are rivals in competition with each other, while other scholars have argued that the line means that officials are protecting each other's interests.²³ Qoheleth's reasoning is not nearly so cleverly concealed; he is only saying that there are many officials, and as such there are many potentially corrupt officials and many potential occasions for corruption. Qoheleth betrays a certain (justifiable) cynicism: the more people are involved, the greater the probability for wrongdoing. V 8 is far more difficult; Gordis calls it "an insuperable crux."²⁴ The NEB translates it to mean that the best thing for a country to have is "a king whose lands are well tilled." Apart from any grammatical considera-

²⁰The phrase **הַשֵּׁנִי הַיָּלֵד** can only mean "the second youth" and not "the youth, the second (person)" as some (e.g. Eaton, Ecclesiastes 96) assert. Gordis's argument that **הַשֵּׁנִי** here means "successor" (Koheleth 245) is not convincing (see Scott, "Solomon," 224). Therefore, the second youth is the same as the one mentioned in v 13, whereas the youth of v 14, who has become the old king of v 13, is the implied first youth.

²¹"Before them" (**לְפָנֵיהֶם**) means "prior to" here, not "standing before them" (Scott, "Solomon," 225). As Gordis (Koheleth 245) notes, the king is generally described as standing before his people, not the people before the king.

²²R. Hentschke, "gabhoah." *TDOT* 2 (1975) 360.

²³Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* 101.

²⁴Gordis, Koheleth 250.

tions, it is hard to see how "a king whose lands are well tilled" offers a nation a particular advantage. Delitzsch translates the verse, "But the advantage of a country consists always in a king given to the arable land."²⁵ That is, a king should devote himself to agriculture instead of war. This interpretation, which interprets 7 as "given to" in the sense of "devoted to," reads too much into the text and does not relate to the problem of corruption. Barton's translation, "But an advantage to a country on the whole is a king --(i.e.) an agriculturalland,"²⁶ makes no sense and therefore is, as Gordis says, "obviously unsatisfactory."²⁷ Gordis's own translation ("The advantage of land is paramount; even a king is subject to the soil"²⁸), however, is equally doubtful. This translation, based on Tg. Ibn Ezra, does not relate to the context (What does the "advantage of the land. .." have to do with bureaucratic oppression?) and is grammatically most unlikely. It requires that one render **בְּכָל** as "paramount" and **נֶעֱבַד** as the adjective "subject" with **מֶלֶךְ** as its antecedent, all of which are unlikely. Norman Gottwald translates the verse, "But the gain of a country in such circumstances would be a king who serves fields."²⁹ He comments: "It would be best, he opines, if the king's absolute power were used to upbuild agriculture to the benefit of the impoverished cultivators of the soil."³⁰ Gottwald's insertion of the subjunctive mood is questionable, however, as is his rendition of the niphal **נֶעֱבַד** in the active voice. Also, the question of what this comment on agriculture has to do with an oppressive bureaucracy still remains.

The interpreter of this verse encounters two problems. The first of these is the word **בְּכָל**, "in all." While Eaton may be correct to render it as "for everyone,"³¹ it is probably best to translate it with Barton as "on the whole."³² The second is the phrase, **מֶלֶךְ לְשָׂדֶה נֶעֱבַד**. Translated literally, this phrase means "a king for a tilled field." The niphal of **עֲבַד** here, as in all other cases,³³ means "tilled." Only "field," and not "king," may act as its subject. "Tilled field," by metonymy, represents the whole concept of agriculture. The verse may be legitimately, if periphrastically, translated: "Here is something which, on the whole, benefits the land: a king, for the sake of agriculture."

The above translation clarifies the relationship of the verse to its context. Qoheleth has told the reader not to be surprised at the corruption that exists in all bureaucracies--the sheer numbers of people involved makes some degree of abuse of power inevitable. Nevertheless, Qoheleth does not espouse anarchy. Governments may be evil, but they

²⁵Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes* 294-5.

²⁶Barton, *Ecclesiastes* 126.

²⁷Gordis, *Koheleth* 250.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) 581.

³⁰Ibid. 582.

³¹Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* 101.

³²Barton, *Ecclesiastes* 126.

