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The Structure of Ecclesiastes

Stephen G. Brown

I remember that once I saw a book advertised entitled *The Structure of Love*. That struck me initially with the impression that some things are best left unexplained! But this attempt at understanding the structure of Ecclesiastes is not just an attempt to divide the book into sections for its own sake. Its ultimate purpose is to provide a better understanding of the meaning of the text. It is also an apologetic against the majority view which (out of frustration or confusion) would deny a literary structure for the book of Ecclesiastes.¹

This paper attempts to demonstrate that Ecclesiastes possesses a remarkable, architectonic unity with each verse set like a jewel in a crown—or, better, stitched like a knot in a Persian carpet. Like a carpet, the divisions or seams of the composition have consistently frustrated literary analysts who, like bugs on a carpet, each differ in their perspective. This is perhaps the genius of the work, for the numerous literary analyses have each individually provided a glimpse or insight from a particular angle, as people might differ who view a prism or finely cut diamond from a different angle. The structure is best described by the German term *gestalt* which speaks of a highly integrated, untied whole whose specific properties exceed the sum of its component parts. Each verse and paragraph bears a relationship both to its immediate context and to the book as a whole. This interconnection of thoughts is supplied by parallel words and ideas found in a network of parallel passages. The work of a superior mind, the book magnificently exceeds the sum of its parts and appears to be purposely impervious to analysis in order to accomplish one of its literary purposes, namely, to show man that he is limited in his ability to discover and know the real essence and significance of a matter (cp. 8:17).

As if it were composed by an architect, the structure of Ecclesiastes may be perceived best through mathematical analysis, with each verse representing a number. So argues A. A. Wright. The results of this [p. 196](#) approach appear to verify the assumption that the verse divisions reflect the original autographs. The 222 verses suggest that a multiple is intended with the key word ‘vanity’ used as a motto and a refrain to divide or sub-divide sections or paragraphs. Corresponding to the 222 verses, the word ‘vanity’ has a numerical value of 37, a multiple of 222 by six ($37 \times 6 = 222$). Similarly, by adding the numerical value of each letter in the motto (1:2b, ‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity’) we produce the number 216, the number of verses in the book without the epilogue of [12:9–14](#). The first word of the book, ‘words’ (*dbry*), also has a numerical value of 216. It is possible that the five occurrences of the root for ‘vanity’ (*hbl*) in [1:2](#), with a numerical value of 185 (5×37), represent the central 186 verses, the body of the book ([2:1–11:6](#)). Further numerical analysis supports such observations which dovetail with the rhetorical structure, dividing the work into meaningful sections, paragraphs and smaller units.²

¹ For various views, see Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), p. 587; James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), pp. 34–49; Graham Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), pp. 11–13; Addison G. Wright, ‘The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth’, *CBO* 30 (1968), 314–320.

² see Addison G. Wright, ‘The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited: Numerical Pattern in the Book of Qoheleth’, *CBO* 42 (1980), 38–51.

A. G. Wright asserts that Ecclesiastes possesses a bifid or two-part structure with 111 verses in each half, based on rhetorical, numerical, and thematic analyses. By identifying the location and repetition of key words, Wright claims to have discovered the author's careful use of the *inclusio* and the refrain to break down the text into meaningful sections and paragraphs. He notes, for example, the strategic clustering of refrains at the end of major sections to provide greater impact. Examples include the repetition of 'vanity' (or 'futility') at the end of ch. 2 (2:15, 17, 19, 21, 23, and 26) and the threefold uses of 'cannot discover' (8:17) and 'do not know' (11:5-6) at the end of chs. 8 and 11.³ Examples of the *inclusio* include the terms 'explanation [-devices]' in 7:25 and 7:29, and the phrase 'wise man' in 8:1 and 8:17.⁴ Wright argues that the structural use of words does not undermine, but assists in developing, a tightly reasoned, coherent argument. In other words, the structure is beautifully interlocked with a logical unravelling of content and ideas.

This study provides further evidence to corroborate Wright's basic thesis and outline of the book. However, there are some differences with Wright, chiefly in the identification of chapter 3 and 9:1-12 as central passages in each half. Rather than focus upon refrains, as Wright did, I want to focus upon the cluster of words and ideas at parallel positions in adjoining and complementary passages. F. p. 197 Zimmerman pointed out that most of the verses are carefully stitched or strung together by at least one common word or phrase in adjoining verses.⁵ I believe that the same principle works on a larger scale between extended passages.

To summarize, I do not propose to attempt to trace carefully the development of the argument in a linear fashion, but will try to show how it coalesces with an architectonic or overarching structure for the whole book. Nevertheless, before we turn to the structure of the book, we do well to sketch the progress or order of argument. The author skilfully switches back and forth between discussions of *work* and *wisdom*. Each major development in the outline first analyzes some aspect of work followed by a treatment of wisdom. Like a pendulum swinging in an ever-widening arc until it completes a full circle, the book presents various analyses of activity or labour that can be observed on the earth as one looks from the present to the past (1:4-8; 1:13-15; 2:1-11; 3:9-15; 4:1-16; chs. 7-8).⁶ Each passage is then followed by a perspective that looks from the present to the future while formulating a sober, wise assessment of man's fate (1:9-11; 1:16-18; 2:12-

³ Wright, 'Riddle', *CBO* (1968), 321-323.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 331.

