Chapter 2

Refining the Voice of Qohelet: New Forms and New Transcripts

(Ecclesiastes 6:10-12:8)

While there is considerable variety in how the structure of the book of Ecclesiastes can be discerned, there is little question about the verses that make up the middle of the book. Ecclesiastes 6:10-12, often referred to as a bridge passage, was designed by the Masoretes as the exact center of the book.¹ Eunny P. Lee sees Ecclesiastes 6:10-12:8 as the third division in the book, with the theme of “No one knows what is good for humanity.”² Readers of this portion of the text will note some immediate differences, not in terms of themes or concepts but in terms of forms. Wisdom literature can certainly take many forms as James L. Crenshaw’s *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* clearly displays.³ There are differences between the dialogues of Job and aphorisms of the book of Proverbs with respect to form. While there were proverb-like aphorisms in the first part of Ecclesiastes, in this portion the number of those traditional proverbial expressions grows. They take the form of advice—perhaps provided through instruction—and in that sense, they form the continuing basis for self-monitoring in this Ptolemaic-governed world as these aphorisms provide the whispers of the postcolonial in the minds of the Judean community under the rule of Egypt. Mortality and its clarion call to treasure moments as they come along with more advice about approaching the king

---


also make this portion of the book poignant. Postcolonial Qohelet channels the legendary
Solomon in ways that promote greater attention to self-fashioning.

The Bridge to the Second Portion of Ecclesiastes (Eccles. 6:10-12)

Scholars have read this bridge passages as an “introduction” to the ideas found in
Ecclesiastes 7:1-14. The passage, however, strikes a different tone. In terms of the
embedded codes that Surgirtharajah isolates in narratives, he suggests that a negotiated
code “acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic code, [but] it operates within
temporal and spatial time. It carries with it the potential for adaptation in varying
contexts.” The questions posed in the passage reveal this diminished, domesticated
hegemonic code:

Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what human
beings are, and that they are not able to dispute with those who are stronger. The
more words, the more vanity, so how is one the better? For who knows what is
good for mortals while they live the few days of their vain life, which they pass
like a shadow? For who can tell them what will be after them under the sun?
(Eccles. 6:10-12)

Krüger suggests that the “stronger” one here is a reference to God, and we can certainly
see the possibilities of reading the הָאָדָם (human being) as the first human or perhaps Job.
What can the human can do in this world with a God who is active but withdrawn in the
sense that a theophanic manifestation is unlikely to occur? Qohelet thus gives future
advice on how to “negotiate” that space “under the sun.” The multiplication of words
provides no solution. The next question seems to have been answered earlier in 3:12-13

4. Krüger, Qoheleth, 132; Hollinshead, “What is Good for Man?,” 31-50; Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes,
131-32.

5. Sugirtharajah, Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation, 82.
and 5:17-19, but here Qohelet asks the question as if it is actually new. The challenge of difference, however, seems to be related to the looming prospects of the future. In that way, he is going to suggest a negotiation of his own previous statements in light of mortality and what comes next after death. What is טוב (good) is the negotiated space Qohelet will suggest as advice to his Ptolemaic Judean audience.

**Advice for the Good (Eccles. 7:1-14)**

With the exception of the popular-based recognition of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, Ecclesiastes 7:1-14 may be one of the most recognizable passages for its seemingly traditional wisdom format. As Micah D. Kiel notes, however, the traditional form “subverts expectations. The episode ends with Qohelet saying that God makes both good and bad so that humans have no idea what will happen.” The passage deserves consideration in its entirety:

A good name is better than precious ointment,  
And the day of death, than the day of birth.  
It is better to go to the house of mourning  
Than to go to the house of feasting;  
For this is the end of everyone,  
And the living will lay it to heart.  
Sorrow is better than laughter,  
For by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad.  
The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning;  
But the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.  
It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise  
Than to hear the song of fools.  
For like the cracking of thorns under a pot,  
So is the laughter of fools;  
This also is vanity.  
Surely oppression make the wise foolish,  
And a bribe corrupts the heart.  
Better is the end of a thing than its beginning;  
The patient in spirit are better than the proud in spirit.  
Do not be quick to anger,

---

For anger lodges in the bosom of fools.
Do not say, “Why were the former days better than these?”
For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.
Wisdom is good as an inheritance
An advantage to those who see the sun.
For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money,
And the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom gives life to the one who possesses it.
Consider the work of God;
Who can make straight what he has made crooked?
In the days of prosperity be joyful, and in the days of adversity consider; God has made the one as well as the other, so mortals many not find out anything that will come after them. (Eccles. 7:1-14)

