

THE STRUCTURE AND UNITY OF ECCLESIASTES

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Perhaps no books of the Bible have had more potential to disrupt complacency in the reader than the Wisdom books of Job and Ecclesiastes, both of which touch centrally on the "seeming inequalities of divine providence."¹ However, while the argument of Job can be persuasively shown to have a cohesive literary structure, dramatic progression, and resolution,² Ecclesiastes seems poorly connected and has led a number of commentators to conclude that "in general no progression of thought from one section to another is discernible."³ Adding to the difficulty of tracing

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¹ "The Scope and Plan of Ecclesiastes," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 29 (July 1857), 423-24, reprinted in *Reflecting with Solomon: Selected Studies on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, ed. Roy B. Zuck [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994], 119. "It is most interesting to observe the harmony of the grand lessons inculcated by Job and by Ecclesiastes. No two books could well be more unlike in their style and method of discussion. The problem upon which they are engaged is one of the most perplexing of human life. They approach it, too, from quarters the most diverse. And yet the principles which underlie their solutions are identical" (*ibid.*). This thematic affinity is also noted by J. Stafford Wright, "Introduction to Ecclesiastes," reprinted in *Reflecting with Solomon*, 167-68.

² See Greg W. Parsons, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Job," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151 (1994): 395-98. Cf. Greg W. Parsons, "The Structure and Purpose of the Book of Job," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (1981): 139-57 (reprinted in *Sitting with Job: Selected Studies on the Book of Job*, ed. Roy B. Zuck [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992], 7-33).

³ R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes, New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 17. Roland Murphy discusses the marked variability of outlines that have been proposed (Ecclesiastes, *Word Biblical Commentary* [Dallas, TX: Word, 1992, xxxv-xli.], and Michael A. Eaton notes the tendency of most commentators to see "the Preacher's work as a string of unrelated meditations. A. G. Wright lists twenty-three commentators who virtually abandon the task of seeking coherence in the book. . . . this list could easily be enlarged" (*Ecclesiastes*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983], 48).

the thread of Qoheleth's argument is the uniqueness of the Hebrew, which makes it difficult to trace the historical context of the book.⁴

Of greater concern to the average reader, however, is the book's generally cynical tone, which tends to pull the reader toward despair throughout; this is only reinforced by the book's main theme of futility ("vanity," KJV).⁵ Such ostensible nihilism has made it difficult for many commentators to accept Ecclesiastes as establishing a positive pattern for living;⁶ in fact the apparently contradictory reflections encountered in the argument in both close (cf. 8:12-13) and remote (cf. 2:11; 4:1-3; 6:3--6; and 7:1 with 9:4) contexts often seem more consistent with strains of modern existentialism than with the theology of the rest of Scripture.⁷ The strength of these concerns has made all the more im-

⁴Eaton is typical in stating "that the linguistic data show that Ecclesiastes does not fit into any known section of the history of the Hebrew language. . . . The language . . . does not at present provide an 'adequate resource for dating'" (*Ecclesiastes*, 19). Whybray, however, claims that "Qoheleth's Hebrew has all the J [larks of lateness," that is, third century B.C. (*Ecclesiastes*, 4). Fortunately, as with the Book of Job (Parsons, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Job," 407-8), the timeless nature of the author's message may well leave the interpretation largely uncompromised by uncertainty over the specific historical context or immediate audience.

⁵The precise meaning of *הֶבֶל* ("vanity," KJV; lit., "breath") is widely debated (Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, lviii-lix). The frequently associated construction, "grasping for the wind," supports a sense of frantic but completely empty effort in life. The translation "futility" is probably best, while recognizing that there are other relevant nuances, especially "absurd" (*ibid.*), "frustrating," or "disappointing." Of the thirty-seven or thirty-eight occurrences in Ecclesiastes (Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 89, n. 9b), twenty-nine are found in the first half plus the inclusion in 12:8, "vanity of vanities" (cf. 1:2).