⁵ Frank Zimmerman, *The Inner World of Qoheleth* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1973), p. 132.

⁶ The bifid structure within each successively larger section begins with the first poem in 11:4-11, where there is a comparison between the world of nature (1:4-8) and the experience of man (1:9-11). Similarly, the following double introduction assesses the activity in the world (1:13-15) and the wisdom of man (1:16-18). Such a division into two parts carries through the rest of the book. The relationship, for example, of 1:3-11 and 3:1-22 is evident from the parallel verses (1:3, 9, 11=3:9, 15, 22), not just from their similar structure of conjoining the programmatic question of the book with a poem (3:1-8 with 3:9). The following two sections, 2:1-26 and 3:1-22, possess similar formats to the previous units and to each other. The phrase 'I said to myself' heads the second half of each passage (1:16; 2:15; 3:17-18). The relationship between the first parts of each section suggests that 3:10, for example, spins off from 1:13-14, probably for the purpose of reviewing the source of man's dilemma—God. This method continues into the second half where the first part, chs. 7-8 (as opposed to the second part of the second half, chs. 9-11) begins by announcing the investigation to follow (the work of man in 2:3; the work of God in 8:17). It is also worth noting that the second half of the book has a similar format with the initial question of 6:12 answered in chs. 7-8 (see 8:5) and the final question of 6:12 in chs. 9-11.

[23](#); [3:16-22](#); [5:8-6:9](#); chs. [9-11](#)).⁷ The former [p. 198](#) passages look for what is 'good' for man as he works amidst God's work ([2:3](#); [3:11](#); [7:18](#)). The latter passages turn from dwelling on the past ([1:11](#); [2:16](#)) to consider man's present, grievous condition ([1:18](#); [2:17](#), [23](#); [5:13](#), [16](#); [6:2](#)) and his imminent death ([2:14](#); [3:19-20](#); [5:15](#); [9:2](#), [10](#)). It is the genius of Ecclesiastes that such a well-organized argument fits within the grid of a larger literary structure; and to this we now turn. We will examine the book as a whole before analyzing its individual parts.

A. G. Wright's discernment of a bifid structure for the book, in two halves of 111 vv. each, provides a starting point for our method. The comparison of the halves of the book provides some remarkable parallels for our thesis. Each half begins with an introduction of similar length ([1:1-11](#); [6:10-7:12](#)), followed by sections of 32 and 34 vv. respectively, which conclude with the exhortation to enjoy life ([1:13-2:26](#); [7:13-8:17](#)). Some parallels often occur on (nearly) the same line number of each half, like the introductory proverb about not straightening what God has bent ([1:15](#); [7:13](#)) and the pivotal verses in the middle of each section where the author decides to pursue a wise solution ([2:12](#); [7:25](#)). The introductory comments of each half include the admonition to 'see' or 'consider' in terms of what is 'good' ([2:1](#); [7:13-14](#)). Other parallels include the author's determination to 'test' what is good ([2:1](#), with pleasurable experiences; [7:23](#), with wisdom) with adjoining verbs in the first person ([2:1ff](#); [7:23ff](#)), followed by disappointing results characterized as 'futile' ([2:15-22](#); [8:10](#), [14](#)) and a reference to 'the hand of God' ([2:24](#); [9:1](#)).

The centre pieces of each half of the book ([3:1-22](#); [9:1-12](#)) occur in the exact centre of each half, containing 22 and 12 vv. respectively. The *inclusio* 'sons of men' begins and ends these sections, again at (nearly) the same point ([3:10](#)//[9:3](#); [3:19](#)//[9:12](#) occur at the sixty-first lines). The fifty-sixth line (or centre verse) of each half again advocates the enjoyment of life under God ([3:12](#); [9:7](#)). The sovereign presence of God dominates both passages, occurring eight times in [3:10-18](#) and heading each half of [9:1-12](#) ([9:1](#), [7](#)). Other parallels, showing the close correspondence of chs. [3](#) and [9:1-12](#), include the predominance of the words 'all' ([3:11](#), [14](#), [19-20](#); [9:1-4](#), [6](#), [8-11](#)), 'fate' ([3:19](#); [9:2](#)), 'time' ([3:1-8](#), [11](#), [17](#); [9:8](#), [11-12](#)), 'share/lot' ([3:22](#); [9:6](#)), and the allusion to ([3:20](#)) and mention of Sheol ([9:10](#)). Note also the death of animals in [3:18-19](#) and [9:4](#) and the words 'love' and 'hate' in both [3:8](#) and [9:1](#).

