SEMĂNĂTORUL (THE SOWER)

The Journal of Ministry and Biblical Research

Volume 4, Number 2 - Supplement

Proceedings of the U.E.O. International Theological Conference "Remember Your Creator: The Meaning of Life in the Face of Death"

ISSUE EDITOR
CORIN MIHĂILĂ

Emanuel University of Oradea, Romania
2024

Semănătorul (The Sower)
Volume 4. Number. 2 Supp (2024): 7-44
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58892/TS.swr4210supp

OLD AGE, DEATH, OR SOMETHING ELSE? ANOTHER LOOK AT QOHELET'S CLIMACTIC POEM

KYLE C. DUNHAM[1]
Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary

ABSTRACT: Qohelet's culminating poem in Ecclesiastes 12:1–7 has attracted scholarly attention as a key passage in the book. Together with the opening poem (Eccl 1:4–11), this final poem frames the book as a meditation on the significance of mortal human life in a fallen world governed by God. Yet the collage of images has perplexed interpreters seeking to decipher the poem's meaning. Readers have adopted five approaches to the imagery: (1) the afterlife/judgment; (2) death; (3) approaching death; (4) a joyless life; or (5) old age. Most interpreters favor the last option, with the poem picturing the aging process through an allegory of body parts. This essay argues from text-linguistic grounds that Qohelet depicts the actual moment of death through a series of images drawn from the cosmos, the home, industry, and war. This approach reads Qohelet's final meditation as consistent with his larger joy theme. He reminds readers to adopt a godward focus as one faces the final moments of life.

KEY WORDS: Qohelet, Ecclesiastes, biblical poetry, allegory, imagery, aging, death, creation

Qohelet's climactic poem in Ecclesiastes 12:1–7 has garnered extensive attention as one of the key interpretive pericopes of the book. Fox calls it "the most difficult passage in a difficult book,"[2] while Jerome remarks already in the fourth century that "there are almost as many opinions as there are people."[3] This paper examines proposed interpretations

1 Kyle C. Dunham (ThD 2010, The Master's Seminary, Sun Valley, CA) is the Associate Professor and Chair of Old Testament at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary in Allen Park, Michigan. Email: kdunham@dbts.edu.

2 Michael V. Fox, "Aging and Death in Qohelet 12," *JSOT* 42 (1988): 55.

3 Jerome, *Commentary*, 124.

throughout the book's reception history. The most popular view has been that Qohelet speaks about the aging process leading to death through a series of metaphors and an overarching allegory depicting ailing body parts. I argue from text-linguistic grounds that Qohelet instead depicts the moment of death through a collage of images and metaphors drawn from the created order, domestic life, commerce, and warfare. With this, I draw conclusions for understanding the book of Ecclesiastes and for Qohelet scholarship. I begin with an analysis of the section's literary structure, followed by an overview of the proposed readings of the passage.

The Structure of Qohelet's Climactic Poem on the Brevity of Life (12:1–7)

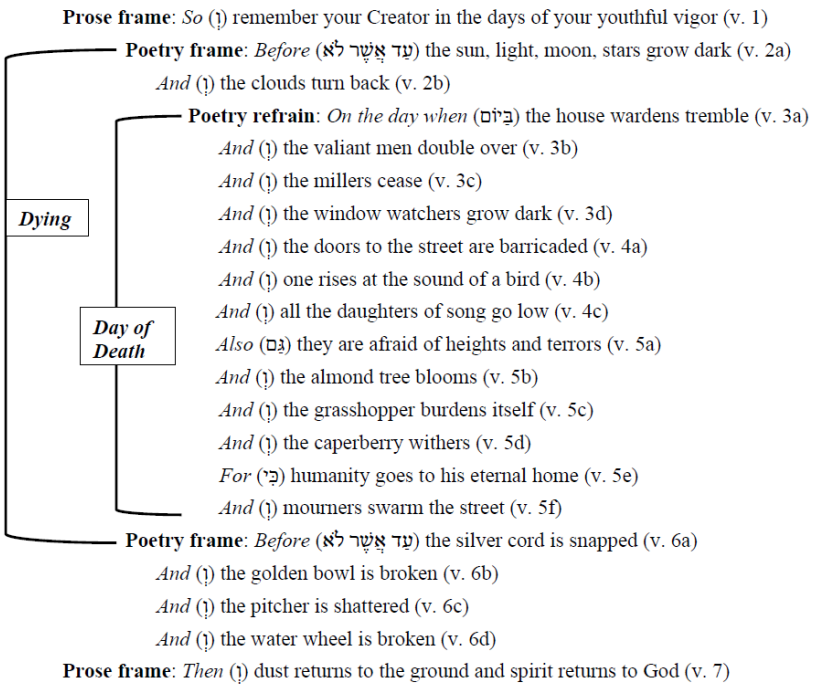
Qohelet moves from his call for youth to enjoy life in 11:7–10 to a climactic pericope on decay and death. The new unit (12:1–14) is headed by an opening imperative "remember" (זְכֹר) (v. 1), which recalls the second jussive of the hinge verse 11:8 ("let him remember"). The *waw* is resumptive, providing a janus function looking backward to 11:7–10 (finding joy in youth) and forward to 12:1–7 (before death robs you of the opportunity). The sub-unit (12:1–7) is framed by mentions of "your Creator" (v. 1) and the "God" who gives life (v. 7). It consists of one long, complex clause governed by the opening imperative. The structure exhibits interlocking prose and poetry frames. Verses 1 and 7 frame the sub-unit with prose, and both verses focus on God as the giver of life, sandwiching the poem proper in vv. 2–6. This godward focus in vv. 1–7 Schwienhorst-Schönberger designates the "core teaching" of the book.[4] The poem alternates between the framed "before" (vv. 2, 6) and the inner refrain "on the day when" (vv. 3–5). The frame (vv. 2, 6) pictures death, or more specifically, the act of dying, so that the "before" refers to the time period after which one can no longer remember the Creator (i.e., *before* a person dies).

The inner refrain (vv. 3–5) is a subset of vv. 2 and 6. It pictures the day of death through a series of images or snapshots of its communal and cosmic consequences. Verse 3's opening phrase "on the day when" signals that the various images occur concurrently, including the lines of v. 5e–f, which mark the man's death. In this unit the verbs follow a pattern of *yiqtol* fol-

4 Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, HthKAT (Freiburg: Herder, 2004), 538.

lowed by four *waw*-consecutive *qatal* verbs and six *yiqtol* verbs.[5] Elsewhere in the book the singular form of יוֹם often describes a unique day, such as the day of one's birth (7:1) or the day of one's death (7:1; 8:8). Each stich in the poem is headed by the conjunction *waw* or a similar marker.

Figure 1.



Literary stitching binds the various couplets and stanzas together, with the framing of "grow dark" (חשׁך) in vv. 2a and 3d, "house" (בַּיִת) in

5 Gilbert emphasizes the shift from *waw*-consecutive *qatal* verbs to *yiqtol*, but it is not clear that this shift signals a clear transition other than stylistic variation (Maurice Gilbert, "La description de la vieillesse en Qohelet XII 1–7: Est elle allégorique?" in *Congress Volume, Vienna 1980*, ed. John A. Emerton, 96–109 [Leiden: Brill, 1981], 99–100).

vv. 3a and 5e, and "street" (שׁוּק) in vv. 4a and 5f. There are also oppositional pairs for poetic variety, such as "rising" (קום) (v. 4b) and "falling" (שׁחח) (v. 4c).

Opening Prose Introducing the Poem (12:1)

The reader is to remember his Creator in the days of his youth. Qohelet introduces the final poem (vv. 2–6) with a prose verse headed by the second imperative deriving from the hinge sub-unit in 11:7–8: The verb "remember" or "keep in mind" (רכז) occurs for the final time (cf. 5:20; 9:5, 15; 11:8).[6] The term is a keyword tying back to Deuteronomy, where it occurs twenty times to underscore the need for intentional reflection on God's redemptive work in freeing Israel from bondage and bringing them into a good land.

Remembering the Creator does not mean merely to think often of death, but to live sober-mindedly: one is accountable to God as the originator and sustainer of life as well as the judge at the end of life. The term "create" (ברא) occurs only here in the book. While creation theology has long been recognized as foundational to biblical wisdom, this is interestingly the only use of the term in the biblical wisdom corpus.[7] The word carries theological significance in that it is used invariably of God as creator.[8] The remembrance is to take place "in the days of your youthful vigor," a phrase repeated from 11:9, where the reader is to let his heart make him glad in this same period.[9] Remembrance is the necessary counterbalance to rejoicing (cf. 11:8).

---

6 *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon*, 269–70; *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 270; *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 3:105.

7 See the discussion in A. J. O. Van der Wal, "Qohelet 12,1a: A Relatively Unique Statement in Israel's Wisdom Tradition," in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, ed. A. Schoors, 413–18 (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 414.

8 An occasional misperception of the term is that it connotes creation out of nothing. This is not universally so (Isa 4:5; 41:20).

9 *HALOT*, 118.

The remembrance in youth takes place "before the evil days come." The idiom עַד ("until") + אֲשֶׁר ("which") + לֹא ("not") means "until no longer," "while it has not (occurred)," or, more succinctly, "before." The phrase occurs three times in the sub-unit (12:1, 2, 6) and twice elsewhere in the OT (2 Sam 17:18; 1 Kgs 17:17). The shorter idiom "until which" (עַד אֲשֶׁר) is akin to other idioms with עַד (עַד אִם, עַד כִּי) that express the contingent period until fulfillment, not merely the result, with the *yiqtol* expressing an *irrealis* future-in-the-past sense ("until it will have happened" or "until it may happen").[10] What is to come (בוא) are the evil days, with רָעָה here signifying "trouble," "misfortune," or "calamity." While some relate the evil days to death, Qohelet is more concerned about life under the sun than the afterlife. Others connect the evil days to times of affliction which the reader will face[11] or to the unpredictable outcomes life has in store.[12] While certainly the notion of affliction is present, these days are the counterpoint to youthfulness, suggestive of a later period of life. The troublesome days are thus likely a reference to the final stages of old age, marked by decrepitude and diminishing powers.