Traditionally, scholars have noted the tendency in wisdom texts to present a group of proverbs such as this one together in a way where word play, rhyme, and repetition are presented, and commentaries have been quick to pick up on this element. The words שיר (song) and סרים (thorns) contribute a hissing sound that is to remind the hearer or reader about true nature of כסילים (fools). While enjoyment has characterized some of his earlier and later statements about joy in feasting and labor (3:12, 5:17, 8:15), the passage intensifies a recognition of mourning and death. Only those who lack wisdom will not choose the “better” part. Whether Qohelet has discovered these traditional proverbial statements and added a second line to each is unclear, yet it has prompted a good deal of speculation. Verse 3b suggests a significant point that contrasts the outer/inner complex of understanding. Happiness is a characteristic that has now been pushed to the level of לב (heart typically but sometimes also mind in this book). Such a concept, however, is hardly foreign to the wisdom tradition, for Proverbs 14:13 reads “Even in laughter the

7. Lohfink, Qoheleth, 92-96.
9. Fox, Ecclesiastes, 43.
heart is sad, and the end of joy is grief.” Yet that image is the reverse of what Qohelet suggests.10

As a postcolonial speaker, Qohelet knows that the older traditional wisdom will no longer serve—those expressions associated with Solomon—even the collected sayings which go back to the time of Solomon in the collected book called Proverbs, at least according to tradition. There are questions that are not worth the time of asking; there is a recognition that life is fleeting; even more direct is the notion that humans cannot change what God has fixed. Qohelet’s diminished voice is not that of the postcolonial liberator, but the voice of the postcolonial speaker who assists others in accepting the reality of personal life, economic circumstances, and patterns of governance. His advice surprises because he is speaking against some common expectations, although certainly not all.

Finding a New Theological Way: A Middle Way (Eccles. 7:15-8:1)

At times, scholars of Ecclesiastes seem mystified by the text, particularly when the suggestions seem heterodox to their own understanding of the role of Torah in the life of the Judean community, particularly after the time of Ezra with his inchoate Torah as noted in Nehemiah 8. In Ecclesiastes 7:15, Qohelet notes that the righteous may suffer and die and the wicked may prosper. He speaks in an oppositional code against the easy answers of covenant theology (deeds-consequences) that are a significant part of the struggle in Job and asserted as part of covenant blessing in Deuteronomy. Trying to find a theological way forward in the midst of activity that he has seen, Qoholet says “Do not be too righteous (צדיק), and do not act too wise; why should you destroy yourself?” (7:16). Further he says, “Do not be too wicked, and do not be a fool; why should you die before

your time?” (7:17). Readers can almost gasp at the suggestion; commentators try to dismiss the challenge presented here. Mark Sneed contends that Qohelet may be suggesting a kind of “golden mean,” located between two communities of his day: a group that required a kind of zealous “Torah piety” and those who have adopted Hellenistic philosophy as their rule. Qohelet suggests a kind of “moderate” position between both parties. Qohelet thus stands in the ideological crosswinds of his day, an image that would become even clearer in the struggles noted at the start of I Maccabees. In such a position, channeling the legendary Solomon would be even more important. Qohelet is practical in the sense that he understands human limitations. As Michael V. Fox notes, “Koheleth is not advocating it but rather accepting its inevitability: all humans are inescapably flawed (7:20), but they can at least avoid being very wicked.”

Further, Qohelet opines, “It is good that you should take hold of the one, without letting go of the other; for the one who fears God shall succeed at both” (Eccles. 7:18). Some critics have seen this as suggesting a shadow side of life as Jung notes. What seems more likely, however, is that the observation fits nicely within Qoheletian free will and responsibility. In essence, one should avoid the extremes of any category in this Ptolemaic world. Right חכמה (wisdom) is ultimately better than ten rulers. Could those ten rulers refer to administrative officials of the Ptolemies that reside in the city of

12. Fox, Ecclesiastes, 49.
14. Krüger, Qoheleth, 141.
Jerusalem that even Josephus notes?\textsuperscript{15} While it is probably important to be careful about an overt “vulgar materialistic” reading of the text of Ecclesiastes that requires too much exact history on the ground,\textsuperscript{16} it would be important to exalt the use of wisdom against those whom Qohelet sees as foolish, particularly those in power in Ptolemaic Judah. In that way, it makes particular sense that he would argue that at times a person’s actions may be righteous and wise, but at times unrighteous and foolish. To the orthodox mind, such a suggestion would sound heterodox, but Qohelet, drawing on the wisdom of Solomonic inheritance, authorizes his realistic understanding of surviving and thriving.