⁶This is reviewed by Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 24-28, and Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 36-40. "The bulk of the book, everything but [the] two final verses, represents a brilliant, artful argument for the way one would look at life-if God did not play a direct, intervening role in life and if there were no life after death. The view presented ought to leave you unsatisfied, for it is hardly the truth. It is the secular, fatalistic wisdom that a practical. . . atheism produces. When one relegates God to a position way out there away from us, irrelevant to our daily lives, then Ecclesiastes is the result. The book thus serves as a reverse apologetic for cynical wisdom; it gives its readers to look further because the answers that the 'Teacher' of Ecclesiastes gives are so discouraging" (Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993], 214, italics theirs). However, C. Stephen Evans has outlined certain evangelical misconceptions about existentialism and has proposed some legitimate parallels between biblical Christianity and certain aspects of existentialism (*Existentialism: The Philosophy of Despair and the Quest for Hope* [Dallas, TX: Word, 1984]). For an outstanding defense of such a view as applied to Ecclesiastes, see Ardel B. Canedy, "Qoheleth-Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?" reprinted in *Reflecting with Solomon*, 81-113.

perative the task of identifying a unified, coherent message in the text, so that Whybray has issued the following challenge.

Since Ecclesiastes is evidently not a single systematic treatise in which there is a progression from a set of premises to a logical conclusion, it remains to be considered in what other sense it might be, a unified composition. . . . It deals with a number of distinct, though related, topics. If it could be shown that these have been arranged in some kind of logical order by Qoheleth himself, this would greatly assist the understanding of his thought.⁸

In reflecting on this challenge one should also weigh the internal claim that the author "pondered and sought out and set in order" his "words of truth" from a reliable source (12:9-11, NKJV). This is supported by Qoheleth's strategic insertion of hortatory pericopae throughout the book, particularly his repeated appeals to enjoyment and his injunctions to "fear God." Moreover, the frequent mention of "good/goodness," "wisdom/wise" (fifty-one times each) seems to offer an optimistic countercurrent to balance the apparent nihilism that pervades most of the argument. The reader is thus challenged to discover how the apparent contradictions and the often juxtaposed cynical and optimistic reflections might be reconciled by the book's literary composition, and to establish the basis for Qoheleth's apparent "attack on conventional wisdom."⁹

Is there a coherent argument woven into the textual design, or is it a literary "patchwork quilt"¹⁰ composed of various random reflections, aphorisms, and exhortations? This article seeks to elucidate the book's distinctive literary structure and track the author's reasoning by appealing to those elements of textual design that attest a coherent argument.¹¹ To this end it is essential to study the ways the author used key terms and phrases, or "constructions,"¹² in order to get a sense of the semantic range em-

⁸ Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 19.

⁹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, lxi-lxiv; cf. lxii. Qoheleth's approach is actually concerned with "the limit set to wisdom. As he points to the futility of all human life 'under the sun' wisdom too is shown to be inadequate. . . . Wisdom given by God, acted out in the presence of God, is allowed; autonomous, self-sufficient wisdom as a remedy to man's plight 'under the sun' is disallowed" (Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 47). Also see note 3tl.

¹⁰ This is precisely the question asked by Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, & Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 106-10, and it must be answered before one can arrive at a reasonable interpretation.

¹¹ The hermeneutical approach promoted in this article is similar to that suggested for the Book of Job by Parsons, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Job."

¹² The use of "constructions" in this overview refers primarily to those terms and

ployed by the author in each case-whether the use is "technical" (referential in every case to one specific concept) or in fact more flexible.¹³

Unfortunately many of the same Hebrew terms are often rendered in different ways in English throughout the text, thus obscuring the meaning. While some variation is attributable to legitimate uncertainty over the historical linguistic context, some recurring constructions that were obviously meant to denote the same referent have been variably translated-even in the same version of the Bible--which is disconcerting for the reader trying to determine the author's intended sense.¹⁴

Qoheleth typically employed certain specific constructions as opening and closing structural markers to help divide the argument into discrete paragraphic units (each with a unifying, coherent thought) and to assist the reader in recognizing and tracking the evolving trajectory of the argument. Pronounced changes in the tone and emphasis of the author's reflections encountered in the course of the "narrative" are also intended by the author to be recognized as literary transitions even though they may provoke reader confusion, or even disillusionment.¹⁵ This recognition is often facilitated in the course of the argument by the author's use of associated constructions that display textual clues or "type traits" that enable the reader to identify variation in the author's expressive purpose.¹⁶

phrases whose "role in the text is so central to what the author is saying that the author includes in the immediate contextual development what is needed to clarify and to specify all that he intends" (Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990], 145; cr. 142).