A corollary to the coming of troublesome days is the arrival of listless years. The verb נגע means "touch," with the Hiphil denoting "to reach as far as" or "happen to."[13] It depicts the "process by which a certain event reaches the time for it to take place" (SDBH; cf. Job 4:5; 5:19). "Days" and "years" are parallel as in 11:8, as synecdoche for one's lifetime. The imperative directing the reader at the outset of the clause transforms to the imagined dialogue of the reader: "in which you say." The term חֵפֶץ

10 *HALOT*, 787; Robert D. Holmstedt, John A. Cook, and Phillip S. Marshall, *Qoheleth: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 294.

11 H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 276.

12 John F. A. Sawyer, "The Ruined House in Ecclesiastes 12: A Reconstruction of the Original Parable," *JBL* 94 (1975): 523.

13 *HALOT*, 669; *DCH*, 5:610.

connotes primarily in Ecclesiastes a "business," "interest," or "concern."[14] Most English versions here render the term as "pleasure" (NRSV, CSB, NIV, NJB) in keeping with the denotation of "wish," "desire," or "delight" (SDBH). The context, however, suggests that delighting in the years is not the issue, for the reader is earlier enjoined to rejoice in *all* his years, even the troublesome ones (11:8). Rather, these years lack the same purpose and drive as the years of youthful vigor, exemplified in the following verses where things come to ruin.

The Poem and Its Reception History (12:2–6)

The troublesome days and listless years are amplified through a series of images concerning death in the poem proper of vv. 2–6. Much discussion surrounds the meaning of the metaphors, with a number of interpretations suggested for the imagery. Fredericks designates this pericope "the most obscure passage in Ecclesiastes,"[15] while Seow calls it "the most controversial portion of the book."[16]

Some interpreters distinguish the imagery in v. 2 from what follows and see an assortment of various metaphors deriving from different fields.[17] Others seek a unifying explanation for all the symbols.[18] There are a number of proposals, which fall into five basic categories:[19] (1) portrayal of the afterlife/judgment; (2) portrayal of death itself; (3) portrayal

14 BDB, 343; *HALOT*, 340; *DCH*, 3:288.

15 Daniel C. Fredericks, "Life's Storms and Structural Unity in Qoheleth 11:1–12:8," *JSOT* 52 (1991): 105.

16 Choon-Leong Seow, "Qohelet's Eschatological Poem," *JBL* 118 (1999): 209.

17 E. Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste* (Paris: Librairie Victor Lecoffre, 1912), 455–56.

18 Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, trans. M. G. Easton (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1891), 403–5.

19 Jerome mentions that Jewish interpreters of his day read the poem as portraying not the demise of an individual but the demise of Israel in the Babylonian and Roman captivities (124–25).

of approaching death; (4) portrayal of a joyless life; or (5) portrayal of old age:[20]

Intrepretive Proposals for the Meaning of the Poem

A variety of proposals have been offered for the meaning of the poem's elements.

(1) The afterlife (Sheol) or postmortem judgment of sinners is portrayed through a series of metaphors (Jerome).[21] Jerome thus reads the passage allegorically as a reference to the eternal punishment in store for sinners when all these symbolized realities pass away. This reading links the "evil days" to the period after death. I would counter, however, that the period is more likely a time when the living (near death) can reflect on the nature of their life, an activity that Qohelet denies for the afterlife ("there is no work, planning, knowledge, or wisdom in Sheol" 9:10, CSB).

(2) Death is depicted through the gloom and sadness of a household following the death of the master of the estate.[22] This view typically sees

20 The following taxonomy is an approximation, as many interpreters combine elements from various views. H. Debel thus champions a plurality view, which holds that the piece is best read as combining various meanings and implications. He advocates seven interpretive lenses (physiological, pathological, parabolic, seasonal, meteorological, eschatological, and allegorical) ("When It All Falls Apart: A Survey of the Interpretational Maze Concerning the 'Final Poem' of the Book of Qohelet (Qoh 12:1–7)," *OTE* 23 [2010]: 259–60). Fox finds three levels of meaning in the poem—literal, symbolic, and figurative/allegorical—and argues that most interpretations combine at least two levels of meaning. Thus, while the poem portrays old age, it also portrays death and more (Fox, "Aging and Death," 59).

21 Graham S. Ogden, "Qoheleth XI 7–XII 8: Qoheleth's Summons to Enjoyment and Reflection," *VT* 34 (1984): 34.

22 Antoon Schoors, *Ecclesiastes*, HCOT (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 798; Holmsted-Cook-Marshall, *Ecclesiastes*, 296; Charles Taylor, *The Dirge of Coheleth in Ecclesiastes XII: Discussed and Literally Interpreted* (Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1874), iii–vii; Taylor, "The Dirge of Coheleth," *JQR* 4 (1892): 533–49; Taylor, "The Dirge of Coheleth (Continued)," *JQR* 5 (1892): 5–17; James L. Crenshaw, "Youth and Old Age in Qoheleth," *HAR* 10 (1986): 9–10.

vv. 2–5 describing his death along with the ensuing funeral. The strength of this view is that it accounts well for the stark imagery picturing the devastation of the city. My own view is a blend of views 2–4, which is close to that of Fox (see below).

(3) Death is portrayed through the decay and dilapidation of a house.[23] Witzenrath thus argues that the movement from positive to negative features exhibits the downfall of the house: from strong to weak, active to idle, bright to dark, and open to closed.[24] She points to other texts (Job 4:19; Isa 38:12) in which house-body metaphors overlap.

(4) Death is described with cosmic or apocalyptic imagery consonant with the end of the world.[25] Kruger champions a subset of this view that takes the apocalyptic imagery as an allegory portraying the demise of the cosmos itself rather than the individual.[26] This view accounts well for the stark imagery. The darkening of celestial lights is a frequent sign in the prophets of the eschatological day of Yahweh (Isa 13:10; Ezek 32:7–8; Joel 2:31 [3:4]; Amos 5:20; 8:9; Zech 14:6–7). Other images, such as the depopulation of mill workers and trembling of house guards, can likewise be linked to eschatological texts (Matt 24:28, 40–41; Luke 17:34–35; Rev

23 H. Witzenrath, *Süß ist das Licht: Ein literaturwissenschaftliche Untersuchung zu Koh 11,7–12,7* (St. Ottilien, Germany: Eos Verlag, 1979), 44–50.

24 Witzenrath, *Süß ist das Licht*, 48.

25 Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 353–55; Ian Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 213; Seow, "Qohelet's Eschatological Poem," 209–234; Craig G. Bartholomew *Ecclesiastes*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 348–50; A. Bornapé, "'Fear God and Keep His Commandments': The Character of Man and the Judgment of God in the Epilogue of Ecclesiastes," *DavarLogos* 17 (2018): 41–42.

26 H. A. J. Kruger, "Old Age Frailty Versus Cosmic Deterioration? A Few Remarks on the Interpretation of Qohelet 11,7–12,8," in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, ed. A. Schoors, 399–411 (Leuven: Peeters, 1998); cf. John Jarick, "An 'Allegory of Age' as Apocalypse (Ecclesiastes 12:1–7)," *Colloquium* 22 (May 1990): 19–27.

6:15–17).[27] The difficult images of v. 5 (almond tree, locust, caperberry) could also accord with the demise of the natural landscape.

(5) Death is portrayed through a series of disparate images taken from nature, the home, business, and the person.[28] Brown proposes a fivefold series of images in the following sequence: (a) demise of cosmos (v. 2); (b) demise of domicile (v. 3); (c) demise of commerce (v. 4a); (d) demise of the natural realm (vv. 4b–5a); and (e) demise of the individual (vv. 5b–7).

(6) Imminent death is depicted as a gathering storm.[29] Plumptre sees a surface-level meaning of a storm, while also allowing for a figurative sense in vv. 3–5 to refer to the body. A challenge to this reading is that v. 2 is often connected to vv. 3–5, which appear for many to depict the time before death—old age—with vv. 6–7 describing death.

(7) Imminent death is portrayed through scenes from the evening nightfall.[30] This reading may account for certain aspects of the poem but falls short of the vividness of the imagery. It is doubtful, for example, that housekeepers tremble and valiant men double over at the onset of dusk. The darkening of the sun hints rather at cosmic proportions.

---

27 Gregory Thaumaturgos thus sees the poem as not an allegory of old age but as an apocalyptic vision—foretold by the prophets—of the eschatological demise of the present age (John Jarick, *Gregory Thaumaturgos' Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes*, SCSS 29 [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990], 289–98).

28 William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 2000), 108–9.

29 Christian D. Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth* (reprint of 1861 ed., New York: KTAV Publishing, 1970), 457; E. H. Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes*, Cambridge Bible (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1898), 213; Fredericks, "Life's Storms," 105–7; Timothy K. Beal, "C(ha)osmopolis: Qohelet's Last Words," in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, ed. Todd Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal, 290–304 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

30 Johann D. Michaelis, *Deutsche übersetzung des Alten Testaments mit Anmerkungen für die Ungelehrte: Der siebente Theil, die Sprüche und die Prediger Salomons* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1778), 159–60.