In a manner of the testing for understanding in Ecclesiastes 2, Qohelet provides an assessment of what he discovers in Ecclesiastes 7:26-29:

\begin{quote}
I find more bitter than death the woman who is a trap, whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are fetters; one who pleases God escapes her. See, this is what I found, says the Teacher, adding one thing to another to find a sum, which my mind has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found. See, this alone I found, that God made human beings straightforward, but they have devised many schemes. (Eccles. 7: 26-29)
\end{quote}

As modern readers of the text, it is important for us to bracket a visceral response to the text at this point. Certainly, modern readers would reject out of hand his comments here regarding women, but we need to look carefully at them to see how they speak to his postcolonial ethic. First, other wisdom texts including Proverbs 1-9 warn of women as tempters, yet at the same time, in an acrostic poem a highly industrious woman is praised (Proverbs 31), and wisdom is presented as feminine in Proverbs 8:22-31. In many cases, women in the wisdom tradition who are condemned are seen as those who lead the

\begin{footnotes}
\end{footnotes}
community away from the importance of Torah. It is possible the number 1000 may refer to Solomon’s harem. Seow suggests since the emphasis in the text is on a single woman, that Qohelet might be referring to his wife or mother. Seen in its total display, Qohelet is actually suggesting something about the nature of society in general. Men are associated more with public spaces, and women with private intimate spaces in the ancient world. In a real way, the same kind of surveillance that would have been a part of the Ptolemaic rule of Judah is here seen on the personal level where all humans are regarded through the prism of suspicion, namely because they lead one away from wisdom. While he has recommended images of two friends providing assistance and the importance of children, here he speaks what experience has taught him. The two questions of Ecclesiastes 8:1, while rhetorical, suggest that in the end the possession of wisdom enriches the individual. Monitoring the self and monitoring others keep one moving toward that path of wisdom. That’s the message of postcolonial Solomon enshrined in Qohelet.

**Actions toward the King: Self-Monitoring in Ptolemaic Judah (Eccles. 8:2-9)**

The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament contains several examples of Israelites/Judeans serving in foreign courts. The names Joseph, Daniel, and Mordecai are the most prominent, with Esther, a Judean, the Queen of Ahasuerus. Qohelet is giving advice on how to approach the king, in this case perhaps a representative of the Ptolemaic government in Judea. Michael V. Fox, Thomas Krüger, and Scott C. Jones contend that

the actual counsel that Qohelet employs here has a source or analogue in Ahiqar’s proverbs, written in Aramaic. Keeping in mind our literary fiction here, Qohelet, a mimic to Solomon, employs the words of another tradition to suggest how to approach a king outside the domain of the Jewish community in Judah in the Ptolemaic period. Fox is quick to note, of course, that it is unlikely that anyone would have actually met a king. A residents of Judea would more likely have met one of his ambassadors to whom the person would swear obedience. Readers could certainly understand the passage as another of those “hidden transcripts” preserved for the community to assist its survival. Particularly significant in the modeling advice as Jones has noted, since the conception about kingship in this area was the notion of the king’s “functional divinity,” that aspect is also factored into the commands (Hebrew jussives and imperatives) to those approaching the king.

With respect to procedure, the ones approaching the king are told: “Keep the king’s command because of your sacred oath. Do not be terrified; go from his presence, do not delay when the matter is unpleasant, for he does whatever he pleases” (Eccles. 8:2-3). Towner suggests that quick movements from the king’s presence might provoke suspicion; thus the wise person moves carefully, a self-monitoring behavior of the physical variety. As Lohfink notes, “The royal splendor (shining out in names such as ‘Savior,’ ‘Benefactor,’ ‘Divine Revelation’) is reduced to what lies behind it: naked


power.” To further warn his hearers about the politically delicate situation he says, “For the word of the king is powerful, and who can say to him, ‘What are you doing?’

Whoever obeys a command will meet no harm, and the wise mind will know the time and way, although the troubles of mortals lie heavy upon them” (Eccles. 8:4-5). Given all the attention to proper times and seasons in the book, Qohelet expects his courtier or person who approaches authority to understand how it works. This is an authoritarian rule that cannot be resisted, at least on the surface. Learning how to read the hegemonic codes of power is vital to survival, even with the ability to mimic the forms of ceremonial courtesy required on the occasions of state. Self-management of the one in the king’s presence is important as Qohelet notes. If Leo Perdue is correct, readers can hear the words of the teacher Qohelet as he trains his students for life in this world. Put perhaps another way, “So putting on another male, elite approach to life, albeit academic rather than royal, the reader can view Qohelet as a ‘fellow traveller’ of the paths of existence.” Throughout the book the advice seems to fall exclusively to a male and—at times apparently an upper-class—audience, but there is no reason to believe the advice is always to be understood in that narrow way. These are words of counsel toward what he sees as an ambiguous position at best and a dangerous one at its worst.