³³Ezek 36:9, 34; Deut 21:4.

are a necessary evil. Citing an economic example³⁴ to prove his point, Qoheleth asserts that the order and structure imposed on society by the monarch be left agricultural production. Without government, maintenance of fixed, boundaries, aqueducts, and other conditions necessary for crop production would be impossible. Naivete would expect all civil servants to be good and upright, and, disappointed in this, could turn from an unqualified acceptance of government to an unqualified disdain for all government. But Qoheleth rejects such an attitude as immature and remind: the reader that political power exists out of economic and social necessity. V. 7:6-9

Qoheleth next refers to political power in a *mashal* passage. V 7 clearly deals with political oppression, but since this verse is one among many proverbs, the reader would not necessarily expect it to relate to its context. But the verse opens with the word **כִּי**, often rendered "because," which gives the impression that what follows may be in some way explanatory of what precedes it. Eaton's explanation that **כִּי** is not here "because" but the emphatic "surely,"³⁵ while possible, overlooks the fact that every other usage of **כִּי** in this passage is explanatory (vv 3,6,9, 10, 12, and 13). The verse, as rendered in most versions, however, does not in any way appear to qualify v 6.³⁶ Some have tried to resolve the problem by translating **עֲשֶׂק** other than by the normal rendition, "oppression."³⁷ This solution is most unlikely; **עֲשֶׂק**, from the verb **עָשָׂק**, "to oppress, extort,"³⁸ elsewhere always means "oppression" or the like.³⁹ The problem is not the meaning of **עֲשֶׂק**, but **יְהוֹלִיל**, the poel of **הָלַל**. This stem is used in two other places in the OT. One is Isa 44:25, which says that the Lord makes fools of diviners (i.e. by making their predictions fail), and the other is Job 12: 17, where Job says that God makes fools of judges (in that he shows how much higher is his wisdom than theirs). In both cases the meaning of the poel of **הָלַל** is not, as many render it, "to drive mad," but to make a fool of someone by showing that what they have been saying is wrong.⁴⁰ The word has the same sense here. Oppression makes fools of the wise in that it shows that their advice (i.e. that the righteous will triumph, that people should not take bribes, that those in authority

³⁴The anarthrous state of the phrase **מִלֶּךְ לְשֹׁדָה נֶעְבְּדָה** may indicate that. Only one of several examples of the benefits of government is here listed. Proverbs, in giving examples of various types of phenomena, regularly employs anarthrous noun phrases. Cf. the various lists in Prov 30 16,19,22,30-31. See also Prov 15:13-15, where various states of mind are listed as anarthrous noun phrases (e.g., "a good heart).

³⁵Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* 110.

³⁶Delitzsch (j ecclesiastes 317) solves this problem by assuming that a line similar to Prov 16:8 has dropped from the text. This solution is, as Gordis (*Koheleth* 271) says, both "unsupported" and "much too conventional for Koheleth."

³⁷E.g. Gordis (*Koheleth* 270) translates it as "bribe." The NEB, following G. R. Driver (VT 4 [1954] 229) renders it as "slander."

³⁸BDB.

³⁹E.g. Jer 6:8 22:17; Ezek 22:7, 12; Isa 54:14; Ps 62:11.

⁴⁰See also H. Cazelles, "*hll*." *TDOT* 3 (1978) 412.

should serve in an upright manner) is worthless.⁴¹ Why should anyone suffer for his integrity or not take advantage of a way to easy money? Everybody is doing it! Hearing the advice of the hoary sage, the young; fool who knows (or thinks he knows) how the world really works, can only cackle and smirk (v 6). The real world not only seems. To falsify the ideals of wisdom and uprightness, but make them look naive.

What follows in 7b, "Bribes destroy the heart," completes the thought [in synthetic parallelism. Just as the realities of politics make the wise teacher look foolish, so the pervasiveness of corruption destroys (עֲבָרָה)⁴² 1 what Integrity people have. Each time a man accepts a bribe, he loses something of his ethics and integrity; in other words, he loses his heart.

Qoheleth concludes with a warning not to be misled by appearances. The reader should not assume that the triumph of the corrupt bureaucrat proves that the path of corruption is the path to success (v 8). On the other hand, those disposed to feel grief and anger over the squeezing of the innocent by the powerful should not allow themselves to be consumed by their own indignation (v 9). These emotions do nothing to help the victims, and only harm the one who holds on to them. Both the one who is induced to join the oppressors and the one who rages within because of Oppression are deceived by the appearance that God does not judge, VI. 8.1-8

In the next passage which deals with political power, 8:1-8, Qoheleth addresses the proper way to deal with those who hold power. V 1 is actually transitional. It concludes the preceding passage, 17: 19-29, which describes the value and scarcity of wisdom, and proleptically looks to the next discussion. The two topics tie together well since it is the "wise man" who best knows how to deal with political realities.