The final sections of each half ([4:1-6:9](#); [9:13-12:14](#)) contain 45 and 50 vv. respectively. Thus, with the initial introduction and poem, the first half has a sequence of 44+22+45 vv. and the second half a sequence of 49+12+50 vv. The chief admonition to enjoy life again [p. 199](#) occurs as a conclusion at the thirty-fourth line of each section ([5:18](#); [11:9](#)) as in the first parallel sections above ([1:12-2:26](#); [7:13-8:17](#)). Other parallels include the references to a king just before ([4:13ff](#).//[9:14ff](#).) and after ([5:9](#).//[10:16ff](#).) centre paragraphs ([5:1-7](#); [10:2-3](#)), the poor wise man ([4:13](#); [9:15-16](#)), 'many words' ([5:3](#), [7](#); [10:12](#), [14](#)), the fool's lack of knowledge ([5:1](#); [10:15](#)), the fool's words ([5:3](#); [10:12-14](#)), the word 'mistake' ([5:6](#); [10:5](#)), the word 'land' ([5:9](#); [10:16-17](#)), the mention of sleep with rich men ([5:12](#); [10:20](#)), the word 'sweet' ([5:12](#); [11:7](#)), the phrase 'an evil I've seen' ([5:13](#); [10:5](#)), the conjunction of 'days', 'darkness', 'vexation' and 'many' ([5:17](#), [20](#); [11:8-10](#)), the

⁷ These second parts of each section are connected in the same way as the first parts. For example, the phrase 'what will occur after him' in [3:22](#) derives from [1:11](#) (cp. also [1:9](#) and [3:15](#)) and also becomes the 'final question' of the second half of the book ([6:12](#); [7:14](#); [8:7](#); [10:14](#); [11:5-6](#)). For another example, [5:15-17](#) takes off on [3:16-22](#) by stressing the unique grievance of man's inability to accomplish anything between birth and death. Similarly, note the reference to the grave as 'one place' in [3:20](#) and [6:6](#).

verbs 'remember' and 'rejoice' (5:19-20; 11:8), the use of one's 'eyes' (6:9; 11:9), and perhaps the conjunction of 'more' with 'wise man' (6:8; 12:9).

Parallels between these sections suggest there is intended interaction and interplay between the halves of the book. Do the halves speak to each other? For example, is the depressing reference to 'darkness' (i.e. death) in 5:17 intended to be dissipated by its corresponding occurrence in the second half (11:8, 10) where the antidote to death's cloudy pall is subscribed? Why not? The author states in 7:18, 'It is good that you grasp one thing, and also not let go of the other; for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them.' Perhaps this verse should be applied to the reader who is supposed to balance or juggle the significance of parallel lines or passages.

Though it is remarkable to find so many instances of alignment between the halves of the book, it is no less astounding to find that the same phenomenon occurs within each half of 111 verses, between the quarters of each half. Just as the central teachings on each half can be found exactly in the middle verses of each half (3:12; 9:7), the middle verses of each quarter of the book (2:10-11, 5:2-3, 7:25-26, and 10:17-18) serve as thematic centres in the 32 or 34 verse passages compared above, which (we will see) are chiasmic. The only exception is 10:17-18, which is located in the conclusion of the fourth and last chiasmus. The importance of recognizing the four chiasmi in order to understand the structure of the book is evident. The remainder of this paper will focus upon the viability and relationship of these four chiasmi, which will enable a better understanding of the strategy and focus of the book.⁸ p. 200

The first chiasmus of 32 verses is thematic, containing an introduction (1:13-18), personal experiences (2:1-9), central summary (2:10-11), personal reflections on experiences (2:12-23), and conclusion (2:24-26). This chiasmus is also a bifid structure, with parallels between 2:1-9 and 2:12-23. The two passages first discuss the role of folly, then evaluate the results of labour, ending with a conclusion that there is no profit in labour. Finally, some parallels with the second chiasmus should be noted. There is (1) the initial mention of 'pleasure' as a measure for experience (2:1; 4:8); (2) the loss of the 'fruit of one's labour', at death (2:18-20; 5:15); (3) the relationship of sleep to one's labour, preceding the admonition to enjoy life (2:23; 5:12); and (4) the need for divine enabling noted after the admonition to enjoy one's labour (2:25; 5:19).

After 11 vv. of prologue and 33 vv. of autobiography (or 44 vv. to the end of ch. 2), the author spends the middle 22 vv. (3:1-22) of the first half of the book (1:1-6:9) elucidating God's role in the world. After the introductory verse (3:1), each section of seven vv. (2-8, 9-15, 16-22) begins with a reference to time (vv. 2, 11, 17), respectively dealing with the events in time, the undiscoverable precedents set in the past by God (v. 11), and the unknowable prospects of man in the future (vv. 21-22). As noted already, there are parallels with the centre of the second half of the book in 9:1-12.

The second quarter section (4:1-6:9) has a more elaborate chiasmus. It has two parallel parts (4:1-16; 5:8-6:9) separated by a centre passage 5:1-7. There are two halves in this centre passage (5:1-3; 5:4-7) marked by the *inclusio* 'God' (5:1, 7) and 'word(s)' (5:2, 7). Each half of 5:1-7 concludes with a reference to 'dreams ... many words' (5:3, 7). The shift from much effort in v. 3 to emptiness in v. 7 may be parallel to the frustration accorded to labour in 4:1-16 and the greater stress upon the lack of satisfying

⁸ The inverted parallel structure of a chiasmus (e.g., a-b-c-d-c'-b'-a') can be understood more clearly by the Western mind if we begin with the middle point and work outward to the end. This method compares similar points (e.g. c with c', then b with b'). As one synthesizes similar ideas or contrasts different ideas into two parallel columns, the content and meaning of the chiasmus becomes discernible.

reward from one's labour in [5:8-6:9](#). The central section of [5:1-7](#) would then serve as a turning point in the second quarter of the book, as would be expected.