(8) The loss of joy and purpose, often associated with old age but not necessarily, is exhibited through meteorological elements.[31] This view likewise does not go far enough, as the sun and moon going dark suggests a finality that is more than simply the loss of happiness.

(9) The failure of human effort in general is pictured through the imagery of a collapsing house.[32] In this view the author appropriates images from the doomed household and from nature to underscore the futility of human exertion in a fallen world, given the constraints of time and mortality. This view carries a similar weakness as the previous one, in that more than mere frustration at human futility seems to be in view, with the cosmic nature of the images.

(10) Old age is depicted by the features of the rainy winter season in the Levant.[33] A variation sees this as a particular period of the winter season, the so-called seven days of death which mark the conclusion of winter and herald the arrival of spring. This period was allegedly a time in which the elderly were susceptible to death.[34] Some interpreters combine this view and the next by seeing a storm in v. 2 and allegorical references to the body in vv. 3–5. A significant issue with this view and

31 Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (New York: George P. Putnam, 1851), 276; Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983),148; Stuart Weeks, *Ecclesiastes 5–12*, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 586–87; Barry C. Davis, "Ecclesiastes 12:1–8—Death, an Impetus for Life," *BSac* 148 (Jul–Sept 1991): 306–7. Weeks separates v. 2 from vv. 3–5, seeing the latter as denoting death with imagery from a fallen household (606).

32 Sawyer, "The Ruined House," 521–31.

33 Ludwig Levy, *Das Buch Qoheleth: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Sadduzäismus* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1912), 132; Otto Zöckler, *Das Hohelied und der Prediger* (Leipzig: Velhagen und Klasing, 1868), 207; Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste*, 456; Charles H. H. Wright, *The Book of Koheleth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1883), 242; Vincenz Zapletal, *Das Buch Kohelet* (Freiburg: Herdersche Verlagshandlung, 1911), 226; Walther Zimmerli, *Sprüche, Prediger*, ATD (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 246.

34 Wright, *Koheleth*, 270.

the following ones is their resort to a largely allegorical reading of the text. Also, modern perceptions of old age may be quite distinct from ancient perceptions, causing interpreters to impose a contemporary geriatric lens foreign to the original context.

(11) Old age is portrayed through a variety of images, primarily seen as a coming storm in v. 2 and the demise of a house/estate in vv. 3–5.[35] Many of these interpreters read vv. 3–5 as an allegory for parts of the body.

(12) Old age is depicted through metaphorical/allegorical references to the human body.[36] With respect to the last option, interpreters have proposed a number of suggestions for this verse:[37]

12:2	*b. Shabbat*	*Qoh. Rabbah*	Targum	Delitzsch (404–5)	Haupt (168–69)

35 A. H. McNiele, *An Introduction to Ecclesiastes* (Cambridge, UK: At the University Press, 1904), 87; George A. Barton, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908), 186–87; Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 270–71; Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, 276–77; Ernest W. Hengstenberg, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (n.p.: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1960), 245–47; Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet*, 532–33.

36 Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, 403–5; Paul Haupt, "Ecclesiastes," *American Journal of Philology* 26 (1905): 168–69; G. Vajda, "Ecclésiaste XII,2–7 interprété par un auteur juif d'Andalousie du XI^{e} siècle," *JSS* 27 (Spr 1982): 33–46; Denis Buzy, "Le portrait de la vieillesse," *RB* 41 (Jul 1932): 329–40; R. Z. Dulin, "How Sweet Is the Light': Qoheleth's Age-Centered Teachings," *Int* 55 (Jul 2001): 267; Hermann Spieckermann, "Jugend—Alter—Tod: Kohelets abschließende Reflexion: Koh 11:7–12:8," *VT* 70 (2020): 204.

37 Ibn Gayyat aligns the various metaphors with the human faculties of the intellect (perception, memory, rationality), which are clouded and darkened with age (Vajda, "Ecclésiaste XII,2–7," 35–37).

sun	forehead	brightness of the face	brightness of the face	spirit (self-knowledge, inner person)	childhood
light	nose	nose	eyes	reason/ memory	childhood
moon	soul	forehead	cheeks	soul	manhood
stars	cheeks	cheeks	pupils of the eye	five senses	maturity
clouds	eyesight	eyes	eyelids/ lashes	mental illness	unhappiness of old age

The problem with these latter readings, clever as they may be, is that they impose a non-falsifiable meaning on the text. Such an approach is subjective and can be neither proved nor disproved. The allegory as a medium rarely appears in biblical wisdom, which is concerned with practicable applications rather than esoteric meanings. If Qohelet intends us to decode the features of an allegory, he has not left the key. Moreover, an allegory runs contrary to the train of the book to this point. My preference is to read the poem as a series of metaphors for death—together with its individual, communal, and cosmic implications—drawn from the created order, domestic life, commerce, and warfare. This view combines elements from views 2–4, by seeing a pastiche of metaphors and by noting that the death of an individual is analogous to the death of a world.[38]

38 As the Talmud states: "Therefore, Adam the first man was created alone, to teach you that with regard to anyone who destroys one soul from the Jewish people, i.e., kills one Jew, the verse ascribes him blame as if he destroyed an entire world, as Adam was one person, from whom the population of an entire world came forth. And conversely, anyone who sustains one soul from the Jewish people, the verse ascribes him credit as if he sustained an entire world" (*Sanhedrin*, 4.37a).

Darkening of the Cosmos (v. 1)

The first set of images pertains to the eclipse of light, perhaps a solar and lunar eclipse. The idiom "before" (אֶל־רִשְׁאֵי דַעַ) is repeated from the previous verse. The verb חִשַׁח appears only here and in the next verse, while the substantive form "darkness" (חֹשֶׁךְ) appears six times as an image of folly, frustration, and obscurity (2:13–14; 5:17 [16]; 6:4; 11:8). The term means "to be dark" or "grow dim."[39] It forms an inclusio with the verb at the end of v. 3, following a basic chiastic framework as follows:

A Sun and light **grow dark**
  B Clouds <u>disappear</u>
    C House wardens *tremble*
    C′ Valiant men *double over*
  B′ Millers <u>disappear</u>
A′ Window-watchers **grow dark**

Although the *yiqtol* verb is singular, I connect it to the first two terms, "sun and light," and understand it to be implied by ellipsis for "moon and stars." First, the "sun" grows dark, flipping the switch on life "under the sun" as a metaphor for mortal existence. In addition to the sun dimming, the other celestial lights darken, including "the light" (הָאוֹר) (as distinct from the sun), "the moon," and "the stars." Divinely-sourced light, distinct from the sun, is emblematic of creation or the new creation elsewhere in Scripture (Gen 1:3–5; Isa 60:19–20; Rev 21:23; 22:5). Its inclusion suggests a finality to the darkening.

The second image relates to clouds turning back after the rain. The notion of "turning back" or "returning" (שׁוּב) is the key to understanding the metaphor.[40] Some interpreters suggest the nuance of "cease" or "desist" as the preferred gloss.[41] Are the clouds "returning" after the rain has fallen ("reappearing") to darken the sky again and bring more rain? Or

39 *HALOT*, 361; *DCH*, 3:331.

40 Graham S. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, Readings (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 200.

41 See *HALOT*, §3, 1430) (NETb: "disappear"

are the clouds "turning back" after the rain ("disappearing") to go back to their source? I prefer the latter, given that the poem forms the antithesis to the opening poem in 1:4–11. In 1:4 the generations come and go (הלך), constantly cycling through, but here the man goes (הלך) irreversibly to his eternal home (v. 5). In 1:5 the sun rises and sets, only to rise again, but here the sun goes dark forever (v. 2). In 1:6–7 the wind and streams keep returning (שוב) on their respective cycles, but here the clouds would turn back (שוב) for the last time (v. 2). In 1:6 the winds circle around in their patterns (סבב), but here the mourners circle around (סבב) the streets to lament the deceased (v. 5). These catchword links suggest a finality to the scene suggestive not of a return but of a turning back forever.

"The clouds" and "rain" are catchwords back to the proverbs of 11:3–4. Some interpreters argue, on Ugaritic evidence, that the preposition אַחַר here connotes "with" ("the clouds return with rain").[42] But this meaning is unlikely, based on the paucity of evidence. Sometimes clouds symbolize divine presence (Exod 16:10; 19:16; 24:16; Isa 19:1–2) and riding on dark rainclouds is emblematic of the divine warrior (Judg 5:4; 2 Sam 22:12; Job 36:29; Isa 19:1). However, given the meteorological context of 11:3–4 and the assortment of like metaphors in this context, a literal return of clouds seems better as a metaphor for dying.

The Demise of Household Persons (v. 3)

The imagery moves from created elements as a metaphor for death to the response of people impacted by the demise. The rhetorical marker shifts from "before" in the frame of v. 2 to the inner refrain with "on the day when." The linguistic marker identifies the following clauses as a subset of the events mentioned in v. 2. Thus, if dying is depicted in vv. 2 and 6, vv. 3–5 concern images associated with that fateful day. While Qohelet depicts old age in v. 1 with the plural "days," as he does the period of youth,

42 R. B. Y. Scott, "Secondary Meanings of אַחַר, *After, Behind*," *JTS* 50 (Jul–Oct 1949): 178; Mitchell Dahood, "Hebrew-Ugaritic Lexicography I," *Bib* 44 (1963): 292–93; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 354.

here he uses the singular "day" to depict the day of death (as in 7:1; 8:8).[43] These images are not, then, a depiction of old age leading up to death but a mélange of snapshots from the day of death and its aftermath, which has communal and even cosmic implications.