Context makes it clear that the "wise man" described in V 1 is more than a sage skilled in solving riddles and wordplays. The line, יוֹדֵעַ פֶּשֶׁר דָּבָר, should be rendered, "who knows how to interpret a situation," not, "who knows how to interpret a word."⁴³ Qoheleth's wise man can deal with the difficult problems of life that confront him. Another problem is the meaning of the line וְעֹז פָּנָיו יִשְׁנָא, (lit., "the strength of his face is transformed"). As several commentators have noted, the word עֹז here means "rudeness," "shamelessness," or "coarseness."⁴⁴ The verse indicates that wisdom teaches a person how to behave in society, particularly before superiors. The wise man knows how to express, and even to hide, his true feelings. Therefore, the verse is an apt prologue to 8:2-8.⁴⁵

⁴¹"The word was admirably suited to Ecclesiastes for describing the utter ineffectiveness of political wisdom" (Ibid. 413).

⁴²Benedikt Otzen, "abhadh," *TDOT* 1(1974) 22, comments, "In the wisdom literature, often this word designates destruction done by fools, by the wicked, or by human vice (always in the piel: Prov 1:32; 29:3; Ecc17:7; 9:18; cf. Ps 119:95; Eccl 3:6[?] and IQS 7:6)."

⁴³See, e.g., Barton, *Ecclesiastes* 151, and Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes* 336. Both point out that דָּבָר here means "thing" or "matter," and not "word."

⁴⁴E.g. Barton, *Ecclesiastes* 151. See Deut 28:50; Prov 7:13; 21:29; Dan 8:23.

⁴⁵So also Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes* 338.

V 2, the proper beginning to the section, begins unusually with אֲנִי ("I") without a complement verb. While some scholars follow the LXX, Tg., and Syr. in emending the word to אָנֹכִי,⁴⁶ it is best to retain אֲנִי as a dramatic ellipsis meaning, "Now I assert that. ..." ⁴⁷Qoheleth evidently refers to an oath of fealty when he encourages obedience to the king's commands "even because of the oath of God." Barton considers this line to be a pious interpolation,⁴⁸ but in fact the line is exactly in keeping with Qoheleth's outlook on life. Throughout his book, Qoheleth advises the reader at all times to avoid self destructive or needlessly painful behavior.⁴⁹ Disobedience toward the king invites trouble not only from the king but also from God, in whose name the oath of fealty was taken.

V 3 is more difficult. Qoheleth's advice is in the form of two coordinate negative imperative clauses and an explanatory "כִּי" clause. The first clause, "Do not hasten from his presence,"⁵⁰ indicates that no one should too easily abandon his position before the king. One might be inclined to withdraw from the political world for a number of reasons. One might fail or anger the king and therefore feel that position and influence have been hopelessly compromised. Or disgust with the decisions and policies of the king may tempt the counselor to resign in protest. Qoheleth's advice is not to abandon quickly proximity to authority and power. Often one does better to endure the political famine and await vindication.

The next negative clause, "Do not stand in an evil matter (לֹא עֲמֹד בְּרָעָה)," has caused a good deal of speculation. Scott's interpretation, "(Do not) hesitate to go when the errand is distasteful,"⁵¹ is unlikely.⁵² Delitzsch, similarly, reads too much into the line by seeing here a warning not to join a conspiracy against the throne.⁵³ The passage deals with proper behavior in court, not with matters of conspiracy and revolution. The text actually gives no more than a simple warning: Do not persistently champion an idea which the king opposes.⁵⁴ Sometimes one must accept political reality and refrain from risking political suicide. The reason for all this is that "the king does whatever he wishes." Kicking against the goads, while sometimes a statement of character and moral courage, is often politically self defeating. V 4 reinforces this idea, and Qoheleth's message is plain: accept political reality and work with it.

In w 5-6a Qoheleth expands his advice regarding proper decorum before authority. He says, "The one who obeys commands will not

⁴⁶Scott, Ecclesiastes (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1965) 240, and Barton, Ecclesiastes 152.

⁴⁷Gordis, Koheleth 288, cites a similar usage of XXXXX in rabbinic literature.

⁴⁸Barton, Ecclesiastes 149.

⁴⁹E.g., 2:22; 1:4; 5:2, 11; 7:16-17; 12:12.