This centre paragraph is framed by comments about a king and government ([4:13-16](#); [5:8-9](#)) just like the corresponding centre paragraph of the fourth quarter ([9:13-11:6](#)). Its final verse ([5:7](#)), the middle verse of the second quarter, contains man's highest obligation to fear God, a command also central to the first half of the book ([3:14](#)) as well as the second half where it serves as an *inclusio* for the third quarter ([7:18](#); [8:12-13](#)) and a conclusion for the whole book ([12:14](#)).

Just as [5:1-7](#) has two halves, so does [4:1-16](#), the first half of the second quarter. The *inclusio* 'living' demarcates [4:1-16](#) which is then divided into halves by the introductory phrase 'then I looked again' p. 201 ([4:1](#), [7](#)), the refrain 'striving after wind' ([4:6](#), [16](#)), and the *inclusio* 'there is no end' ([4:8](#), [16](#)). The second half of ch. 4 shifts from the advantage of one (vv. [1-6](#)) to the advantage of two (vv. [7-16](#)), or from the advantage of having no enemy to the advantage of having a companion.

Finally, like the first half and centre part of this quarter, the second half of this quarter can also be divided into halves ([5:8-17](#); [6:1-6](#)) which have many parallels with each other⁹ and also with [4:1-16](#). The first half of this quarter ([4:1-16](#)) discusses oppression ([4:1](#)), death ([4:2-3](#)), the dissatisfaction of riches ([4:8](#)), and a poor lad ([4:13](#)). The last 22 vv. ([5:8-6:9](#)) also contain the same sequence of ideas. Like the first half, the second half also begins with the idea of oppression ([5:8](#)), followed by two parallel sequences which refer to the earning of riches ([5:10-12](#), [18-20](#)), the hoarding and dissatisfaction of riches ([5:13-15](#); [6:1-3](#)), and death and poverty ([5:16-17](#); [6:4-8](#)). Common words and ideas are lack of satisfaction ([5:10](#); [6:3](#), [7](#)), eating ([5:12](#)//[6:2](#); [5:17](#)//[6:7](#)), riches ([5:13](#); [6:2](#)), grievous evil ([5:13](#); [6:2](#)), fathers ([5:14](#); [6:3](#)), good things ([5:11](#); [6:3](#), [7](#)), birth and death ([5:15-16](#); [6:3-4](#)), darkness ([5:17](#); [6:4](#)), and advantage ([5:16](#); [6:7](#)).

Stripping life of any advantage, these issues in [5:8-6:9](#) focus on the concluding exhortation to rejoice ([5:18-20](#)), which occurs in the middle of [5:8-6:9](#) and is highlighted with the term 'behold'. The exhortation appears to serve as a final conclusion to the first half of the book and is echoed in the concluding proverb of [6:9](#) at the end of the 'supplementary' parallel sequence. The location of the exhortation is intriguing, for it could serve as a beginning, middle or end section. (1) The phrase 'here is' (lit. 'behold') begins an earlier section ([4:1](#)) and could serve to introduce [5:18-6:9](#). As a beginning statement for [5:18-6:9](#), vv. [18-20](#) would parallel [5:10-12](#) which also deal with the problem of making a living and enjoying life. (2) Better as a middle statement, vv. [18-20](#) stand at the centre of [5:8-6:9](#) and would be the main teaching of the section, wrapping up the advice of vv. [10-17](#) and introducing ideas developed in [6:1-9](#) (such as one's years or length of life, and the ability or empowerment to enjoy life). (3) But best of all, one can see [5:18-20](#) as a final statement for [5:8-17](#), occurring at the thirty-fourth verse of a quarter section like [2:24-26](#), [8:15-17](#), and [11:8](#). As a conclusion, vv. [18-20](#) would parallel [6:9](#), which also stresses the importance of enjoying the present rather than preoccupying p. 202 oneself with the future. Hence, [5:18-20](#) and [6:7-9](#) would be parallel and function as a fitting double conclusion for the second quarter, or indeed, for the entire first half.

There is good reason to apply [6:8-9](#) to the entire first half of the book. The relationship between the first and second quarters is suggested appropriately in the concluding verse of the first half: 'What the eyes see is better than what the soul desires' ([6:9](#)). The first quarter represents the good use of eyes or the best of what man could see and experience ([2:10](#), [14](#)) while the second quarter represents the futility and frustration of souls caught

⁹ See the recent article by Daniel C. Fredericks, 'Chiasm and Parallel Structure in Qoheleth 5:6-6:9', *JBL* 108 (Spring, 1989), 17-35.

up in the trap of seeking to attain the desires of their appetites ([4:8](#); [5:10-11](#); [6:3](#), [7](#)). Desires, by this definition, always exceed available resources. Like [6:9](#), [6:8](#) applies to the first six chapters. The first question of [6:8](#) recalls the relationship of wise and foolish men in ch. [2](#) and the second question (v. [8b](#)) recalls the issue of riches and poverty in chs. [4-6](#). These questions also serve to introduce crucial issues left to the second half of the book regarding the relative importance of wisdom ([7:11-12](#); [8:12-13](#); [10:2-3](#), [10](#)). Similarly, [6:7](#) is not just a conclusion for [6:1-6](#), but deals with the issues of endless labour and eating that permeate all of [4:1-6:6](#).