Following what is very clear counsel for behavior in the midst of colonizing powers, Qohelet drops into a discourse that occurs several times through the narrative that is almost impossible to interpret with respect to its intention. Qohelet seems clear on

24. Lofink, Qoheleth, 104.


26. Mary E. Mills, Reading Ecclesiastes: A Literary and Cultural Exegesis (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 98.
that fact that there is an established time for events to happen as in chapter 3: 1-8, but humans can hardly discern when that will be. The future is unclear. Death is a certainty, hence the reason for contemplating it as noted in chapter 7:1-4. Again as an observer Qohelet sees the harm that people do to others. He cannot liberate people from that misfortune, but he can through his words—however burdensome they may be—deliver a verdict of practical wisdom to those now late in the Second Temple period.

**Decolonizing Israelite/Judean Covenant Theology (Eccles. 8:10-17)**

The belief that God rewards those who remain in covenant with God and that God punishes the wicked is a standard belief of covenant theology found in all segments of the Hebrew Bible (Torah, Prophets, and Writings), but here Qohelet is skeptical, based on his own observations. The practice of piety at the Temple (8:10) and the systems of justice that should be adjudicated by the courts (8:11) are in some measure darkened by those who attempt to practice them, whether priests at the temple or magistrates/judges who are ultimately connected with the system of oppression. Qoheleth believes at some point that God’s justice must vindicate the innocent and punish the wicked (8:13), but in no way is there a verifiable timetable. Both the innocent and the wicked are a part of his postcolonial future. What is becoming clearer in the mind of Qohelet is that in the midst of this uncertainty there is a possibility that should not be taken lightly: “So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun” (8:15). To modern readers this might seem simply like a narcotic against a system that seems to be out of control and lacking any apparent

resolution. For the postcolonial Qohelet, the feasting itself is an act of resistance. It is not an eschatological banquet of the future; it is the present—the right now—the only thing that for Qohelet can have meaning. Qohelet has not given up on God; he simply does not believe that humans can affect the change, move time forward, or even understand the nature of divine design. Feasting provides a tangible statement for him that humans can find some comfort “under the sun,” even if only in their own houses—their own kingdoms. As Krüger suggests, this entire passages “completes the circle back to 6:10-12.”28 Recycling images, of course, is part of Qohelet’s narrative strategy that speaks to resistance in the midst of uncertainty as well as laying claim to what can be done in a world where the certainties are simply not there. That Qohelet is even beginning to reject wisdom itself as a means of access to knowledge is a concept that is growing in scope in his narrative. The ultimate rejection of the wisdom dimension will grow shrill as the book moves toward its conclusion.

Postcolonial Feasting as Resistance and the

Warring Foolish King vs. the Unknown Wise Man (Eccles. 9:1-18)

In one sense it is possible to read a significant portion of Ecclesiastes 9 as the continuing resistance narrative that postcolonial Qohelet is developing—an intensification and elaboration on Ecclesiastes 8:10-16. And while Ecclesiastes 8:16-17 seems to downplay the possibility of knowledge through wisdom and the mining of empirical experience, Ecclesiastes 9:13-15 suggests a small but definable space for the wise man amidst the horrors of war invoked by a king against an ancient city. The wise man contains the germ of the postcolonial ethic.

28. Krüger, Qoheleth, 162.
Often this chapter has been read as among the most desperate and sad of the entire text. Crenshaw says, “A lengthening shadow extends throughout the book, especially becoming dark in this unit.”

Further, he notes that there is a shift in linguistic forms regarding the advice about enjoying life seen in 2:24-26, 3:12-13, 5:17-19, 8:15 to imperative forms in 9:7, and he suggests that Qohelet’s change reflects “a greater sense of urgency.”

While Qohelet asserts that the צדיקים (the righteous ones) are אלים ביד (in the hand of God), and while that might seem like an advantage over the wicked, their fate is similar. There is no system whereby surety can be gained—even in the performance of ritual acts of sacrifice as prescribed by Torah (9:2). Is Qohelet rejecting even the very means whereby reconciliation can be made? Is he positing a post-sacrificial system for Judaism? Drawing on the work of Josephus, Towner notes that the passage could be considered in light of changing attitudes toward oath taking in the Hellenistic period.