The first two images are masculine, referring to custodians at home and courageous men about. The second two images are feminine, pertaining to women who grind at the mill and those who gaze out windows. Thus, the first lines of each couplet pertain to lowly, menial workers (custodians, mill-grinders), while the second lines refer to higher-status citizens and landowners (valiant leaders/warriors, mistresses of the house). The merism between male and female, higher class and lower class, suggests all the household's—and perhaps by implication the community's—inhabitants are affected.[44] The arrangement also shifts from inside the home to outside and follows a loose chiastic structure:

A **Within the home**: house wardens (masculine) tremble (lowly status)
  B **Outside the home**: valiant citizens (masculine) double over (high status)
  B′ **Outside the home**: millers (feminine) become idle (lowly status)[45]
A′ **Within the home**: window-watchers (feminine) grow dark (high status)

Interpreters have proffered many suggestions for an allegorical reading of the verse: (1) body parts (ancient Jewish readers, see below); (2) fea-

43 The word יוֹם occurs in the singular seven times in the book (7:1 [2x], 14 [2x]; 8:8, 16; 12:3). If 12:3 refers to the day of death, then three out of seven occurrences link to this culminating day.

44 Gilbert, "La vieillesse en Qohelet XII 1–7," 103.

45 Whether or not milling took place within the home is difficult to determine. It appears that groats would have been produced with a hand mill inside the home, while flour was likely milled outside the home at a water mill or at a threshing floor adjacent to the fields. See T. Frank, *Household Food Storage in Ancient Israel and Judah* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2018), 23–30.

tures of a house (related allegorically to the body, as in #1;[46] (3) incidents relating to the onset of a violent storm.[47] While nearly all interpreters who favor the allegorical reading agree on the final two images (millers = teeth; window watchers = eyes), they differ on which body parts are represented in the first two images:

12:3	*Qoh. Rabbah*	Targum; Dulin (268)	Ibn Ezra; Delitzsch; Levy; Loader; Stuart	Podechard (457)	Zapletal; Lauha	Hengstenberg (246)
house wardens	loins and ribs	knees	arms and hands	hands	hands	arms
valiant men	bones	arms	legs	loins	bones	feet

The first image concerns house caretakers that tremble. The phrase "to keep/guard the house" occurs elsewhere only three times in the context of the concubines David leaves to "take care of the [royal] residence" or "tend to the palace" while he flees Absalom's revolt (2 Sam 15:16; 16:21; 20:3). There the nuance is to "tend," or "keep charge of."[48] This correlation favors the translation "tenders, "keepers," or "wardens" over "house guards" as in some versions (CSB, NASB, NETB). The verb זוע is rare, occurring only here and in Est 5:9, although in the Pilpel in Hab 2:7. It means "to quake" or "tremble" connotes a psychosomatic terror.[49]

In the second clause the men of valor double over. The Hithpael form of עות occurs only here in the OT, with the D-stem meaning "to make

46 J. A. Loader, *Ecclesiastes*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 131; Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste*, 457; Stuart, *Ecclesiastes*, 277.

47 Ginsburg, *Coheleth*, 460–61.

48 *DCH*, 8:475–76.

49 *HALOT*, 267; *DCH*, 3:97; *NIDOTTE*, s.v. "זוע," by M. V. Van Pelt and W. C. Kaiser, Jr., 1:1090.

crooked," "bend."[50] Here the nuance is "to be stooped over" or "be bent over," with the parallelism suggesting cowardice or terror. The subject is "men of valor" (אַנְשֵׁי הֶחָיִל). This phrase or similar phrases occur some seventy times in the OT, often describing leading citizens (e.g., Boaz) or courageous warriors (cf. Gen 47:6; Exod 18:21; Judg 3:29; 20:44, 46; Ruth 2:1; 1 Sam 14:52; 31:12; 1 Kgs 1:42). The attribution thus signifies well-to-do landowners or citizens who are fit for military service, courageous and competent. Thus, the previous clause pertains to lowly custodians who keep the house (domestic caretakers), while this clause pertains to those who lead the city and go to war (substantial men, valiant warriors). Both sets are immobilized by fear, at home and abroad.

The third clause concerns female millers who come to a halt. The clause uses unusual words, but the gist is clear. The feminine plural nominative of טֹחֲנָה is a *hapax legomenon* meaning either a "molar tooth" on the basis of an Arabic cognate (*ṭāḥinat*) or "miller," "grinder" on the basis of cognates טַחֲנָה ("mill") and טחן ("to grind").[51] The latter is more likely. The grinding involves crushing or pulverizing meal to powder by means of a pestle or larger millstone, regarded as a menial task and often done by slaves or prisoners in the ancient world. This time-consuming work required intense physical effort, with repetitive back-and-forth motion, and was thus often accompanied by singing and musical instruments.[52] The grinders here "stop working," with the verb בטל meaning "to grow inactive," "be idle," or "cease working."[53] This Hebrew term is also a *hapax legomenon* but carries affinities with the Akkadian cognate *bāṭālu*

50 BDB, 736; *HALOT*, 804; *DCH*, 6:319–20.

51 *HALOT*, 374; *DCH*, 3:363.

52 L. Bombardieri, "Mill Songs: The Soundscape of Collective Grinding in the Bronze and Iron Age Near East and Eastern Mediterranean," in *Stone Tools in the Ancient Near East and Egypt: Ground Stone Tools, Rock Cut Installations and Stone Vessels from Prehistory to Late Antiquity*, ed. A. Squitieri and D. Eitam, 71–80, AANEA 4 (Oxford, UK: Archaeopress, 2019).

53 *HALOT*, 121; *DCH*, 2:141.

meaning "to cease" or "stop working."[54] The כִּי conjunction provides the reason ("because"): they have reduced in number. The verb מעט in the D-stem is resultative and means "to grow to be few" or "be reduced in number."[55] Grinding meal to flour was a communal task, with archaeological reliefs depicting two to sixteen figures simultaneously grinding.[56] Here the grinders must stop because there are too few left to carry on the work. Within the context, an analogous Sumerian proverb is apt: "As long as you have light, grind the flour."[57] When darkness descends, as has happened here, grinding ceases.

The fourth clause mentions the disappearance of women who watch out the windows. The verb חשׁךְ means "grow dark," and forms an inclusio with the diminishing lights at the outset of v. 2. The Qal feminine particle form of ראה identifies those who "watch" or "gaze" out the windows. The term for "window" is the less-frequent word אֶרֶבָּה, which denotes "a hole in the wall," "window well," or "socket."[58] Such viewing through the window often carried associations in the ancient world with *teichoscopy*, the female viewing of battles from the city walls,[59] or of female window-watching for the return of warriors from the battlefield (Judg 5:28; 2 Kgs 9:30). Such window gazing conjured dramatic and emotional connotations and often testified to the dark and negative consequences of

54 *CAD*, s.v. "bāṭālu," 2:174.

55 *HALOT*, 611; *DCH*, 5:391

56 Bombardieri, "Mill Songs," 74–78.

57 *COS*, s.v. "Sumerian Proverb Collection 3 (1.174)," l. 13, trans. B. Alster, 1:564.

58 *HALOT*, 83; *DCH*, 1:367; SDBH. This leads to Weeks's rather obscure translation "the eyes in the ceiling-holes mist over" (2022, 623).

59 N. W. Bernstein, "'The Clash of Weapons and the Sight of War': Spectatorship and Identification in Roman Epic," in *War as Spectacle: Ancient and Modern Perspectives on the Display of Armed Conflict*, ed. A. Bakogianni and V. M. Hope, 57–72 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 58; T. Fuhrer, "Teichoskopia: Female Figures Looking on Battles," in *Women and War in Antiquity*, ed. J. Fabre-Serris and A. Keith, 52–70 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

war.[60] Here the women "grow dim" or "dark," relating perhaps to their disappearance due to the failure of their beloved combatants to return.

The Demise of Household/Social Connections (v. 4)

The imagery continues from people to manmade objects and then back to people. Here the image pertains to doors to the street being shut and secured. The verb רגס appears only here in the book, in the Pual form. In the D-stem it means "to close up" or "lock up."[61] The doors are "in the street," meaning that they open to the street and are now closed off to entrants.[62] The word "street" forms an inclusio with the end of v. 5, where the mourners throng the streets. This occurs "when" the sound of the mill grows low. The verb לפשׁ denotes "to become low," "fall." The word לוֹק denotes "voice," or here "sound." The term "mill" (הַנָּחֲתַ) relates to the cognate form in the previous verse. Grinding meal was often a domestic task, so as households are depleted and barricaded up, the sound of the grinders fades.

The next two clauses concern the response to certain sounds. First, a person arises to the sound of the bird. The singular subject appears to be impersonal, as any possible antecedents are plural (cf. also the pluralized "they are afraid of heights" in v. 5). Due to the difficulty, however, various emendations have been proposed. Seow takes "the sound of the bird" as the subject ("the sound of the bird rises"), but this is difficult in the context and requires a forced reading of the לְ preposition as asseverative. The verb קום means "to arise," "get up," or "stand up."[63] The לְ preposition signifies what instigates the rising ("at," "for"), as in Job 24:14 ("the murderer rises *at first light*" [לָאוֹר]). The "sound" or "voice" (קוֹל) repeats a catchword from the previous clause, here emitted by "the bird." Although

60 Fuhrer, "Teichoskopia," 53.

61 *HALOT*, 743; *DCH*, 6:119.

62 Seow views the dual form as denoting more specifically the double doors to the city square or bazaar, where the marketplace is (356). This is possible but would require the same meaning for where the mourners congregate in v. 5.