The second half of the book begins much like the first half with introductory questions about man's existence on earth followed by a uniquely conceived group of verses. The evocative string of proverbs in [7:1-12](#) thus functions like the analogic poem in [1:3-11](#). The questions in [6:11-12](#) present the issues of the second half. The question of [6:11](#), 'What then is the advantage to a man?', has already been answered and simply leads to further questions in [6:12](#). The first question of [6:12](#) has already been answered to some extent in the first half (cp. [2:3](#), [24](#); [3:12](#), [22](#); [5:17](#)). The second question of [6:12](#) is answered most fully in the second half ([7:14](#); [8:7](#); [10:14](#)). The two questions deal with the chief issues of the third and fourth quarters: (1) 'finding' or 'discovering' what is good for a man to do (chs. [7-8](#)); and, (2) 'knowing' what is the future (chs. [9-11](#)).

The collection of proverbs (vv. [1-12](#)) focuses on seven 'better' sayings (the quote of v. [10b](#) makes eight). The twelve verses begin the second half of the book much as [1:1-11](#) did the first half. Their import is summarized in vv. [13-14](#) which introduce the second half. To show the consistency of the writer's method, we should point out that the word 'futility' appears to divide the collection between vv. [6](#) and [7](#); which would make the word 'oppression' begin the second half of the collection of proverbs just as it began the second half of chs. [1-6](#) ([4:1](#)) and the second half of chs. [4-6](#) ([5:8](#)). The twelve verses function to give the better side of life—that of wisdom. One can cope, with life [p. 203](#) better with wisdom and the rest of the book demonstrates the advantage of wisdom in the face of the unknown ([8:1](#); [9:16](#); [10:10](#)).

The third quarter ([7:13-8:17](#)) is clearly chiastic. Setting off the centrepiece of [7:25-29](#), the three sections of ch. [8](#) correspond inversely to the three sections of [7:13-24](#):

7:13-14	A Man cannot discover the work of God (with exhortation)
7:15-18	B Fear God despite the prosperity of the wicked
7:19-24	C The vicissitudes of the wise
7:25-29	D Man cannot discover an explanation
8:1-9	C' The vicissitudes of the wise
8:10-14	B' Fear God despite the prosperity of the wicked

This third quarter begins with the command to consider or 'see' which appears to recur in the middle section (7:25-29) as an *inclusio* to suggest a divide between the seventeen vv. of 7:13-29 and the seventeen vv. of 8:1-17. The middle section of 7:25-29 is the apex or chief point of the third quarter and is bordered by questions beginning with 'who' (7:24b; 8:1a). The key term 'discover' or 'find', which begins and ends chs. 7-8 (7:14; 8:17), occurs seven times in vv. 26-29. The term 'explanation' or 'devices', representing the sum total of knowledge, frames this central paragraph in vv. 25 and 29 and also occurs in the dead centre of the paragraph in v. 27.

The correspondence of paragraphs A and A' is thus evident in the *inclusio* 'man cannot discover' which occurs in 7:14 and three times in 8:17, the last verse of the quarter. A second obvious connection between A and A' is the *inclusio* 'the work of God' (7:13; 8:17), which also functions as an *inclusio* for the second half of the book (7:13; 11:5). As noted already, this third quarter parallels the first quarter, beginning with an admonition 'to consider' (2:1; 7:13) and ending with the exhortation to enjoy life, at nearly the same line of each half (2:24; 8:15). After citing all the problems the wise must face in the world in chs. 7-8, the advice to enjoy life still holds true and answers the introductory question of 6:12a, 'Who knows what is good for man during his lifetime?'

Paragraphs B and B' of the third quarter weigh the merits of righteousness as opposed to wickedness, advocating the fear of God in spite of the apparent success of the wicked (7:18; 8:12-13). Both passages mention the fear of God, the wicked man, the lengthened days of the wicked, and the righteous and the wicked receiving the reward of the other.

Paragraph C and C' each begin by noting the 'strength' of wisdom p. 204 (7:19; 8:1) and implicitly uphold its practice regardless of circumstance. Other common terms include 'heart' (7:21-22; 8:5) and 'word' (7:21; 8:4). Both paragraphs deal with the exercise of rule and authority (7:19; 8:4, 9), insubordination (7:21-22; 8:3) and the limits of the wise (7:23-24; 8:7-8). Another parallel between each paragraph is the question about who can understand the past (7:24) or the future (8:7), which apparently reflects the continued fluctuation between a discussion of the past (e.g. 3:15) and the future (e.g. 3:22) in the first half, in answer to the questions in 6:12a and 6:12b. Paragraph C is defined by the *inclusio* 'wisdom' (7:19, 24). Paragraph C' has two parallel parts, an illustration (8:1-4) and an explanation (8:5-9), evident from the repetition of words in the second part such as 'keep' (vv. 2, 5), 'command' (vv. 2, 5), 'pleases' or 'delights' (vv. 3, 6), 'evil' or 'trouble' (vv. 3, 5, 9), and 'authority' (vv. 4, 8-9).