⁵⁰The Hebrew XXXXX combines two finite verbs instead of a finite verb and complimentary infinitive. See Gordis, Koheleth 182, and Barton, Ecclesiastes 152.

⁵¹Scott, Ecclesiastes 240. Cf. RSV.

⁵²The necessity of prompt obedience is taken up in v 5 below.

⁵³Delitzsch, 7 Ecclesiastes 340. Cf. NASB.

⁵⁴Gordis (Koheleth 289) cites a Mishnaic example where (עָמַד) has the meaning, "persist in." See also 2 Kgs 23:3, which indicates that Josiah did more than simply "stand up;" he "took a stand" on behalf of Yahweh. Also Isa 50:8, where עָמַד means to stand against a legal opponent.

experience problems." Here again, the passage is not contrasting obedience with outright rebellion and revolution, but simply warns the reader not to be slack in carrying out royal commands. The phrase, "will not experience problems" (לֹא יִדַּע דְּבַר רָע), is a throwback to (דְּבַע רָע) in v 2. Here too it means "problems" or "trouble" in the sense of incurring the king's displeasure. In 5b and 6a the words (עֵת וּמִשְׁפָּט) mean "proper time and procedure."⁵⁵ If the courtier patiently awaits the proper time, and pleads his case in the proper way, he will be able to get what he wants. When dealing with authority, one needs patience and tact, not a hot head and an easily bruised ego.

In 6b-8 Qoheleth places his advice on proper behavior before authority against the backdrop of the broad realities of life. One must know how to coexist with political power "because a man's troubles are heavy upon him." In this clause (6b), כִּי is neither concessive nor temporal but is explanatory, and רָעָה refers not to moral evil but to trouble and difficulty.⁵⁶ Qoheleth expounds on this idea in v 7 and in so doing returns to a familiar theme: the future is uncertain, and therefore any decision may lead to success or disaster. One should not add to an uncertain future the problem of being unpopular with those in power.

V 8 closes off this section and again in proleptic fashion looks forward to the next. V 8a is ambiguous in that רוּחַ could mean either "wind" or "spirit." If the latter is meant, then 8a parallels 8b, both meaning that no one can escape the day of death. This interpretation, however, needlessly limits the scope of the passage. Also, there is no clear evidence that "to restrain the spirit" can serve as a metaphor for preserving life.⁵⁷ Indeed, * such an understanding of the language is harsh and unnatural. The line is more naturally taken to mean that no one can hold back the wind, i.e., the inevitable. This aptly reflects 8: 1-7: Do not break yourself against powers greater than you. Qoheleth then fills out his thought by invoking what is to him the greatest inevitability people face: death (8b). The two images combine in 8c, where he states that there is no discharge from war.⁵⁸ The obligation men have to serve in war is itself a merging of two inevitables: service to the government, the power of which is as irresistible as the wind, and the inescapable nature of death. Here, as elsewhere, Qoheleth exhorts the reader to learn to deal with the realities he faces.

A completely different idea enters at 8d. This line, "Wickedness will not let go of those who practice it,"⁵⁹ besides not dealing with the same idea as 8abc, is grammatically distinct. The first three lines all begin with (אִי) followed by a noun, whereas 8d begins with (לֹא) followed by a verb. In 8d, Qoheleth moves in a new direction. As indicated above, he here

⁵⁵See Gordis, *Koheleth* 289.

⁵⁶On, רָעָה cf. Gen 19:19; Prov 27:5; Eccl 5:13. Gordis (*Koheleth* 289-90) understands the word to mean "evil," and comments, "A wise courier will find an opportunity to execute his designs, because human weakness is widespread, and an opening is sure to appear." This is too cynical even for Qoheleth.

⁵⁷Contrary to Gordis, *Koheleth* 290.

⁵⁸Deut 20: 1 ff. is not significant for this passage.

⁵⁹The verb מַלִּיט could be legitimately translated "deliver," but here a meaning "let go of" is more natural. Cf. NIV.

proleptically introduces 8:9ff, a passage that wrestles with sin, retribution, and the theodicy.

VII. 8:9-9:6

Here Qoheleth faces a problem that is larger than, but includes, the problem of injustice and oppression: What evidence is there that God judges the wicked? This issue may apply to any form of evil, but nowhere is the problem of theodicy more urgent than in respect to oppression by the political powerful, for in no other case are the victims so helpless.