The real sense here should be clear: none of these aspects will preserve the memory of a person good or evil (9:5-6). Even the riddle of 9:4 with the images of the living dog and dead lion, perhaps iconography of social class, suggests that anything living is better than being dead, with the suggestion that “lion” represents a king. Qohelet simply surprises his readers here. Surely it would be better to be living than dead. From the postcolonial perspective, a “dead lion” or king represents a regime change that may have a significant impact on the life of the community as it certainly will mean some level of disruption in

29. Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 159.
30. Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 162.
31. Seow, Ecclesiastes, 303-04.
33. Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 161.
powers whereby the powerless often become the victims of the “show of force” for the incoming monarch. Qohelet has merely presented a disgusting image of the dog in Ancient Near Eastern culture against a potentially horrible fate. For Qohelet, all stops with death, at least from the human perspective. Whatever God does is beyond Qohelet’s capacity to understand through any system of knowledge.

In the midst of this recognition of the reality of death for all humanity—righteous or unrighteous—Qohelet poses his resistance feasting with even more elaborate details:

Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given to you under the sun, because it is your portion in life and in your toil under the sun. Whatever your hands find to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going. (Eccles. 9:7-10)

As noted in Ecclesiastes 8:15, feasting becomes the work of resistance in the empire where Judeans are under the control of the Ptolemies, but even in a more philosophical way, such an activity becomes a resistance against the obvious end of all human life. God has designed this time according to Ecclesiastes 3, so to engage it is to work within the larger contours of divine desire. In addition to food and drink consumption, the person is in the midst of the recognition that death is real and is to wear white garments that are associated with festival times to push back against that reality in a divinely approved way.34 In this sense, Qohelet sees the God whom he worships but cannot know as providing moments of resistance. Even the Psalmist knew that in 23:5: “You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies.” This is the God who רָאת (qal perfect 3ms, is pleased with) such behavior of eating and drinking. Clearly, Qohelet throughout the book

---

is likely addressing a male audience, but here it is clear when he tells the reader to enjoy life with his אשה (wife). The enjoyment of feasting, connections with a partner, and delight in work are important in the current moment. Labor here is seen as a positive because it flows out of the natural desire of the human. This is not the labor that is extracted from those who are oppressed in 4:1-2. Again, however, Qohelet quickly returns to his upside down world that defies covenant theology, with the potential for calamity at almost any turn. But these remarks are short lived—for only 9:11-12.

The final segment of the chapter returns to a more positive image that has clearly postcolonial implications in a world where kingship has oppressed peoples and besieged cities. The identity of the city is not significant, but the effort to conquer it is described as a significant military activity: “great siegeworks against it” (9:14). This passage seems reminiscent of Ezekiel 4:2 and II Kings 25:1, referring to the siegeworks against the city walls of Jerusalem. Qohelet does note that the wise man was not consulted and the city fell (9:15). If aphoristically “Wisdom is better than might; yet wisdom is despised, and his words are not given heed” (9:16), then Qohelet is in some way calling out the error of his day. Empires, whether at the time of Solomon or the current empire of the Ptolemies in Judah, conquer cities, and as a result, control the means of production and economic fortunes of a people. The scenario suggests the power of wisdom and the wise man who is overlooked because it is countercultural to the nature of the social order that has been constructed along military lines. The postcolonial Qohelet knows that the future of the

---

35. Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 163. Crenshaw suggests that this aspect of gender may actually be very different for the audience imagined in 12:9.

36. Barbour suggest that rather than “siegeworks” the meaning of what the king built could be “nets,” which she sees is related to Ecclesiastes 9:12.
world resides in wisdom, and that it is better than בְּכֶלֶת קְרֹב (weapons of war), yet he is not a prophet who can project an image of peace restored, vineyards planted, and wine consumed in joy and festivity (Amos 9:11-15). Barbour suggests that this small vignette may owe its echo effect to Sennacherib’s siege of Jerusalem in 701 BCE; in fact, the echoes in I Maccabees 7 and II Maccabees 8 seems very clear.³⁷ In her continuing analysis, the city for the Ecclesiastes text would be Jerusalem, with Sennacherib as the besieging king, and the wise man as the prophet Isaiah.³⁸ Whatever the case may be, ancient world warfare was well known, and hope is held out that the weapons of wit and language may carry the day in this postcolonial world of Ptolemaic Judah. The “poor wise man” (9:15) seems radically different from the powerful Qohelet of the autobiography, yet in this man, Qohelet sees new possibilities. Readers are left to speculate that the real power of the city lies with this man who has the wit and ingenuity to allow his own city to escape and thrive. Qohelet may be giving us the quiet picture of the revolutionary—the man of wit and judgment—perhaps the one necessary to bring liberation from the colonial world that exited in the city and in the military power that attempts to take it over. Was this a man of the past, or is this a man of the present to whom the city might turn for deliverance? This עִיר קְטָנָה (small city) could be reminiscent of Jerusalem or any city. The principal idea is one not to be missed; the wealth in resistance against any empire is always its people.