Between the third and fourth quarters of the book stands the centrepiece of the second half (9:1-12), which corresponds to the centrepiece of the first half (3:1-22) in both position and content. As noted above, both centrepieces use the *inclusio* 'sons of men' and each puts the exhortation to enjoy life on the fifty-sixth line of its respective half of the book, the exact middle of its section and the exact middle of its respective one hundred and eleven verses. Another *inclusio* for vv. 1-12 is 'man does not know' (vv. 1, 12) and also the 'hand' (vv. 1, 10). Verses 1-6 discuss the certainty of death and vv. 7-12 encourage the living of life to the fullest in light of death's approach. The first six verses are framed by the terms 'love' and 'hate' (vv. 1, 6). The twelve verses are divided further into four paragraphs of three verses each with each paragraph separated by the refrain 'under the sun' (vv. 3, 6, 9).

The final quarter (9:13-12:14) contains a chiasmus in its first half (9:13-10:20):

9:13	A Introduction
9:14-16	B Wisdom is better than much folly
9:17-10:1	C Wisdom is vulnerable to a little folly
10:2-3	D The contrast of wise and foolish men
10:4-9	C' Wisdom is vulnerable to a little folly
10:10-15	B' Wisdom is better than much folly
10:16-20	A' Conclusion

The first indication of this chiasmus derives from the chiasmic arrangement of key terms, such as 'city' ([9:14](#); [10:15](#)), 'king' ([9:14](#); [10:16](#), [20](#)), 'strength' ([9:16](#); [10:10](#), [17](#)), 'words' and 'wisdom' ([9:15-18](#); [10:10-14](#)), 'quietness/abandon/allay' (Heb. *nuah*. [9:17](#); [10:4](#)), 'ruler' [p. 205](#) ([9:17](#); [10:4](#)), 'fool/folly' ([9:17](#); [10:6](#)), 'sinner/offence' (Heb. *hata'*. [9:18](#); [10:4](#)), 'weapons/axe' ([9:18](#); [10:10](#)), with the centre verses being [10:2-3](#) or paragraph D.

Paragraph D is the structural and thematic centre of [9:13-10:20](#). It contrasts the hearts (i.e. minds) of the wise and the foolish (cp. [7:4](#)). A shift of emphasis occurs here: before v. [2](#) it is wisdom coping with folly; from v. [3](#) it is folly succeeding for lack of wisdom.

Paragraph C portrays wisdom as both superior ([9:17-18a](#)) and vulnerable to folly ([9:18b-10:1](#)), which is chiasmically parallel to wisdom's power ([10:4](#)) and weakness ([10:5-9](#)) in paragraph C'. Paragraph C stresses the small amount of folly needed to undermine great wisdom. Paragraph C' dwells on examples of folly diminishing the wise, resulting in large-scale social upheaval ([10:5-7](#)). The four aphorisms of [10:8-9](#) correspond to the one in [10:1](#).

Paragraphs B and B' counterbalance paragraphs C and C' by stressing that wisdom is better than much folly and strength ([9:16](#); [10:10](#)), in spite of the fact that the words of the wise are customarily ignored ([9:16](#); [10:12](#)). Common terms, cited above, are 'city', 'strength', 'words', 'wisdom' and 'king'. Beyond the borders of the chiasmus itself there are terms framing the chiasmus: bird ([9:12](#); [10:20](#)), bread ([9:7](#), [11](#); [10:19](#); [11:1](#)), hand(s) ([9:10](#); [10:19](#); [11:6](#)), evil ([9:12](#); [11:2](#)), and, perhaps, oil ([9:8](#); [10:1](#)). The chiasmic relationship of the opening and closing sections ([9:13-15](#); [10:16-20](#)) dealing with a king is more apparent when both passages are compared in terms of [4:13-16](#). The latter passage, also about a king, supplies the concept of a poor person (Heb. *miskén*. [4:13](#)) for [9:15-16](#) and the idea of a youthful king for [10:16](#).

The passages about a king or ruler appear to be strategically interrelated as to their function throughout the book, located just before and after the middle of the second chiasmus ([4:13-16](#); [5:8-9](#)), the third chiasmus ([7:19](#); [8:2-5](#)), and the fourth chiasmus ([9:14](#); [10:4-5](#), [16-17](#)). A reference to kings also occurs just before the middle of the first chiasmus ([2:8](#)). This uniformity of references further supports the literary structure under consideration.

The extended treatment of a king's role at the end of the chiasmus in [10:16-20](#) has a structural and semantic similarity with [10:4-9](#) (perhaps related to the connection of vv. [3](#) and [15](#)). Common terms are 'prince' (vv. [7](#), [16](#), [17](#)), 'land' (vv. [7](#), [16](#), [17](#)) and 'strength' (vv. [10](#), [17](#)). Further, just as the positive recommendation of v. [4](#) is contrasted with several problems (vv. [5-9](#)), so the problem of v. [16](#) is contrasted with several implied recommendations. The formula would appear to be one plus four or five (i.e.v. [4](#) + vv. [5-9](#); v. [16](#) + vv. [17-20](#)). Thus, [p. 206](#) [10:16-20](#) appears to serve in a supplementary role to buttress and reinforce the previous argument, like an appendix. It resembles [6:1-9](#) in role and function at the end of the first half of the book. Its importance should not be minimized, being the conclusion of a chiasmus as well as the midpoint of the last quarter of the book.