Qoheleth begins in v 9 by telling the reader that he has been considering the problems posed by "one man dominating another to harm him," i.e. oppression. Some would translate the final לֹא לְרָע as a reflexive, "to his own harm," and so understand Qoheleth to mean that oppression hurts the oppressor as much as the oppressed.⁶⁰ This translation is most unlikely. The antecedent of the pronoun is most reasonably the nearer noun, the subject. Also, while the preposition? can be reflexive, it is generally used in that way only with a verb of motion.⁶¹ Finally, a reflexive translation contradicts this passage. If oppression harms the oppressor, then the problem of theodicy disappears! But Qoheleth is deeply vexed as he considers: Do the wicked really suffer for what they do?

The Hebrew of v 10 is most difficult. The versions⁶² and a few Hebrew manuscripts indicate that instead of וְיִשְׁתַּכְּחוּ ("and they were forgotten"), the urtext read וְיִשְׁתַּבְּחוּ ("and they were praised"), and should be followed over the MT. Also, three interpretive problems confront the reader. The first is the meaning of the word וּבְכֵן. Eaton has resolved this problem and has shown that the word should be translated, "in such circumstance."⁶³ The second problem is the meaning of the words, מְקוֹם קְדוֹשׁ ("holy place"). At first glance it appears to refer to the temple, and has been taken as such by some interpreters.⁶⁴ Gordis, however, has shown convincingly that the words are a euphemism either for the burial site or for a synagogue as a place of a memorial service.⁶⁵ The words are therefore best translated periphrastically as "funeral." The third problem is that Qoheleth does not always make clear who are the subjects of the five finite verbs in this verse. Nevertheless, context indicates that there are three subject operating here: Qoheleth, who has observed many funerals; the wicked, who have been buried; and the unnamed people who buried the wicked. A reasonable translation is as follows: "And in such circumstances I saw the wicked buried. And the people came and left the funeral, at .d the wicked were praise<! in the city where they had done

⁶⁰Cf. NIV.

⁶¹See Ronald Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline* (2nd ed.; Toronto: Univ. of Toronto, 1976) 4~.

⁶²The LXX, Vg. OL, Aquila, Theodotian, Coptic, and Syriac-Hexaplar.

⁶³Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* 121. See Esth 4:16.

⁶⁴E.g. Barton, *Ecclesiastes* 153. Delitzsch (*Ecclesiastes* 346) considers it to refer to either Jerusalem or the temple.

⁶⁵Gordis, *Koheleth* 295-6.

so much wrong. This too is meaningless." The "circumstances" under which Qoheleth saw this happen were when he was meditating on the problem of oppression (v 9).

V 11 develops this idea: not only are the wicked praised at their funerals, but even if they are caught in wrongdoing the penalties⁶⁶ imposed on them are not carried out (further evidence of corruption in high places!). The average person, aware of all this, can only be inspired to imitate the evil-doer.

A dialogue of faith follows. First, Qoheleth asserts his continued belief in the maxim of wisdom that God watches over the righteous for good but that punishment will pursue the wicked (vv 12-13). This looks back to the proleptic introduction to the passage, "Evil will not deliver those who practice it. In V 14, however, he frankly confesses that what he sees often contradicts what he believes: the wicked get what the righteous deserve, and the righteous get what the wicked deserve (v 14). Faced with this "meaninglessness" (הֶבֶל), he retreats to his oft stated belief that the best thing a person can do in this life is enjoy its simple pleasures while he can (v 15). He all but abandons the search for an answer in vv 16-17 and in effect says that only a fool or a liar would claim to be able to solve this riddle.

Nevertheless, Qoheleth's despair does not drive him to doubt whether God really judges the wicked.⁶⁷ Rather, he is dismayed at appearances. In the observed world, God does not appear to judge the wicked and even the wisest of sages is unable to answer all the moral problems posed by evil, suffering, and injustice. Wisdom and righteousness do not insure against personal disaster. Also, he sees that the appearance that there is no divine justice fills the hearts of people with "insanity" (9:3)--the insanity of embarking on an endless search for love, power and victory over personal enemies (9:5). Death itself proves that such behavior is insane. Death not only permanently halts the quest for glory and power, but it renders the whole process meaningless; it is not only the person that dies, but all the glory he worked for as well. Whatever fame a person may have gained in life scarcely survives him, and the power he once possessed does not benefit him after death.⁶⁸ "A living dog is better than a dead lion" (9:4). Qoheleth concludes that humanity is vexed not because God does not judge, but because he does not appear to judge. Still, he asserts that the passions that drive men to commit acts of oppression can only be called "insane."