³⁸. Ibid., 132-33.
Assessing Wisdom and Folly: Managing the Self in the Midst of a Leadership Crisis

(Eccles. 10:1-11:6)

In his remarks on this most proverb-like section of Ecclesiastes, Micah D. Kiel notes that this portion of the text “depicts a world on the brink of chaos.” While wisdom is certainly present, folly in some sense destroys the stable structure of good decisions and actions of the wise. At the same time, the actions of the fool are so self-evident that they cannot be missed (Eccles. 10:3). That folly may indeed rise to the very top, even to leadership seems apparent. Offering conduct advice, Qohelet opens a window of understanding and calls for endurance:

If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your post,
For calmness will undo great offenses.
There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as great an error as if it is proceeded from the ruler: folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place. I have seen slaves on horseback, and princes walking on foot like slaves. Whoever digs a pit will fall into it;
And whoever breaks through a wall will be bitten by a snake. (Eccles. 10: 4-8)

In a passage dealing with wisdom and folly and those who live according to them, for a brief moment readers might think that even Qohelet has lost his way. The world he describes seems impossible, and the images suggested seem to be presented upside down. What he is actually doing, however, is presenting the concept of quiet resistance. It would seem, of course, that rulers would determine who will continue in a position, not the person serving, but clearly Qohelet sees the subordinate in the position as having the real power. The subordinate actually has the power in the situation enacted through מָרְפָּא (calmness). Since the ruler and folly are connected in 10:5, there is a sense of triumph of the one subservient over him. As Seow observes, such a situation may not work out every

time, yet it may give a certain internal power to the subordinate—it is his oppositional code behavior here as pushing back in this situation. Just to remind us that the voice of Qohelet is “aristocratic,” he notes that the foolish ones advance over those who have wealth. Fox notes that here “Koheleth reveals his class bias” and that typically the wisdom community voice is “conservative” of the traditions. From the postcolonial perspective, the difference noted would raise suspicion about his enterprise, but it would also be expected. In verses 8-19, while he continues to restore the worth of the wise person to some degree, the real focus is on the fool. Given that Qohelet sees the world as turned upside down here, readers must be aware that Qohelet is protecting the interests of his class. Qohelet here has become the mimic of the oppressor. His hegemonic voice, similar to the opening of the text, asserts privilege in a way that gives attention to his colonial project, yet that it is falling apart suggests that the days of colonial oppressions are beginning to fall away. The problem is that his text does not yet suggest the opportunity for a new day that will be rewarding.

Closing the chapter, Qohelet warns,

Do not curse the king, even in your thoughts,
Or curse the rich, even in your bedroom;
For a bird of the air may carry your voice,
Or some winged creature tell the matter. (Eccles. 10: 20)

Following on from the remark that “Feasts are made for laughter; wine gladdens life” (Eccles 10:19), readers or hearers find this statement a warning. Whether or not

40. Seow, Ecclesiastes, 324.
41. Fox, Ecclesiastes, 68.
Ptolemaic Judah has a system of surveillance that would penetrate even into the private spaces of the home, Qohelet warns that informants are present. Enjoying the feast is important as a whisper of postcolonial relief, but a warning quickly follows. Krüger notes that the warning covers thought as well as words; in this case, it is the “fruit of exaggerated anxiety.”\(^{42}\) What this passage suggests, even through out of the mouth of an ambivalent Qohelet, is that the world is so chaotic that it is impossible to trust anyone, maybe even one’s self. Either we can conclude that Qohelet is exaggerating, or we can conclude that the actual *Sitz im Leben* is such that no one can be trusted. At this point, readers must ask whether or not Qohelet has himself come to embody the kind of oppressive forces which are present in Ptolemaic Judah. Has he become the parodic representation of the empire itself?

The beginning of chapter 11 suggests a number of interesting ideas about the nature of human knowledge. Herein lies not only an extension of self-monitoring, not so much as a matter of protection, but as a warning against folly, perhaps even the folly of those of economic superiority:

\begin{verbatim}
Send out your bread upon the waters,
    for after many days you will get it back.
Divide your means seven ways, or even eight,
    for you do not know what disaster may happen on earth.
When clouds are full
    they empty rain on the earth,
Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north
    in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.
Whoever observes the wind will not sow;
    and whoever regards the clouds will not reap.
Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother’s womb,
    so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything.
In the morning sow your seed, and at evening do not let your hands be idle;
    for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be
\end{verbatim}