Looking back on the third and fourth quarters as a whole, it is important to note further structural indicators regarding their relationship and parameters. First of all, besides their chiastic structures and length, [7:13-8:17](#) parallels [9:13-11:6](#), in much the same way as the first half of the book parallels the second half by the use of the same sequence of key words or concepts: wisdom ([7:19](#); [9:13](#)), city ([7:19](#); [9:14](#)), ruler ([7:19](#); [9:17](#)), sin ([7:20](#); [9:18](#); [10:1](#)), a contrast in the centre paragraph (man vs. woman, [7:25-29](#); right vs. left, [10:2-3](#)), (wise) heart ([7:26](#); [10:2-3](#)), composure before a ruler ([8:2-4](#); [10:4](#)), evil and injury ([8:6](#), [8-9](#); [10:5](#), [8-9](#)), the future and the unexpected ([8:7-8](#); [10:8-9](#), [14](#)), time ([8:9](#) [Heb.]; [10:17](#)), and again, a city ([8:10](#); [10:15](#)).

Secondly, regarding their parameters, these two chiasmi are enclosed together by the key words of the second half of the book: 'the work of God' ([7:13](#); [8:17](#); [11:5](#)) and 'good' ([6:12](#); [7:13](#), [18](#); [8:17](#); [11:6](#)). Other important frame words refer to cursing ([7:19-22](#); [10:20](#)), a city ([7:19](#); [10:15](#)), and scornful words ([7:21](#); [10:14](#)).

The last three paragraphs of the book appear to expand successively upon each other as concluding remarks. As noted above, there are some instances of *inclusio* in [10:16-20](#) from ch. [7](#), and other examples of *inclusio* from [11:1-3](#) that appear in ch. [9](#), but generally speaking, [10:16-20](#) concludes the fourth quarter, [11:1-6](#) encompasses the second half, and [11:7-12:8](#) covers the whole book. Admittedly, [11:1-6](#) does pose some problems for such a simple arrangement, being both a part of the fourth quarter and at the same time hearkening back to the prologue with the mention of water (v. [1](#)), earth (v. [2](#)), wind (vv. [3-4](#)), and the sun in the adjoining verse (v. [7](#)). But these exceptions appear to simply reflect the comprehensive and transitional character of [11:1-6](#) which serves to conclude the fourth quarter while anticipating the final conclusion of [11:7-12:8](#). The final conclusion of [11:7-12:8](#) serves to recall the natural elements and cycles of ch. [1](#) as well as or better than [11:1-6](#) which, tied together by the *inclusio* 'do not know' (vv. [2](#), [5-6](#)), appears to serve two purposes. More specifically, [11:1-4](#) appears to frame chs. [9-11](#) and [11:5-6](#) encloses chs. [7-11](#). Compare the urgent admonition to work hard amidst misfortune and uncertainty in [11:1-4](#) to [9:10-12](#) and the emphases in [11:5-6](#) to [6:12](#) and [7:13-14](#), [18](#) about not knowing the work of God or what is good. [p. 207](#)

Keeping in mind the symmetry of the entire work, the third and final conclusion of [11:7-12:7](#) expands its scope to the whole book and appears to act as a counterbalance to the introduction of the book ([1:1-11](#)). It is here that the issue Of the natural cycle is closed and the motto 'all is vanity' is reaffirmed ([1:2](#); [12:8](#)). This final twelve-verse conclusion also appears to balance or reflect the introduction of the second half ([7:1-12](#)) and possibly the twelve verses preceding the fourth quarter ([9:1-12](#)). Considering the similarities between [9:1-12](#) and [3:1-22](#), comparisons can also be made between [11:7-12:8](#) and [3:1-22](#).

This analysis has attempted to show the highly structured parallels between the halves and quarters of the book in order to add further confirmation to the strict

delimitation of paragraphs following the scheme of A. A. Wright. Such structure provides facility in interpretation, accenting the stress on the futility of man's labour in the first six chapters and the inscrutability of God's work in the last six. In the first six chapters the author repeatedly emphasizes that there is no lasting value, advantage, or profit to man's efforts ([1:3](#); [2:11](#), [22](#); [3:9](#), [16](#); [6:8](#), [11](#)). The last six chapters reveals the only possible advantage for man in a world where God's purposes are unclear: the advantage of having wisdom ([7:11-12](#); [10:10-11](#)).¹⁰