63 BDB, 877; *HALOT*, 1086; *DCH*, 7:226–27.

most interpreters presume the bird in question is a cheerful songstress, more sinister notes may be present.[64]

Some connect the image to early morning bird calls that wake the fitful sleeper, an alleged sign of aging (Talmud, Jerome). Not all bird calls occur early in the morning, however. In many ancient contexts bird calls were associated with death and the underworld.[65] Sometimes the bird itself was the symbol and messenger of death.[66] The Sumerian warrior god Ninurta thus used the Anzu-bird as his emblem, while the Sumerian netherworld demon Muḫra was depicted with bird claws.[67] Other contexts associate bird calls with foreign, unintelligible speech.[68] In the case of the latter, the speech of foreigners could be mimicked through onomatopoeic words.[69] Isaiah thus appears to recreate satirically the speech

64 So Seow notes that "the author is probably thinking not of birds singing in joy, as is commonly assumed, but either birds hooting ominously or of birds of prey making a commotion when they sense death or when they move into a depopulated place" (358).

65 K. van der Toorn, "Echoes of Judaean Necromancy in Isaiah 28:7–22," *ZAW* 100 (1988): 209–212.

66 L. Verderame, "The Seven Attendants of Hendursaĝa: A Study of Animal Symbolism in in Mesopotamian Cultures," in *The First 90 Years: A Sumerian Celebration in Honor of Miguel Civil*, ed. L. Feliu, F. Karahashi, and G. Rubio, 396–415, SANER 12 (Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2017), 407–8.

67 Frayne and Stuckey, *Handbook of Gods and Goddesses*, 215, 278. The Anzu-bird was a powerful, eagle-like bird-monster with a lion's head, whose cry made the earth shake (Frayne and Stuckey, *Handbook of Gods and Goddesses*, 26). In the Gilgamesh Epic, when the Anzu descends upon Gilgamesh he is described as follows: "whose maw was fire; whose breath was death" (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. B. R. Foster [New York: Norton, 2001], 34).

68 S. L. Boyd, *Language Contact, Colonial Administration, and the Construction of Identity in Ancient Israel: Constructing the Context for Contact*, HSM 66 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 351; M. B. Dick, "Foreign Languages and Hegemony," in *Language in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 53e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, ed. L. Kogan, N. Koslova, S. Loesov, et al., 1137–46 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 1140–41.

69 Dick and Boyd argue that this occurs through the repetition of sibilant sounds

of Assyrians, a sign of judgment for Israel in Isa 28:11–13, through the repetition of the sibilants ז ,צ, and שׁ, along with the velar ק: "Line upon line, line upon line, precept upon precept, precept upon precept, here a little, there a little" (צַו לָצָו צַו לָצָו קַו לָקָו קַו לָקָו זְעֵיר שָׁם זְעֵיר שָׁם) (*ṣaw lāṣāw ṣaw lāṣāw qaw lāqāw qaw lāqāw zĕʿêr šām zĕʿêr šām*). As a corollary, here Qohelet likewise uses the sibilant צ and the velar ק) וְיָקוּם לְקוֹל הַצִּפּוֹר) (*wĕqûm lĕqôl haṣṣippôr*). If a reference to the sounds of the underworld or to the sounds of foreign invaders, both related elsewhere to the chirping of birds, the startled response is to arise in alarm at one's approaching judgment and death.

The final image is the fading sound of the daughters of song. The verb שׁחח occurs only here in the book and in the Niphal means "to become low" or "be muffled."[70] The sense may be in opposition to "rising up" in the previous clause.[71] The Akkadian cognate *šaḫāḫu* means "to dissolve" or "waste away."[72] What grows faint is "all the daughters of song." This is a unique idiom in the OT, and its meaning is uncertain. The phrase could be a euphemism for songbirds, parallel to the previous clause. Other options include the hooting of birds of prey,[73] the musical notes of a song,[74] or skilled singers.[75] The participle שָׁרוֹת refers generically to female singers in Eccl 2:8. Zapletal argues that the idiom cannot pertain to singers, because this is not the normal way of expressing those who produce songs, which would be more aptly "mothers of song."[76] Yet the word שִׁיר always refers elsewhere to humanly articulated songs. A parallel may be

in Neo-Assyrian texts that intend to mimic the chirping of birds, as the Akkadian verb *ṣabāru* refers to the chirping of birds (Boyd, *Language Contact*, 350–51; Dick, "Foreign Languages," 1140–41) (cf. *CAD*, s.v. "ṣabāru," 16:2–3).

70 *HALOT*, 1458; *DCH*, 8:320.

71 Seow thus sees these as birds "swooping down" (360).

72 *CAD*, s.v. "šaḫāḫu," 17A:75.

73 Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 359.

74 GKC, 418.

75 Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, 411.

76 Zapletal, *Kohelet*, 228.

found in Neh 12:28, where "musicians" (NIV) or "singers" (CSB, NETB) are "the sons of singers" (בְּנֵי הַמְשֹׁרְרִים). The sense appears to be that all the women who sing (perhaps female choirs for dedicated purposes such as weddings) are silenced because mourning has overtaken the city.

Although many read these elements as an allegory for human body parts, the difficulty is twofold. First, these interpreters often treat the first two images as metaphorical and the last two as literal, thus conflating symbolic and literal meanings. Second, they often create an unintended conflict between the two final images, with the first signaling sensitive hearing (rising at the sound of a bird) and the second dulled hearing (unable to hear the daughters of song).[77] In the end, the allegorical reading carries interpretive problems that offset its potential value. I take the verse as denoting the communal and cosmic implications that arise from the death of an individual: loss of productivity, fear of the afterlife, and lament.

Terrors and Destruction outside the Home (v. 5)

The poem continues with a series of six images portraying death and its aftermath. This part of the refrain is headed by the additive particle גַּם ("also"). The first clause is awkward, sometimes broken into two phrases (CSB: "they are afraid of heights and terrors on the road"). It reads literally "also from high they fear and terrors in the way/road." The meaning of the preposition מִן is significant for the sense of the clause, and there are a variety of possible readings: (1) separative ("*away from* the high place"); (2) spatial relationship ("*from*/*to* the high place"); or (3) causal ("*because of* the high place"). The first two are semantically related as connoting spatial senses in terms of origin, destination, or location.[78] The מִן preposition is best taken in this spatial sense in tandem with the later preposition בְּ to denote locative spheres ("*from* high . . . *along* the way).

An interpretive problem, however, still remains in its connection to the adjective גָּבֹהַּ. This term appears elsewhere in the book to mean "high"

77 Lauha, *Kohelet*, 212–13.

78 See Waltke and O'Connor, *IBHS*, §11.2.11b, 212.

or "proud" with reference to governing officials (5:7 [8]) or arrogant people (7:8). The adjective often denotes high people or entities in general, whether officials (Eccl 5:8–9 [7–8]), mountains (Gen 7:19; Isa 30:25), or trees (Isa 10:33; Ezek 17:24). Fox thus takes the adjective as a reference to God (the "High One") whom mourners fear as they accompany the dead.[79] Yet almost always the word appears as an attributive adjective modifying a noun rather than as a substantive adjective. Many relate the adjective to "high places" or "heights" that the elderly fear.[80] However, "heights" as a location is usually designated in the OT with other nouns, such as מָרוֹם (Judg 5:18; 2 Kgs 19:22–23; Ps 148:1), בָּמָה (Num 21:28; 2 Sam 22:34; Ps 18:33 [34]), or רֹאשׁ (Num 14:40, 44).

I prefer in this light to render as "from above" or "from on high," which I take as a reference to the land of the living "above" Sheol, which is always downward or below. The verb ירא appears nine times in the book, nearly every other time with reference to fearing God (3:14; 5:7 [6]; 7:18; 8:12–13; 12:13), but here it seems with the more general nuance of "be afraid."[81] This is the only OT text to collocate "fear" (ירא) with "high" (גָּבֹהַּ). Unlikely, then, are the suggestions that the clause concerns the elderly's fear of heights[82] or that it designates their fear of climbing hills due to arthritis or being out of shape.[83] Other unlikely proposals include a fear of dangers on the road,[84] irrational anxiety about difficult tasks,[85] a

79 Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 327.

80 Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1992), 119.

81 *HALOT*, 433; SDBH.

82 So the CSB; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 119; Graham S. Ogden and Lynell Zogbo, *A Handbook on Ecclesiastes* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1997), 427. Podechard relates the metaphors to a house and the fear to being on the rooftop due to the height (465).

83 Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, 411; Levy, *Qoheleth*, 134.

84 Zapletal, *Kohelet*, 228.

85 Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes*, 218.

dread of God,[86] panic about birds swooping down to devour carcasses,[87] or terror about a violent storm brewing in the distance.[88] Preferable is the suggestion of Taylor, who sees a spatial contrast between "from high" (i.e., from above) and "in the way" (i.e., going below).[89] He compares to Sura 6 in the Qur'an, which states: "He is Able to send torment upon you from above you or from beneath your feet" (6.65).[90] In Job 18 Bildad speaks of death in similar terms: "Terrors frighten him on every side, and chase him at his heels. . . . He is torn from the tent in which he trusted and is brought to the king of terrors" (Job 18:11, 14).[91] I connect this to more specifically, then, to the fear of dying and of Sheol. "From above," i.e., from the land of the living looking down into the underworld (called "the land of no return" in Sumerian literature) they are afraid of the way they must go. They are afraid of what happens after death and of the supernatural beings they will encounter at death.