⁶⁶The word פְּתִיגִים means "sentence" in the sense of a decreed penalty for wrongdoing. See Esth. 1:20.

⁶⁷Contrary to J. L. Crenshaw, "Popular Questioning of the Justice of God in Ancient Israel," ZAW 82 (1970) 390. Crenshaw says that Qoheleth's response to the problem of theodicy is "despair, criticism of God for not caring, the denial of divine justice, hence of meaningful existence."

⁶⁸Qoheleth's statement that "the dead know nothing" (9:5) is not speculation about the afterlife (or the denial of it) but is the strongest possible assertion that all the power, admiration, and wealth acquired in life become immediately worthless at the moment of death. "Know" (יָדָע) carries the sense, "experience," and relates to how the dead have been totally cut off from experiencing the things they once thought important.

VIII.9:13-10:20

In this section, Qoheleth advises the reader how to deal with the caprices of absolute power. He begins by observing that rulers are often more impressed by wealth and prestige than by real ability. He tells the story of how a poor but wise resident of a small city delivered his city when it was, under siege by a mighty king. He does not tell us whether the poor man delivered the city by military strategy or by diplomacy, for that is not the issue here.⁶⁹ For all his ability, the poor man was deemed worthy of no memorial trophy or similar high honor because he did not possess political power. Rewards are given only to those who are in a position to demand them.

Sometimes not only the poor man is ignored, but his good advice is ignored as well (9:16-18). Qoheleth affirms that the abilities of a wise man provide a city with greater security than a large arsenal and accomplish far more in times of crisis than the desperate shouts of a king to his useless sycophants, but sadly notes that the best advice, if its source is of low social position, is often ignored. "One sinner destroys much good;" in other words, one oily-tongued courtesan looking out for his own interests and prestige in time of crisis can bring down the entire city. Qoheleth reinforces his point with a proverb: "As dead flies make perfumer's oil irksome,⁷⁰ so a little folly outweighs wisdom and dignity"(10:1). Gordis has captured the sense of the proverb: "Dying flies have little power to accomplish anything, yet they can destroy the oil; so fools, impotent to achieve an I good, can yet destroy what has been created by dint of wisdom."⁷¹ Also, as Eaton comments, "folly" here is "a moral rather than an intellectual complaint."⁷² A system that prefers position and prestige to true ability is both wrong and unwise, but Qoheleth, in contrast to those who blissfully extol wisdom as the all-conquering summum bonum of life, recognizes that this is how the world often works.

In 10:2-3, Qoheleth points out that the obviously poor character of the fool should tell against his ever being placed in a position of authority or having his advice heeded. The fool's heart is on the left and not the right. Qoheleth obviously does not concern himself with correct anatomy; just as, for most people, the left side is the clumsy side, so the fool always thinks in a lwrong way.⁷³ Here again, he is not describing the common oaf or buffoon the fool is someone who consistently lives without integrity or prudence. Nevertheless, Qoheleth insists that anyone with discernment can spot a fool even by the way he walks, so obvious is his folly (v 4). The astonishing thing is that the fool's unworthiness is obvious to everyone

⁶⁹Similarly, attempts to locate historically this incident (e.g., Barton, Ecclesiastes 164-5) are pointless and futile.

⁷⁰The hiphil of **שָׂא** is here used in the metaphorical sense of "to make odious, repulsive, irksome," not in the literal sense, "to cause to stink," as in most translations. It is a sensitive nose indeed that can smell a dead fly in perfume!

⁷¹Gordis, *Koheleth* 314-5.

⁷²Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* 133. ,

⁷³See Gordis (*Koheleth* 317-8), who notes that in many languages and cultures the left side stands for clumsiness and evil.

but the king, who gives him a high government post, as described in vv 4-7.

In a passage that recalls 8:3, he next tells the reader not to be too hasty to resign his post on account of an autocratic, arrogant or unwise superior. The word רוּחַ here does not mean "spirit" or "wind," but anger.⁷⁴ The wise subordinate, rather than abandon his position, will learn composure⁷⁵ in order to handle his master's bad temper and poor judgment and so prevent the king (and the land) from falling into disaster. Composure and tact, Qoheleth asserts, can prevent⁷⁶ royal mistakes that may be disastrous, evil, or both.⁷⁷