¹³ See Grant R. Osborne's discussion of sense and reference, structural linguistics, and guidelines for the study of key words in *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1991), 76-78, 89-92.

¹⁴ Examples of mistranslation will be considered as the intended connections between recurring constructions are progressively elucidated in this article.

¹⁵ In narrative structure "speakers. . . must be interpreted in terms of who they are, from what position they speak, and what they say. Some statements must be viewed as having a negative contribution and other[s] . . . as contributing positively to the message of the book. Such considerations are particularly important in the interpretation of Job and Ecclesiastes" (Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics*, 208).

¹⁶ "Expressive purpose" refers to the author's use of a particular literary style or genre to express his message to the audience and is closely related to Johnson's use of the term "type of meaning" (*ibid.*, 87-96). The accurate determination of the author's expressive purpose depends first on the readers' accurate recognition (the initial step in hermeneutics) of the "type-traits" or literary elements of the intended "type of meaning" (*ibid.*). Inadequate attention to variation in expressive purpose in the course of a book's argument may underlie some of the existing confusion over the structure and unity of the book. For example recognition of the radical change in literary style and thematic emphasis from chapter 6 to chapter 7 is

QOHELETH'S USE OF TERMS IN THE ARGUMENT

Certain recurring terms emerge as literary keys to guide the reader as the argument unfolds. The author recounted the findings of reflective investigation into the significance of man's labor (1:3, 13; 3:9-10; 7:25; 8:16) in view of the apparently meaningless events that seem to characterize life "under the sun."¹⁷ Specifically Qoheleth sought to find out what "profit" or "advantage"¹⁸ there could possibly be to man's "labor,"¹⁹ when it seems to yield only "misery" ("adversity," "evil"²⁰) for man all his life. Against this background of misery the author scrutinized life for any evidence of "goodness" or "good" that can give people a sense of satisfaction or fulfillment.²¹ Qoheleth underscored the paradoxical nature of his observations of life by periodically juxtaposing contrasting terms, such as "good[ness]" and "misery" (cf. 5:18-6:6; 7:14) or "advantage" and "futility" (or "misery") (cf.

important in discerning the pivotal change in expressive purpose in the second half of the book (Hans Finzel, *Opening the Book* [Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1987], 115-16).

¹⁷ The phrase "under the sun" is a trademark of Qoheleth and is closely related to the concept of futility. It occurs twenty-nine times and projects the perspective of man alone, using his own wisdom and senses in the realm of "this world" alone. The phrases "under heaven" (cf. esp. 1:13-14; 3:1) and "on earth" (cf. 5:2; 8:16) are probably synonymous (Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 44).

¹⁸ Qoheleth used one Hebrew word group (מִוְתָר/יְתָרוֹן/יְתָר, only in Eccles.) as the primary vehicle to convey the concept of some "advantage" or "point" to man's effort (Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 36-37) in 1:3; 2:11; 3:9,19; 5:9,16; 6:8,11; 7:11,12; 10:10. (A similar meaning is encountered in 5:11 with כִּשְׂרוֹן, "profit.") Qoheleth's use is not entirely technical, however, as the word group occasionally means "excessively" or "exceeds" (2:13 [twice], 15; 7:16 [ibid.]).

¹⁹ Qoheleth used two virtually interchangeable word groups for man's labor, "toil" (עֲמַל/עֲמָל thirty-four times) and "task" (עֲנִיָּה/עֲנָה eight times, only in Eccles.), as illustrated by their parallel use in 2:22-23 and 3:9-10. The sense is that of man's striving with great trouble and diminishing return, thus reflecting the same kind of "toil" (although by a different Hebrew word) with which man was cursed in Genesis 3:17 (cf. Gen. 5:29).

²⁰ The Hebrew רָע is literally "evil" or "bad," but in Ecclesiastes it usually connotes misery or adversity (2:21; 5:13, 16; 6:1; 7:14; 8:6; 9:12; 10:5, 13; 11:10; 12:1), rather than moral evil. Nonetheless a number of other words-derived from the same Hebrew root for evil (רָע)--are encountered in Ecclesiastes with a predominantly moral connotation. These are clustered predominantly in Ecclesiastes 7:15-9:3 (esp. 8:2-15), where Qoheleth discussed the nature and consequences of man's depravity.