The *waw* on the following substantive חַתְחַת is explicative ("concerning"). The term חַתְחַת is a *hapax legomenon* in the OT. It designates "terror" or "terrors," deriving from the cognate חתת, "to be dismayed," "be terrified."[92] The latter verb occurs often in the context of death (1 Sam 2:10; 2 Kgs 19:26; Isa 7:8; 51:6). The term דֶּרֶךְ should be translated consistently as "way" in Ecclesiastes, relating to an often-unseen path traversed by a designated agent (fool, 10:3) or entity (wind, 11:5; heart, 11:9). This would be an unlikely reference to a dangerous road. The best sense here is the way through the veil of death, to the underworld (cf. 12:7). In ancient

86 Holmsted-Cook-Marshall, *Ecclesiastes*, 298.

87 Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 360.

88 Ginsburg, *Coheleth*, 461.

89 Taylor, *The Dirge of Coheleth in Ecclesiastes XII*, 28–29.

90 *The Majestic Qur'ān: An English Rendition of Its Meanings* (Chicago: The Nawawi Foundation, 2000), 135.

91 Brown likewise connects the terror to death itself and compares Utnapishtim's description of death to Gilgamesh as that whose "picture cannot be drawn" (112).

92 *HALOT*, 363; *DCH*, 3:334, 3:337.

Mesopotamian writings, *galla*-demons functioned as escorts to the netherworld.[93] For example, in an Old Babylonian incantation text, various spirit beings are adjured from approaching the body of the sick person:

> Incantation: The *asakku* has approached the man's head. . .
> The evil *alû* has approached his breast,
> The evil ghost has approached his waist,
> The evil *gallû* has approached his hand. . . .[94]
> In the Mesopotamian myth "Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld,"

Inanna purposes to go the underworld. She passes through the seven gates of the underworld, losing one of her divine powers at each. Finally, she arrives before the throne of Ereshkigal, her sister and the queen of the netherworld. She seizes Ereshkigal's throne and for her impudence is sentenced to death by the seven Anunna or judges of the underworld. The god Enki intervenes to save Inanna, but the Anunna decree that she must find a substitute to take her place in the underworld. The demons escort her then to the land of the living to find a substitute, which ends up being her husband Dumuzi, who is not observing proper mourning rites:

> So when Inanna left the underworld. . .
> The small demons, like a reed enclosure,
> And the big demons, like the reeds of a fence,
> Restrained her on all sides.
> Those who accompanied her,
> Those who accompanied Inanna,
> Know no food, know no drink,
> Eat no flour offering and drink no libation. . .

93 Frayne and Stuckey, *Handbook of Gods and Goddesses*, 108.

94 CT 17,9–11.1, 7–12, in M. E. Couto-Ferreira, "From Head to Toe: Listing the Body in Cuneiform Texts," in *The Comparable Body—Analogy and Metaphor in Ancient Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Greco-Roman Medicine*, ed. J. Z. Wee, 43–71 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 55.

They tear away the wife from a man's embrace.
They snatch the son from a man's knee.
They make the bride leave the house of her father-in-law.[95]

These demons serve as terrifying escorts between the land of the living and the underworld.

Similar monsters and death-demons, such as the Anzu-bird, typically waited on the road to snatch passers-by or sneaked into bedrooms to abduct people in their sleep. These symbols expressed the ancients' fear of death: "Death thus embodied the fear, anxiety, revulsion, frustration, despair, and grief felt over losing life and loved ones, as well as the acceptance and resignation that it could not be avoided."[96] Qohelet vividly expresses a similar anxiety of death through this image.[97]

The second clause concerns the blossoming of the almond tree. I propose that the next three images are to be taken in tandem as a reference to springtime crop failure and hunger as a harbinger of death: the late winter/early spring when the almond tree blossoms is also the time when the locust strikes, devasting the crops and destroying food supplies so that the caperberry is nullified since there is nothing left to eat from the

95 "Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld," ll. 290–300, in J. A. Black, G. Cunningham, E. Fluckiger-Hawker, E. Robson, and G. Zólyomi, *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (Oxford, UK: The ETCSL Project, 2016), available online at https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.1.4.1#, accessed 4 September 2023. See also T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 55–63; S. N. Kramer, "'Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld' Continued and Revised," *JCS* 5 (1951): 1–17; G. Buccellati, "The Descent of Inanna as a Ritual Journey to Kutha?" *Syro-Mesopotamian Studies* 4 (1982): 3–7.

96 I. Sibbing-Plantholt, "Coping with Time and Death in the Ancient Near East," *Religion Compass* 15 (Nov 2021): 6.

97 See the exploration of death anxiety in the ANE in L. W. Craig, "A Journey into the Land of No Return: Death Attitudes and Perceptions of Death and Afterlife in Ancient Near Eastern Literature" (Honors College Capstone Thesis, Western Kentucky University, 2008).

denuded landscape.[98] With the blossoming of the almond tree, the verb is a unique form, at first glance deriving from the root נאץ, "to spurn." This leads some commentators to translate along the lines of "the almond disgusts" or "the almond tree spurns."[99] This would refer either to the refusal to eat almonds or to a rejection of the metaphorical meaning of the almond tree, however that is construed. Seow concludes that the almond has rotted and become inedible, an ominous sign of his demise.[100] The MT Masorah, however, prefers reading the form as the Hiphil of נצץ, "to blossom" or "flourish," with the *aleph* orthographic.[101] All the versions except Symmachus support this reading, which makes better sense of the context. In addition, this understanding best fits the parallelism with the other clauses, in which the substantive following the verb is the subject, not accusative.[102] (Gordis, 347).

The term שָׁקֵד denotes "the almond," and by metonymy "the almond tree."[103] The term was connected to the verb שׁקד, "to watch," as the almond tree was an early harbinger of spring. The tree grows to about twenty-five feet in height and blooms in late January.[104] The blossoms appear before the leaves and vary in color from pink to white. Almonds were an important source of food, along with other foodstuffs such as dates and

98 While I came to this conclusion independently, Provan, who regards the poem along apocalyptic lines, likewise views these images as ecological disaster, with the engorged locust as the key to a right reading of the series (216–17). Other commentators likewise take the three images in concert, such as Ginsburg (462–64), who relates them to the rejection of food; Hitzig (303–4), who relates them to sexual impotence; Seow (363), who relates them to the death of plants; and Murphy (119), who connects them to the awakening of nature.

99 Stuart, *Ecclesiastes*, 280; Ginsburg, *Coheleth*, 462.

100 Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 361; Beal, "C(ha)osmopolis," 300.

101 McNiele reads the form as the Piel 89) וינָאֵץ), while Podechard prefers the Pual 463) וינֹאַץ).

102 Robert Gordis, *Koheleth, the Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes*, 3rd ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 347.

103 *HALOT*, 1638; *DCH*, 8:547.

104 *ISBE*, s.v. "Almond," by R. K. Harrison, 1:97.

wheat often packed in baskets for Egyptian kings to enjoy in the afterlife.[105] Many proposals for the meaning have been offered. Allegorical readings often conclude that the metaphor references the white hair of the elderly.[106] Others suggest the heralding of spring[107] or the freeing of the soul from the body.[108] Podechard highlights the almond as a healthy snack spurned by the old man who has no appetite.[109] While many such suggestions are clever, if not overly imaginative, we must reject the allegorical readings for the reasons mentioned above. Rather, the clause here probably pertains to the time of late winter or early spring, a time alternately associated with the death of the elderly and the renewal of life. Taken in concert with the locust and caper berry below, springtime, rather than the herald of new life, becomes here a harbinger of death as the blossoms fall off or are consumed.

The next clause has to do with an engorged locust or grasshopper. The verb סבל appears only here in the Hithpael and means "to burden itself," "be weighed down," or "become thick." The substantive חָגָב appears only a few times in the O.T and means a kind of "locust" or "grasshopper."[110] Interpreters have offered a number of proposals for the meaning of the image. Some argue that an old man is beset by arthritis.[111] Others contend that the grasshopper is a symbol of smallness and that his physical powers have declined such that he cannot carry even the lightest thing.[112] Knobel connects the locust to the Arabic term for breath and contends

105 B. Bryant, B. Fentress, and L. Balslev, *Almonds: Recipes, History, Culture* (Layton, UT: Gibbs-Smith, 2014).

106 Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, 413; Haupt, "Ecclesiastes," 169.

107 Wright, *Koheleth*, 273.

108 Heinrich Ewald, *Die poetischen Bücher des Altes Bundes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1837), 224–25.

109 Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste*, 466.

110 *HALOT*, 290, 741; *DCH*, 6:115, 3:158. Seow interprets the locust as a referɵ ence to the carob tree rather than the insect (362).

111 Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, 421.

112 Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 190; Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes*, 219.

for labored breathing.[113] Graetz relates the burdened grasshopper to erectile dysfunction, while Heiligstedt proposes that the burden is the old man's inability to chew and digest the locust as food.[114] Zöckler connects the burdened grasshopper to the elderly's emaciated frame, while Wright connects it to springtime when locusts crawl out of their domains—a time the elderly are susceptible to dying.[115]

In the ANE, the locust was associated with crop failure and famine, feared widely as a portent of mass death (Exod 10:4–5; Deut 28:38; Joel 1:4; Nah 3:15–17).[116] Amos recoils at Yahweh's vision of locusts destroying Israel's crops before the spring harvest: "The Lord God showed me this: He was forming a swarm of locusts at the time the spring crop first began to sprout—after the cutting of the king's hay. When the locusts finished eating the vegetation of the land, I said, 'Lord God, please forgive! How will Jacob survive since he is so small?'" (Amos 7:1–2, CSB). As Michael Lyons notes of the latter passage: "Locust swarms in the Bible and ancient Near East meant crop failure, and crop failure meant famine. Joel 1, for example, envisages the terror of a locust invasion and what it means for agriculture—the collapse of the food system. The locusts eat everything (1:4, 7); they destroy crops (1:10, 11, 12, 17); food shortages appear (1:10, 12, 16, 17); food offerings cease (1:13); even animals cannot get food (1:18). Shock and horror is all that remains."[117] A Neo-Assyrian

113 August Knobel, *Commentar über das Buch Kohelet* (Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1836), 354.

114 H. Graetz, *Kohelet* (Leipzig: C. F. Winterische, 1871), 137; Heiligstedt, "Ecclesiastes," in *Commentarius Grammaticus Historicus Criticus in Vetus Testamentum* (Leipzig: Sumtibus Librariae Rengerianae, 1847), 4:380. Podechard (460), Ginsburg (463), and Stuart (281) identify the locust as a highly valued food in the Middle East, with a taste similar to crabmeat or crayfish.