Qoheleth then says that he has seen the errors that a ruler can make. Delitzsch comments that the ruler referred to is God and that the kaph of כְּשֶׁנֶּגְהָ is here used to soften the apparent blasphemy.⁷⁸ The kaph, however, is asseverative ("indeed, truly and does not mean "like" or "as" here.⁷⁹ Moreover, understanding the word "ruler" in this (political) context to refer to God needlessly confounds the passage. Qoheleth merely means that he has seen rulers make many foolish mistakes.⁸⁰ In vv 6-7 Qoheleth gives an example of error made by a king. Often, for whatever reason, a ruler will make the worst possible choice in appointing a person to fill a high office. While his language indicates that Qoheleth's viewpoint is aristocratic, the reader should not be misled into assuming that Qoheleth's only concern is in preserving the ancient regime. His reflective pain at seeing the oppression of the poor by the rich and the sentiment expressed in 9:16 are proof enough to show that he holds no illusions about the virtue of the upper class. His point is that kings often appoint people to high offices who are unworthy or incapable. In short, the king's favor is often bestowed upon the obvious fool of v 3. In this context, the terms "slave" and "prince" may refer more to Qoheleth's estimation of the character of the individuals involved than to their social status. He has seen princes who should be slaves and slaves who should be princes.

⁷⁴Cf. 7:9; Isa 25:4; Prov 29: II; Prov 16:32 and Judg 8:3. See also Gordis, Koheleth 318, and Eaton, Ecclesiastes 134, n 3.

⁷⁵Gordis (Koheleth 318-9) notes that מַרְפָּא has three meanings: (1) "healing, cure" (2 Chr. 21:18; 36:16; Prov 4:22; 6:15; 29:1); (2) "well-being" (Prov 13:17; Jer 14:19); and (3) "relaxation of spirit, calmness" (Prov 12:18; 15:4). In this passage it means "calmness, composure."

⁷⁶Note the two distinct uses of the hiphil of נָחַל in the verse. In v 4a it means to "leave" in the sense of to "quit one's post;" in v 4b it means to "prevent" or "undo." See William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 231.

⁷⁷Delitzsch (*Ecclesiastes* 375) interprets this passage incorrectly. He says that the sin which is prevented is not the king's but the subject's: by patience he is prevented from entering a treasonous conspiracy against the king. In this verse, however, as elsewhere in the book, notions of revolution and treason simply do not appear.

⁷⁸Ibid. 376. Scott (*Ecclesiastes* 251) also believes that "ruler" here refers to God, but this position is well refuted by Eaton (*Ecclesiastes* 135).

⁷⁹Gordis, Koheleth 319, and Eaton, Ecclesiastes 135.

⁸⁰Barton (*Ecclesiastes* 170) translates (שָׁלַח) as "unintentional error" and says by using the word Qoheleth himself is being respectful to the mighty. This reads too much into the word; it should simply be translated "mistake."

Qoheleth follows this with a series of proverbs arranged in dialectic fashion. Here again, the context of the discussion is political, and the proverbs must be interpreted in that light. The first, V 8, is a familiar axiom⁸¹ which asserts that evil befalls those who plot evil plans. He who (digs a pit n ay fall into it. This is conventional wisdom speaking: you need not worry about the climbers and ambitious sycophants, because sooner or later their sin will find them out. V 9 responds to this. Even someone doing such Innocent and constructive work as quarrying stones and splitting wood is equally as likely to suffer a painful or even fatal accident. Who can say that the thief digging through a wall will always be bitten by a snake, any more than the woodcutter will always be injured by a flying splinter? The proverbs in vv 10-11 resolve this dilemma. There is no guarantee of success in life, but chances for success are increased by prudence and forethought. By sharpening the ax before starting to chop, work is mc de easier, and by having a charmer nearby, the risk of being (bitten by a snake is reduced (presumably this last bit of advice is not given for the benefit of would-be housebreakers!). Wisdom (here understood as preparation for contingencies) indeed surpasses folly (2:13).

In vv 12-15 Qoheleth reaffirms that in most situations the king will indeed favor the wise subject over the fool. A counselor's most important asset is his speech, and although the wise man's words are agreeable and satisfying (וְיִשְׂמְעוּ), the fool only entraps and destroys himself with his words (v 12). The more he talks, the more absurd and ridiculous he looks (v 13). Moreover, there is a qualitative difference between wise counsel and that of the fool. The prudent counselor's advice takes into account various contingencies, the wise man being always aware that things may not develop as expected. The foolish counselor, however, assumes in his arrogance that he understands exactly what will happen in the future, and formulates his advice accordingly. He babbles on about the future with an assurance the wise never possess (v 14). In v 15 Qoheleth strikes his final blow: the foolish counselor's advice is so bad that he cannot even give simple instructions on how to get to a town, and the one who listens to his directions will soon find himself lost and weary .⁸² Woe to him who listens to the fool's advice in weightier matters!