²¹ The word "goodness," טוֹבָה (4:8; 5:11, 18; 6:3, 6; 7:14; 9:18), connotes "satisfying meaning" in all but 5:11 (where it means "material goods"). The verbs "to be satisfied" (שָׂבַע, 1:8; 4:8; 5:10; 6:3) and "to be full" ("79, 1:8; 6:7) are contextually linked to טוֹבָה in 6:3-7 and help to define the intended meaning; unfortunately the NASB renders it "good things" in 6:3, 6. The related "good" or "better" (טוֹב) occurs as an adjective or gerund forty-four times, usually, but not always, with a similar non-moral existential connotation. Two other related words--"sweet" (מְתוֹק/מְתוֹקָה) in 5:12 and 11:7, and "to be made good" (יָטַב) in 7:3 and 11:9--can be translated "satisfying" and "to be edified," respectively.

1:2-3; 2:11; 5:16; 6:11), as well as the contrasting experiences of "light" and "darkness."²²

Although people hope that their labor will produce works" of abiding value, they cannot tell in this life under the sun whether this is so, for ultimately these works find lasting meaning only within the unfathomable "work" (same word) of God.²³ Since an individual cannot discover which efforts will be blessed with meaning (11:5-6), present fulfillment can derive only from one's God-given "portion" ("lot," "heritage").²⁴ The reader is thus repeatedly exhorted to enjoy his lot in life,²⁵ even though mankind lacks the innate capacity to be satisfied with this heritage (6:1-7).

Qoheleth's quest led him to explore the roots of this "existential inability," and he found that it is attributable to three natural limitations: man's inherent uncertainty, mortality, and depravity. The theme of uncertainty arises early, then predominates in the second half of the book; it is best expressed in a series of rhetorical questions concerning what will happen or what is truly good in life ("Who knows. . . ?" or "Who can tell. . . ?"²⁶) and their declarative equivalents (man "does not know. . ." or "can-

22 Although "light" and "darkness" are often used as figures of life and death in the Old Testament (Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 58), the figure "see light" (or "see the sun") in *Ecclesiastes* connotes advantage or goodness in life, while experiencing "darkness" reflects the adversity or misery so typically encountered in life. See 2:13-14; 5:17; 6:4--5; 7:11; 8:1; 11:7-8; 12:2.

²³ The word "work" (~~) occurs twenty-one times and is distinguished from the words "task" or "toil" in that it refers to achievement of lasting significance (8:17; 9:7, 10; 11:5). Together with the essentially synonymous "works" (עֲצָדָי יְהוָה) in 9:1, it is the key construction of 8:16-9:10. When it is used in reference to God, it connotes His sovereign design (cf. 3:11; 8:17; 11:5). A closely related sense emerges with the construction "hand of God" (2:24; 9:1), which seems to establish the connection of sovereign purpose between the works of God and man. This same connection is seen in the Book of Job, where references to the "hand of God" imply His sovereign prerogative in relation to man's work (Job 14:15; 34:19; cf. 1:10b; Ps. 90:16-17).

²⁴ Man's "lot" or "portion" (חֵלֶק) is mentioned eight times (2:10, 21; 3:22; 5:18, 19; 9:6, 9; 11:2) and bears the sense of man's "heritage" or "share" from God in this life. Man can in fact be satisfied with meaning if he accepts his "lot" and exercises proper stewardship over what God has given him. Closely related is "inheritance" (חֵרֶשֶׁת); its only occurrence in *Ecclesiastes* is in the pivotal verse 7:11.

²⁵ The "enjoyment" pericopae are 2:24-26; 3:12-13; 3:22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10; and 11:7-10, and each features the occurrence of either חֵדָּה ("gladness," "joy"; 2:26; 5:20; 9:7) or פָּחַד ("be happy," "rejoice"; 3:12, 22:5:19; 8:15; 11:8,9); see also מְנוּחָה ("enjoyment") in 2:25. A similar sense is conveyed by "see good[ness]" (2:1; 5:18; 6:6) and "see life" (9:9).

²⁶ These questions are encountered in 2:19; 3:21; 6:12a; 8:1; and in 6:12b; 8:7; 10:14, respectively. Analogous constructions occur in 7:24 ("Who can find out?") and 3:22 ("Who can bring him to see?").

not find. . .²⁷). If one can never "know" or "find" what is potentially meaningful in life, he or she can never be completely sure of being on the path to experience such meaning.