115 Zöckler, *Prediger*, 213; Wright, *Koheleth*, 273.

116 On the characteristics and ANE perceptions of the locust, see Karl Radner, "Fressen und gefressen werden: Heuschrecken als Katastrophe und Delikatesse im Alten Vorderen Orient," *WO* 34 (2004): 7–22.

117 M. C. Lyons, "A Famine Motif in the Book of Amos: Amos 8:11–14 and

hymn composed during the reign of Sargon II (721–705 B.C.) curses the devouring locust:

> The evil locust which dries up the grain,
> The malignant grasshopper which dries up the orchards. . . .
> May it (the grasshopper) be counted as nought.[118]

In his dedication of the temple, Solomon prays that Yahweh will hear his people after they experience the devastating effects of a locust invasion and famine (1 Kgs 8:37; 2 Chron 6:28). Given these parallels, the grasshopper may here be a symbol of death associated with the consuming devastation brought on by the satiated swarm.

Following this is a reference to the ineffectiveness of the caperberry. The MT points the verb פרר as the Hiphil, in which it means "to break," "destroy," or "make useless."[119] The passive form makes better sense in the context, so I emend the MT to וְתֻפַּר, "and is made ineffective." The subject is אֶבְיוֹנָה, taken usually as a reference to the caperberry (genus *kapparis spinosa*), used alternately to whet the appetite, as a garnish and flavoring for food, or as an aphrodisiac.[120] The berries were sometimes pickled and added as a relish.[121] The plant carries heavy, drooping branches that bloom in May, with large, white flowers that open for only one night (SDBH). Interpreters have also proposed a number of meanings for the imagery, including loss of appetite,[122] loss of sexual power,[123] or the slip-

Ancient Near Eastern Innovations of Hunger, Drought, and Famine," *BBR* 33 (2023): 147.

118 *COS*, s.v. "A Hymn to Nanaya with a Blessing for Sargon II (1.141)," trans. A. Livingstone, 1:473.

119 *HALOT*, 974.

120 *HALOT*, 5; *DCH*, 1:105.

121 R. T. J. Cappers and R. Neef, *Handbook of Plant Paleoecology*, 2nd ed. (Groningen: Barkhuis and Groningen Institute of Archaeology, 2021), 310.

122 Delitzsch, *Ecclesiastes*, 422.

123 Stuart, *Ecclesiastes*, 281.

ping of the soul from the body.[124] This clause may hint instead at either the pointlessness of stimulating the appetite when there is no food before death or the uselessness of the relish if there is nothing to put it on. The brief window of flowering likewise illustrates the brevity of life. Here its ineffectiveness signals the end of life.

Qohelet then provides the grounds for these disparate images. The conjunction כִּי is causal ("for").[125] Humanity goes to his eternal home. The Qal present participle of הלךְ underscores a present, ongoing reality: humans are coursing toward their own appointment with death.[126] The term הָאָדָם identifies humanity existentially and collectively—the one and the many are interrelated—an individual's death is in some fashion a death for the whole.[127] The catchword "house" (בַּיִת) links back to the trembling house wardens in v. 3. This house—to be equated with the grave—is eternal (עוֹלָם).[128] While God has set transcendent eternity in humans' hearts (3:11), death is their final destination. Psalm 49, a wisdom psalm similar to Ecclesiastes, likewise designates the grave as an eternal home: "For one can see that wise men die; foolish and stupid men also pass away. Then they leave their wealth to others. Their graves are their eternal homes, their homes from generation to generation" (Ps 49:10–11, HCSB). Death

124 Haupt, "Ecclesiastes," 169.

125 Seow prefers the asseverative ("indeed") (364).

126 Leupold argues that the participle denotes "a continuous act of dissolution, which may involve many years" (282). But I have argued above that death rather than aging is in view in the poem. It is best, then, not to make too much of the participle.

127 John Donne, "Devotion 17": "Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee" (cited in Targoff, *John Donne*, 148).

128 Plumptre views the eternal home more concretely as Sheol (220). This is possible as a figure of speech, but Qohelet refers directly to Sheol elsewhere (9:10). R. F. Youngblood argues from cognates that עלם here carries the connotation of darkness ("dark house") ("Qoheleth's 'Dark House' [Eccl 12:5]," *JETS* 29 [Dec 1986]: 397–410). The parallel with Ps 49:11 suggests the grave is in view.

is irreversible in the present order. The mid-eighth century B.C. Aramean king Panamuwa likewise speaks of his burial chamber as his "eternal abode,"[129] while Sennacherib's tomb inscription in Assur (seventh century) designates it as his "palace of sleep, tomb of rest, eternal residence."[130]

In conclusion to the dismal scene, mourners mill about the streets. The term סבב is a catchword linking back to the circling winds and streams of the opening poem (1:6). It means "to go around" or "surround." The term "street" (שׁוּק) is a catchword from the previous verse. The term ספד occurs also in 3:4 and means "to mourn" or "lament," usually for the dead. Some take the phrase as depicting professional mourners who descend upon the house in the hopes their services may be needed. More aptly the scene describes the preparation for and enactment of a funeral, as mourners both anticipate the death and march in procession to bury the dead. Examples of such funeral processions may be found elsewhere, often accompanied by skilled mourners who wail, play instruments, and chant laments (2 Sam 3:31; 2 Chron 35:25; Jer 9:16–20; Matt 9:23; 11:17).

The Moment of Death (v. 6)

Qohelet closes his frame with the repetition of the idiom "before" (דַּעַ֣ת אֶל־רֹ֣אשׁ) from v. 2. Here he lists another series of metaphors describing death's finality. The verse has a number of *hapax legomena* within the book. The background to the images of the cord, bowl, jar, and wheel is difficult to discern. A link between the first two images and the second two images is likely. The first two items consist of precious metals and are associated with fire and light as symbols of life. The final two images revolve around drawing and conveying water, which functions also as an ancient symbol for life.[131] Some interpreters have connected the first two images to suspension lamps allegedly used in homes during

129 *COS*, s.v. "The Hadad Inscription (2.36)," trans. K. L. Younger, Jr., l. 1, 2:156.

130 J. de Savignac, "La sagesse du Qôhéléth et l'épopée de Gilgamesh," *VT* 28 (1978): 319.

131 Ibn Ezra, Loader (131), and Levy (137) see all four images as pertaining to a well, but the use of silver/gold here makes this unlikely.

Qohelet's day. There is no archaeological evidence, however, for the use of suspension lamps even into the Hellenistic period.[132] The silver cord and golden bowl do not appear elsewhere in Scripture. A burning lamp is a consistent biblical metaphor for life (1 Kgs 11:36; 15:4; 2 Chron 21:7; Job 18:5–6; 21:17; Prov 13:9; 20:20; 24:20). Likewise, spring water is a symbol of life and fertility (Gen 13:10; 26:19; Num 21:16–17; 2 Sam 23:15–17; Prov 5:15), while spilling water is a symbol of death (2 Sam 14:14). This connection makes it more likely that Qohelet gives us two sets of images pertaining to fire/light and to water as symbols for the human life lost.

The MT's opening verb is problematic. The *ketib* reads the Qal *yiqtol* יִרְחַק (“is distant”) while the *qere* reads the Niphal *yiqtol* יֵרָתֵק (“is tied”). Both readings make awkward sense, while the second also carries an unattested form (elsewhere רתק appears only in the D-stem). A commonly proposed emendation going back to Pfannkuche in the eighteenth century, and adopted by Gesenius and *HALOT*, is the Niphal *yiqtol* יִנָּתֵק (“be torn apart”). I follow this emendation, supported by most English versions (ESV, CSB: “is snapped”; NASB: “is broken”; NIV: “is severed”). What is snapped is “the silver cord.” The term חֶבֶל appears only here in the book (cf. the keyword הֶבֶל) and means “rope,” “cord,” or “line.”[133] “Silver” attests to its value as a metaphor for the worth of human life. The silver cord is likely fastened to the golden bowl in the next clause and here snapped, causing the bowl/reservoir to topple and go out. Eliphaz similarly describes the death of mortals in Job as the severing of a tent-cord: “Is not their *tent-cord plucked up* within them, do they not die, and that without wisdom?” (Job 4:21). A pagan Wiccan ritual used in contemporary settings to commemorate the death of a coven member is to smash a bowl suspended by a silver cord and to throw the shards into a flowing river. This act is followed by a reenactment of the goddess's descent to the underworld.[134] A psychologist studying out-of-body experiences in

132 R. H. Smith, “Household Lamps of Palestine in Old Testament Times,” *BA* 27 (Feb 1964): 31.

133 *HALOT*, 286; *DCH*, 3:151.