Ever the realist, however, Qoheleth must now qualify his assertion that wisdom will generally prevail. There is one situation in which wisdom is certain to be ignored -if the king himself is a young fool who is more intent on drinking and parties than on maintaining good government (vv 16-17). In that case, the wise counselor has no chance of success. Having advised his reader on the subject of success in politics, Qoheleth gives his counsel on personal financial success (11:1-6). As is his custom, however, he moves into this topic by mean of a transitional

⁸¹See Ps 7: 15; Prov 26:27.

⁸²V 15 should be translated, "The effort of fools wearies him who does not know the way to town." In other words, the long-winded explanation by a fool on how to get to a certain town only worries a traveler and leaves him more confused than before. The suffix on the verb וְיִשְׂמְעוּ is the antecedent to the relative וְאֵלֶּיךָ, which is itself the subject of the following relative clause with the verb יָדַע (וְאֵלֶּיךָ should not be translated "that" or "because" here). See Barton, *Ecclesiastes* 178.

passage (10:18-20). The transitional nature of this passage is evident in that it relates both to the political text above and the financial text below. The proverb of v 18 can obviously apply both to the national and to the domestic situation. V 19, similarly, tells the reader that feasting and enjoyment of the good things of life is impossible without at least some money.⁸³ Hence the government must provide for the national economy and the individual must provide for his personal economy. In v 20 Qoheleth gives a parting bit of advice which completes the transition from the political to the economic sphere: never assume that anything you say will remain private and secret. If you speak against the king or a rich man, your words will come back to haunt you.

CONCLUSION

Qoheleth has given us a portrait of a wise politician. He is foremost instructed in moral wisdom. He does not oppress the weak or accept the way of easy money by extortion or bribery. But he is far from naive and will not be shocked at the existence of corruption in high places when he sees it. Also, the wise politician does not seek power or position for the sake of glory and fame--all this he knows to be **הֶבֶל**. Nevertheless, he does not, in self-righteous arrogance, avoid the dirty world of politics. He remains close to the seat of power, and, being tactful and prudent, will know when to keep silent and yield to the king's wishes. He works for the good of the nation without sacrificing himself or his position, and patiently awaits the fall of his rival, the ambitious and arrogant counselor (the fool).

The passages we have examined also carry certain implications regarding the message of Ecclesiastes. First, Qoheleth considers the oppression of the weak by the powerful to be among the worst evils of life in this world. Oppression, he asserts, makes a world that is already difficult unbearable. For all the sorrows that people face, and despite the ultimate absurdity that all is made meaningless by death, one may still find a measure of joy in life. Food, drink, companions, a good day's work followed by a good night's sleep--these things all give real if passing pleasure in their time. Oppression, however, deprives people of even these pleasures and makes all of life bitter. Abuse of one's rights at the hands of those who are untouchable in their power makes death seem; preferable to life. Still, Qoheleth is convinced that oppression is an offense to God and subject to divine judgment. He is dismayed that in the real world the wicked appear to receive rewards rather than punishment for their deeds, and he is painfully aware that this only makes the way of righteousness and wisdom look foolish. Nevertheless, although he does not know how or where, Qoheleth is sure that God will judge. Second, although Qoheleth knows that oppression is common and even inevitable, he does not reject the idea of government or working in government. Government has a rightful role in maintaining order in

⁸³See Gordis (*Koheleth* 328) on the meaning of **יַעֲנֶה** here. The meaning of this verse is that money provides food and wine and other such things.

society. Particularly addressing himself to those with access to the royal court, he advises patience, tact, and forbearance in dealing with superiors.

Finally, the above passages make clear that large portions of Ecclesiastes are political. Qoheleth feels deeply for the suffering of the lower classes, but he is not one of them, nor does he directly address them. He speaks to those who have dealings with the king; the Sitz im Leben of large portions of Ecclesiastes is the power struggle in the royal court. Proverbs such as those found in 7:6-9, 10: 1, 8ff must be interpreted in that light. These, verses are not isolated gnomic sayings that deal with life in general, but pieces of advice to those who have access to the circles of political power. Qoheleth says a great deal to political leaders, and his message is this: by wisdom work for a government that is fair and just.

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