\(^{42}\) Krüger, *Ecclesiastes*, 189.
good. (Eccles. 11: 1-6)

In an encapsulating statement with regard to this unit of thought, Crenshaw observes that “an element of risk always resides in commercial and agricultural enterprise, but intelligent people venture nevertheless.” In that way, even on the personal level, Qohelet suggests a kind of resistance mentality must accompany those who “live under the sun.” The beginning of the passage seems rather obscure to modern readers, but T. A. Perry suggests that “casting bread upon the water” may actually be a sexual metaphor to encourage procreation. Given earlier references in 3:5, the possibility is certainly there. In a world where the colonial mentality would push against taking chances and in cases where Qohelet has actually encouraged a level of self-monitoring for safety sake, this resistance work seems to contain the whispers of the postcolonial. If the reference to seven or eight has particular meaning—other than just being a part of poetic device of ascending numbers—then it may suggest the practical wisdom of helping those who are in need “in case you too face adversity.” In essence, it creates the possibility for a community of sharing—that community of liberation, actually the kind of sharing that the Torah itself anticipates in helping those in need. Misfortunes happen as other texts in the Jewish wisdom literature affirm, but a person cannot allow those misfortunes to become a kind of oppressor to those who understand that the potential for flourishing actually arises from resistance itself. For Qohelet, life is a mystery, and in one of the text’s most mystical statements, Qohelet says, “Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the

43. Crenshaw, Ecclesiastes, 178.
45. Fox, Ecclesiastes, 73.
bones in the mother’s womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything” (Eccles. 11:5). Seow, in responding to 11: 5, writes that “Human beings do not really know how nature works.”

Not only has God created so that humans cannot know (3:11), even the very processes of nature itself are hidden—even the most potentially joyous celebration of new human life—from human perception. For Qohelet, such events are wonders, not the cause of fear or despondency. Nature and God with the unknown aspects push humans forward; the potential for liberation from one’s own mind is the point of the text. Taken in the larger context, the designs of liberation, the whispers of a world longing to be born, are present in the very design that God and nature have presented before humans. Such words are an encouragement in Ptolemaic Judah for those who understand the hidden messages. Hidden transcripts are actually at times on the surface, but only a person in the context of knowing would be able to read them in a way intended by the writer.

**What Remains?: Youth, Age, בָּשָׂר (Breath): Ecclesiastes 11:7-12:8**

In the last unit of the book of Ecclesiastes, credited as the words of Qohelet, a very unusual turn is taken. In the previous section, hearers and readers were warned even about the nature of thought itself as a challenge in the midst of oppression. In one sense we should then not be surprised by the ending of the book. In his commentary on these well-known words of Ecclesiastes 12:1-8, Fox suggests there are multiple ways of reading this text: allegorical, literal, and eschatological.

The text itself has a mysterious beauty seen only when the words are repeated and analyzed:

---


47. Fox, *Ecclesiastes*, 76-80.
Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, “I have no pleasure in them;” before the sun and the light and the stars are darkened and the clouds return with the rain; in the days when the guards of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the women who grind cease working because they are few, and those who look through the windows see dimly; when the doors on the street are shut, and the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low; when one is afraid of heights, and terrors are in the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; because all must go to their eternal home, and the mourners will go about the streets; before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the wheel is broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity. (Eccles. 12:1-7)

In essence, the question is whether or not this text is about an individual person’s death, the larger concept of aging and death, or a way of looking at the death of a person as an image of the eschaton.

Given that a postcolonial approach tends to deal with the text at its face value, this reading will address the literal level of the text. Fox suggests that a literal reading of this poem would follow somewhat in this manner:

In a literal reading, the items of the description are just what they are said to be. One such interpretation has verses 2-6 describing an estate falling into disrepair. The event as a whole, rather than the individual elements, represents human deterioration and death. Another literal reading proposed in the present commentary, construes verse 2b as a reference to old age and verses 3-5a as a description of a funeral of the lord of the estate. In favor of this is the syntax of verses 3-5, according to which the events described all happen on the day in which “the man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners walk about in the streets” (v. 5b). This is the time of the funeral procession. Even within this literal reading, some symbolism is recognized. For example, the luminaries’ growing dark (v. 2a) represents the coming of death, and the breaking of the vessels (v. 6) represents death and burial.48

While it is fair to say that sometimes such poetic expressions should be read for the mere emotional intensity that they provide and may not require commentary, these lines do

48. Ibid., 76.
indeed merit consideration in light of the current attempt to understand Qohelet’s advice for his disciples, readers, and hearers in Ptolemaic Judah. If this is the estate of a rich lord, it would be easy on another level to think that it might be such an estate of Qohelet himself. If readers were inclined to think allegorically, it might be a picture of the life of the entire community itself, but there has never been any suggestion that Qohelet thinks that the community itself is dying. What it may be is a recognition about the kinds of rhythms that are predictable as those which open the poem (1: 2-11). At the same time, if this could be construed as Qohelet’s own aging, death, funeral, and burial, then in an implicit way he is suggesting that his attempts at wisdom are over, but the life of the world continues. If Qohelet has been a quiet and circumspect revolutionary who whispers the postcolonial, then such an ending would not be a surprise, but a call to continue the message for an even later age. We should thus not be surprised that the Epilogue attempts to do just that.