134 E. D. White, *Wicca: History, Belief, and Community in Modern Pagan*

the 1960s and 1970s found that many people described their out-of-body experience as including a psycho-somatic body tethered to their actual body by a silver, smoky, or luminous cord.[135]

The second metaphor relates to the breaking of the golden bowl. For the form ותרץ, I follow *HALOT* and Goldman in emending the MT Qal *yiqtol* וְתָרֵץ ("and [the golden bowl] smashes" [incorrectly pointed as II-ו in the MT]) to the Niphal *yiqtol* וְתֵרֹץ ("and is cracked," "broken").[136] The Niphal of רצץ means "to be crushed" or "be shattered." The subject is "the golden bowl." The term גֻּלָּה refers to rounded dish or reservoir, such as a bowl or basin on top of a lampstand (Zech 4:2–3), a decorative item on a pillar or column at the entrance to Solomon's temple (1 Kgs 7:41–42; 2 Chron 4:12–13), or a pool of water welling up from an underground spring (Josh 15:19; Judg 1:15) (SDBH). In the case of the decorative capitals on the columns in Solomon's temple, these bowls sat atop the two pillars at the entrance named Jachin and Boaz (1 Kgs 7:21; 2 Chron 3:17). The connection to Solomon's temple and to Zechariah's visionary lampstand suggests that the shattering of the bowl could be associated with the demolition of a sanctuary or temple. Pedestal lampstands from the ANE often represented both in homes and sanctuaries a stylized tree, either the tree of life or a symbol of the fertility cult, so the shattered lamp indicates life is snuffed out.[137] That gold cannot shatter is a common objection, but the lamp might be gilded, as gold often overlaid other materials.

Witchcraft (Eastbourne, UK: Sussex Academic, 2016), 145.

135 Robert Crookall, *Out-of-the-Body Experiences: A Fourth Analysis* (Secaucas, NJ: Citadel, 1970), 118–19. Cf. C. Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experiences in Medieval and Modern Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 116–19. For a critique of some of Crookall's findings, see C. S. Alvarado, "Explorations of the Features of Out-of-Body Experiences: An Overview and Critique of the Work of Robert Crookall," *JSPR* 76 (Apr 2012): 65–82.

136 *HALOT*, 1285; *Biblia Hebraica Quinta*, 111*.

137 Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 364. See the example and description from Tell Beit Mirsim in Smith, "Household Lamps," 23–24.

Silver and gold were associated in the ancient Near East with offerings and sacrifices made to the gods. In the *Kirta Epic* the god El commands Kirta to perform rituals involving these precious metals:

> Measure out the food for a sacrifice.
> Find a bird suitable for sacrifice,
> Pour wine from a *silver cup*,
> Drip honey from a *golden bowl*.
> Climb to the top of the tower,
> Climb to the heights of the wall.
> Raise your hands to heaven,
> Sacrifice to your godfather, El the Bull.[138]

These links are suggestive of the sacred value of life in the face of one's own death and perhaps moreover that humans bear the precious image of God (Gen 1:26–27; 9:6).[139]

The next two images point to spilled water and smashed equipment as a metaphor for death. The first concerns a shattered jar. The verb שׁבר in the Niphal means "to be broken" or "be crushed," while the vessel in view is "pitcher" or "jar."[140] The vessel typically carried water (Gen 24:14), although sometimes flour (1 Kgs 17:12), and could be lowered by a rope to retrieve water from a well or reservoir. Seow points to the smashing of pots as a funerary custom, given the large number of sherds found at tombs from the Persian period, but it is uncertain the author is pointing to funeral rituals.[141] Here the jar is shattered at a "spring" or "fountain."

138 "The Kirta Epic," ll. 17–24, in V. H. Matthews and D. C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, 4th ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 2016), 215.

139 Ginsberg interprets the golden bowl as representing the nobleman, the clay pitcher the common man, and the wheel the poor man. But the metaphors all seem to relate to the same thing: death as depicted from various angles. Delineating the materials as representing the strata of society also contravenes the Torah's ethics whereby all humans are divine image-bearers.

140 *HALOT*, 460, 1403; *DCH*, 4:362, 8:250.

141 Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 366.

The latter term מַבּוּעַ appears only three times in the OT. In Isaiah the term describes springs of water that stand in contrast to the parched ground (Isa 35:7; 49:10). Water, a source of life, spills onto the dry earth because the clay vessel is broken. Elsewhere the metaphor of the clay pot points to God as sovereign creator (i.e., the potter) and to human weakness as mortal flesh (Job 10:9; 33:6; Isa 29:16; 64:8; Jer 18:6; Rom 9:21; 2 Cor 4:7).

The final image is a smashed wheel at the well. The verb is the same root רצץ as used with the golden bowl earlier, here in the Niphal *wĕqatal*. The term גַּלְגַּל means a "wheel" or the "paddle-wheel" at a well.[142] The word בּוֹר denotes a "pit," "cistern," or "well." Some link this term to the grave[143] or to the world itself,[144] while Seow sees a double entendre as the pit can refer to life-giving water (cistern) or to death (Sheol).[145] A Neo-Assyrian relief depicts soldiers in a besieged city using a wheel to retrieve water from a reservoir.[146] The means for retrieving water is here smashed to bits, a picture of the individual's life being extirpated.

The Aftermath of Death (v. 7)

Qohelet finally portrays the end for the deceased person, with the body returning to the dust from which it came and the spirit returning to God. Mention of God here frames "your Creator" in v. 1. This verse, along with Eccl 3:20, alludes to Gen 3:19: "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return." The dust returns here to "the earth" (יְרֵאָה) as it was. The preposition לַעַ (“on,” “upon”) may distinguish the

142 *HALOT*, 190. Dahood argues against this meaning in that waterwheels were uncommon in the Levant. He prefers to interpret this as a rounded vessel for drawing water, linked to the Ugaritic cognate *gl* and Akkadian *gulgullu* ("water vessel") ("Canaanite-Phoenician Influence," 216–17; cf. also Seow, 217).

143 Beal, "C(ha)osmopolis," 301. Fox notes that the smashed wheel at the cistern evokes the image of a grave with disjointed bones lying around it (1999, 329).

144 Hengstenberg, *Ecclesiastes*, 252.

145 Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 367.

146 See Eph'al, *The City Besieged*, 65.

sphere to which the dead body goes ("upon the earth") as contrasted with the sphere to which the spirit goes (לְאֵ) ("unto God") (cf. 3:21) (cf. LXX, ἐπί vs. πρός). The latter phrase consists of the preposition כְּ ("as," "like") + שֶׁ ("which") + הָיָה ("it was"). This unique expression relates to primal man originating from the dust as described in Gen 2:7. I conclude that the statement does not refer to the cessation of existence; rather, the contrast between the spirit and the body may hint at the afterlife, as Qohelet elsewhere contrasts upward/downward motion after death (3:21) and spheres of existence in heaven/earth (5:2 [1]).[147] The body's decomposition in the soil from which it came frames mortal human existence as a chiasm from beginning to end.

The spirit returns to God.[148] Those who maintain Qohelet's skepticism and alleged ignorance of the afterlife, read רוּחַ here as an impersonal life-force imparted by God.[149] Yet ancient people held universally to an afterlife. The allusion to creation (cf. Gen 3:19) as well as the meaning of "spirit" in Eccl 3:21 suggest that the human spirit as the animating breath or immaterial life is in view. Other texts speak of God as the creator of the human spirit (Isa 57:16; Zech 12:1) and as "gathering/taking the spirit" at death (Job 34:14; Ps 104:29). In the Torah Yahweh is called "the God of the spirits of all flesh" (Num 16:22; 27:16). In God's hand is "the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind" (Job 12:10). The spirit's return to God as that of a conscious, postmortem being accords well with the reality of future judgment (12:14).

Returning to God is fraught in the OT not with connotations of judgment but of life and blessing (Gen 32:9; Deut 4:30; 30:1–3; 1 Sam 7:3; 2 Chron 15:4; 30:6; Zech 1:3). This is especially the case in Deuteronomy: "When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, in the future you will *return to the Lord your God* and obey him" (Deut 4:30, CSB). The mortal body dissolves in the dust, in keeping with the sin

147 Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 151.

148 Podechard argues against belief in an afterlife, claiming that this conclusion would upend the entire tenor of the book (*L'Ecclésiaste*, 470).

149 Podechard, *L'Ecclésiaste*, 470.

curse, but the spirit returns to God its creator in anticipation of continued life after death. The passage stretching from 11:7–12:7 has furnished the core teaching and culminating wisdom of Qohelet and spans his admonitions and instructions for the young to the old and dying.[150]

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that rather than presenting an allegory of ailing body parts to illustrate the aging process, Qohelet is depicting the moment of death through a collage of images and metaphors drawn from the created order, domestic life, commerce, and warfare. This reading moves the interpreter away from the pitfalls of imposing on the text an allegory, a form that is rare in the biblical wisdom corpus. Rather, Qohelet challenges readers to call to mind their creator while they still have the breath to do so, before death overtakes them. The moment of death is depicted through a series of metaphors that highlight this final occurrence as one of darkness (v. 2), fear and diminishment (v. 3), alarm (v. 4), terror (v. 5a), destruction (v. 5b), and eclipse (v. 6). Death is humanity's great equalizer, as it casts its pale shadow over life from beginning to end. Qohelet reminds the readers—including us—that death is a fate from which there is no escape. Nevertheless, it is a fate which through some forethought can be offset to a degree by joy in God's good gifts and remembrance of his redemptive work. For Qohelet living life with the end in mind takes a decisive and ultimately wise step toward appropriating what limited range of gifts life in a fallen and often dark world has to offer.

150 Lauha, *Kohelet*, 215.