The second natural limitation to fulfillment in one's labor is mortality. The author frequently referred to death directly,²⁸ but the sense of mortality is also projected indirectly by Qoheleth's equally frequent allusions to the limited number of "days" one has to live,²⁹ and by the implications of Qoheleth's familiar, metaphor-laden portrayal of progressive debilitation and death in 12:1-7, People have precious little "time" to find meaning in life and enjoy it before their "time" is up.³⁰

The third and most devastating limitation is man's depravity. Although broached in 2:26, the topic of sin is not developed until the second half of the book.³¹ Any advantage a person might gain through wisdom is quickly destroyed by the innate propensity to sin, which is both extensive (manifest throughout the human race: 7:20, 27-29) and intensive (corrupting every aspect of man's being, 7:16-18, 20-21; 8:11; 9:3). The destructiveness of sin is most commonly depicted in Ecclesiastes as "folly."³² The negative moral implications of the concept of "folly" are most ex-

²⁷ These are encountered in 5:1; 8:7; 9:1, 5,12; 10:15; 11:2,5 [twice], 6; and in 3:11; 7:14,28 [twice]; 8:17 [three times], respectively. The Hebrew words here for "know" (יָדַע) and "find out" or "discover" (מָצָא) express (in the negative) the disappointing failure of the author's attempt to "seek" , 1:13; 7:25; 8:17) or "search out" (חָרַץ, 1:13; 2:3; 7:25) the meaning of things.

²⁸ The concept of death is most often communicated by the Hebrew word-groups מָוֹת/מָוָה ("die," "dead," "death"; 2:16; 3:2,19; 4:2; 5:16; 7:1,17,26; 8:8; 9:3-5) and מִקְרָה/קָרָה ("befall," "fate" , alluding in every case to the inevitable outcome of death (cf. 2:14-15; 3:19 [three times]; 9:2, 3, 11).

²⁹ Cf. 2:16, 23; 5:17, 18, 20; 7:10; 8:13, 15; 9:9; 11:1,8, 9; 12:1.

³⁰ "Time" (עֵת in Ecclesiastes often (thirty-one times in chap. 3, twice in 8:5-6) refers to the inevitable outworking of God's sovereign, preordained purposes and adds the nuance of inscrutability to the relationship between God's purposes and man's "opportunity" for true meaning in life. It also denotes the appointed yet unpredictable timing of man's ultimate "fate" in 7:17 and 9:11-12 (three times).

³¹ The Hebrew for "sin"/"sinner" (חַטָּא/חַטֵּא) occurs five of its seven times (2:26; 5:6; 7:20, 26; 8:12; 9:2, 18) in the second half of Ecclesiastes in close context with those words for "evil" with a predominantly moral connotation, and helps convey the sense of man's accountability for evil in 8:2-13.

³² The concept of "folly" in Ecclesiastes is represented by two virtually interchangeable word groups. The principal word for "fool," "כָּסִיל" (sixteen times), is the one most commonly encountered in the wisdom literature; "the related כָּסָל" ("folly," "foolishness") occurs in 7:25. The other word group, "סְכָלִים/סְכָלִים/סְכָלִים", is almost exclusive to Ecclesiastes, occurring thirteen times. Whybray plausibly attributes such dual use to Qoheleth's selective quotation of ancient proverbs (R. N. Whybray, "The Identification, and Use of Quotations in Ecclesiastes" (reprinted in *Reflecting with Solomon*, 185-99).

plicitly developed in 7:15-29 and in chapter 10, in which a series of proverbs or aphorisms portray folly as imprudent and presumptuous self-gratification.³³ Qoheleth clearly intended to identify the folly he depicted with sin (7:20; 9:18) but he first had to establish that people in their own strength are incapable of enjoying "goodness" in life (1:12-6:12)-only then would the reader likely be motivated to examine the evidence for his own depravity (7:15-29) and accept his accountability before God for the consequences of his depravity (8:1-15).