There are, however, other ways to understand this strangely beautiful poem in light of a postcolonial reading. If one is to “remember the Creator” from the time of youth (12:1), the point is less an allegory than a recognition of life itself. The sense is that Qohelet has provided a kind of multi-dimensional text that provides multiple readings. If life is a recognition that the body fails and that one by one the attributes of life disappear, then at the end when one reads, “and the breath returns to God who gave it” (12:7), readers are reminded of the end of life. As Fox suggests, the real sense of 12:7 is less the idea of the immortality of the soul than the simple end of life itself and that life ends when breath does.49 Spirit or ה הרי animates human life in Genesis 2:7, and God gives and

49. Ibid., 82.
takes away רוח from animals too in Psalm 104:29 and they die. In essence, it is merely a recognition of the cycle—a cycle that seems to continue in perpetuity in 1:2-11. On the surface, this final poetic vision would seem to have little to do with an overt postcolonial reading. What should be noted is actually the opposite. This reading actually suggests two possibilities, one already given and one to follow.

The postcolonial always holds out the whisper of change. The person noted here in the literal sense as dying is less significant than the idea that whatever remains does remain. That רוח (spirit) that remains is powerful, and it participates in the very life of God, the Creator. Given that God is represented as remote, unknowable, and uncircumscribed, God remains outside the domains of the imperial world. That means that in some sense the return of the breath—not necessarily eschatological at least according to the prophetic tradition would present it—will find meaning. At the same time, while it would appear that the text has realized some finality, there is this statement: “Vanity of vanity, says the Teacher, all is vanity” (12:7), which echoes Ecclesiastes 1:2. As an inclusio, as Kruger notes, “12:8 exhorts the readers at the end to read the book again and anew from this viewpoint.”50 Such a reality creates several possibilities. First, the whole experience may have been an enigma that simply cannot be solved. That would leave the text and experience in a colonialist quagmire. Second, the experience could be one so rooted in contradiction that no real resolution is possible. Third and most likely, the ending suggests that the whispers of change are present, but that a true postcolonial society remains only a dream. Many will die before that reality is born out; many will

experience the failures. Many will long for the change suggested in a text that in many ways remains locked in the genre of a proto-postcolonial document.

**Conclusion**

Ecclesiastes 6:10-12:8 provides an important insight into the whispers of the postcolonial world. Qohelet is not a revolutionary. He is a practical individual who dons the voice of one of Israel’s legendary kings only to call into question everything that it means to be a king and everything that it means to live in a world where oppression is a reality and deliverance a distant prospect. Arguing in a countercultural way about embracing the house of mourning in chapter 7, even when in this section he presents the necessity of feasting and the enjoyment of labor as one’s resistance to colonial oppression, Qohelet surprises and prepares. If moderation is important, then finding a way for that to be meaningful in some momentary context is vital. The complexities of the world require training in order to survive, whether one is dealing with one’s equals or if one is going before the king or his representatives. Further in chapter 8, Qohelet is less convinced that the traditional understandings even within his own inherited religion that stress covenant blessings given to those who obey actually happens because he discerns that from his perceptions the righteous and wicked are treated similarly. Can one person make a difference in this world? Perhaps that wise person can, provided he is not scorned. Indeed, he may be the beginnings of that new possibility of liberation. What must be said is that humans have to take chances to move forward, even under those watchful Ptolemaic eyes.

Ending his text in death and the separation of body and spirit, Qoheleth anticipates a world on the brink of change, but also a world laboring for a deliverance
that has not yet come. That הָבוֹן (vanity or futility) ends the quest is less a recognition that life has no meaning and purpose, but that the text suggests that the deliverance remains in some kind of earthly future. Such an event would have to wait until the Maccabees, and one has to wonder whether Qohelet would have seen them as any more than those rooted in folly. Qohelet has taken his readers on quest for learning, a quest for what it means to be human, and a quest that suggests careful observation is the order of the day. Qohelet surprises, understands, anticipates, and whispers to a later age as he also critiques the heritage of his own voice.