Further assistance to understanding the message of Ecclesiastes has been found in the strategy of chiasmic quarter-sections. First of all, each chiasmus highlights the chief topic or subject under discussion at the apex or centre of the chiasmus ([2:10-11](#); [5:1-7](#); [7:25-29](#), and [10:2-3](#)). Each chiasmus also helps to frame a central passage of each half ([3:1-22](#); [9:1-12](#)). Secondly, this structural breakdown emphasizes the climactic and conclusive authority of the series of exhortations which admonish man to enjoy his lot in life to the best of his ability by placing them strategically as a conclusion at the end of each chiasmic section and by highlighting them in the centres of chs. [3](#) and [9:1-12](#). These seven exhortations represent the chief message of the book and give a positive response to the programmatic question ([1:3](#); [2:22](#); [3:9](#); [5:11](#), [16](#); [6:8](#), [11](#)) which questions the value or advantage of man's life and [p. 208](#) work in the face of grief ([2:24-26](#)), despair ([3:12](#), [22](#)), oppression ([5:18-20](#)), injustice ([8:15](#)), and the uncertainty ([9:7-9](#)) and brevity of life ([11:7-10](#)). As noted before, it is amazing that these exhortations match up at the same locations in each half; near the forty-fourth lines ([2:24-26](#); [8:15-17](#)), at the exact centre of each half in the fifty-sixth lines ([3:12](#); [9:7](#)), and at the twelfth line from the end of each half ([5:18-20](#); [11:7-10](#)), not counting the epilogue of [12:9-14](#). It should be noted again that the first and third exhortations of each half occur at or near the thirty-fourth line in their respective chiasmus. Finally, it should also be inferred that what is true of each chiasmus or quarter section is applicable to the structure of the whole book. The centre of each half represents the central message of each half and is not fully applied until the end of a half or the end of the book.

The genius of Ecclesiastes is its unusual, careful utilization of both space and time, that is, the development of both a highly developed symmetry and a closely reasoned, logical, sequence of thought. It is a rare artistic achievement, even in great literature, to have the visual symmetry of a painting and the logical, aural development of a symphony. The reader could miss the structure of the work altogether as the flow of thought is absorbingly complex, to say the least, but the structure suggests and provokes a higher and more sophisticated dimension of interpretation once it is discerned and appreciated. The author would have the reader transcend his customary recitation to attain the higher level of meditation enjoyed by the wise. Subtly and delightfully, the author skilfully leads the reader to a treasure of wisdom which exceeds the sum of its component parts. The highly integrated nature of the work is the expression of a determined effort to search out the nature of the world; and this perception leaves little place for the common view that the book is a fragmented, disorganized conglomeration of miscellaneous and unrelated topics and sayings.

¹⁰ Advantage or profit is not to be confused with man's portion or reward ([2:10](#), [21](#); [3:22](#); [5:17](#), [18](#); [9:6](#), [9:11:2](#)), which refers to man's enjoyment and participation in the good things that God provides. Man's focus should be on enjoyment itself, which should include his work, and not just upon work and its results by themselves. Thus the book teaches that man should try to find a permanent profit from his work, but he should be content with the passing joys that come and go ([6:9](#)). In other words, a man's portion cannot be kept as profit for the future.

Stephen G. Brown delivered this paper to the Evangelical Theological Society's 41st Annual Meeting, in San Diego, California, in November 1989. It is reprinted by permission. p. 209

New Frontiers in African Theology

F. Burton Nelson

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One of the embarrassing realities of contemporary American life is the increasing paucity of geographical awareness about the world. According to a Gallup survey in 1988, only 57% of adults in the United States could locate England on a map. A poll in 1987 among high school students in Dallas disclosed that 25% could not identify Mexico as the contiguous border country on the south!¹ In still another survey, an international Gallup inquiry on geographical knowledge, Americans 18 to 24 years old scored lowest among the developed countries surveyed, well below young Mexicans whose overall level of education is considerably below that of the U.S.A.²

So acute has this problem become that a panel of governors warned that 'the economic well-being of the United States was in jeopardy because so many Americans are ignorant of the languages and cultures of other nations.'³ They recommended a school curriculum which would convey an international perspective and emphasize both geography and foreign languages. 'Global education' momentum is consequently rising in a number of states. Perhaps this momentum will be enhanced by the stated intention of George Bush to be known as 'the Education President'. Hope springs eternal among all concerned citizens.

Geographical considerations relate also to contemporary theology. The globalization of theology has become a profound fact of life which we theologians overlook to our impoverishment and detriment. This point was made fifteen years ago with precision and perception by African John S. Mbiti, and he has continued to underscore it from strategic ecumenical posts both in Europe and in Africa. His probing question concerns the implications for the future of Christian theology, considering that 'within our own lifetime the axis of Christendom will shift from the Northern to the Southern regions of the world ... the p. 210 new centres of ecclesiastical gravity'.⁴ He reports that many theologians of the younger churches are scandalized and affronted that Christian scholars in older Christendom know so little about churches in the Third World. He even suggests that with

¹ 'Global Issues Education', *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 20, 1989.

² *New York Times*, Feb. 27 and March 12, 1989.

³ *New York Times*, Feb. 27, 1989.

⁴ John S. Mbiti, 'Theological Impotence and the Universality of the Church' in *Mission Trends No. 3: Third World Theologies*, edited by Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (Paulist Press, 1976), p. 6. The essay was originally published in *Lutheran World* (xxi/3, 1974). Dr. Mbiti, a Kenyan, has taught in Uganda, has served as Director of the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Institute near Geneva, and is currently a pastor in Switzerland and a professor of missiology at the University of Berne.