These three inherent limitations to fulfillment in the search for meaning lead ultimately in life to varying degrees of frustration or "vexation."³⁴ In response to such vexation people characteristically redouble their efforts to "see goodness" by attempting to forge their own meaning in life (4:4-6: 12). This disposition of radical self-determination is symbolized in Ecclesiastes by the imagery of grasping envy (4:4-6; cf. 6:9), presumptuous "dreams" (5:3, 7), "vows" (5:4-6), and "many words" (5:2-3, 7; 6:11) before God.³⁵ Such selfish ambition explains in turn the observed ubiquity of injustice and the oppression of those with less power in life (4:1-3; 5:8; cf. 3:16).³⁶ What begins as the oppres-

³³The chapter's preceding "topic sentence" (9:18) summarizes its unifying theme, wisdom's severe vulnerability to folly. See Graham S. Ogden, "Variations on the Theme of Wisdom's Strength and Vulnerability-Ecclesiastes 9:17-10:20" (reprinted in *Reflecting with Solomon*, 331-40).

³⁴The word "vexation" (וַעֲזָבוֹ) appears seven times (1:18; 2:23; 5:17; 7:3, 9 [twice]; 11:10) and projects the idea of grief, anger, and frustration generated by the misery and disillusionment to which life is prone (cf. 5:16-17). While vexation may lead positively to true mourning (7:2-4), it can also become entrenched and lead to bitterness of soul (7:9-10; 11:10). Most translations render the word variably: "grief," "sorrow," "anger" (NKJV); "grief," "vexation," "sorrow," "anger" (NASB); "grief," "sorrow," "frustration," "provocation," "anger," "anxiety" (NIV). The present writer believes a more technical use is intended, especially in recalling the sense of 5: 17 in 7:3, 9, and 11:10.

³⁵The figure "many words" in 5:2-3, 7 projects the presumption of a person announcing to God (5:1-3) his self-determined ambitions ("dreams," 5:3) without any consideration of God's intended purposes for him. He attempts to manipulate God with "vows" (5:4-6) to "guarantee" that God will bless his ambitions, but only risks destroying the results of his work (5:6c-7). The same presumption is recalled with the reappearance of "many words" in 6:11.

³⁶The word group "oppress/oppression/oppressed" (עָשָׂה/עָשָׂה/עָשָׂה) appears five times in Ecclesiastes (4:1 [three times]; 5:8; 7:7). Those who oppress others (4:1-3) in their attempts to find meaning only aggravate the futility already manifest "under the sun" (chaps. 1-3). Although this perceived injustice initially led Qoheleth to investigate further the selfish ambition that generates such oppression (4:4-6; cf. 3:16), his attention ultimately shifted (7:7) to man's response to oppression, just as Elihu redirected the focus in Job 35:9 from God's justice to Job "victim's complex" (cf. 10:3). This connection in Ecclesiastes 7:7 is completely overlooked by the NIV's rendering of "extortion" rather than "oppression."

sion of others, however, ultimately returns to the heart of the oppressor himself instead of enjoying satisfaction, a self-determined individual multiplies fruitless strife and alienation toward others (4:7-16; cf. 4:4) and only ends up suffering material loss, physical sickness, and vexation himself (5:10-17; 7:9-10), even to the point of despair (6:3-6; cf. 4:2-3).³⁷

Qoheleth's answer to such self-consuming vexation is to tout the life-giving advantage of true "wisdom."³⁸ Yet if God gives such wisdom only "to a person who is good in His sight" (2:26; cf. 9:1)³⁹ and man's depravity extends to all, how can anyone be "good in His sight" and thereby gain wisdom's advantage? To compound this existential dilemma, man is ultimately held accountable as a steward of God's sovereign purposes, as conveyed by the concept of "time and judgment" (8:5-6): God puts people on notice that there is a "time for every purpose" (3:1, 17; 8:6),⁴⁰ and "there is . . . , judgment" (8:6; cf. 3:17)⁴¹ of the willful evil that subverts such stewardship (8:2-8), even though the evidence for such

³⁷Although the word "despair" (שָׁאָה) occurs only once in Ecclesiastes (2:20) and once in Job (6:20), it is a key concept in both books, as developed more fully in figurative imagery. Just as in Job's classic soliloquy of despair (Job 3), the dynamic of despair is epitomized in Ecclesiastes 4:2-3 with Qoheleth's praise of death or nonexistence, and in 6:3-6 with the imagery of "darkness."

³⁸The concept of wisdom" (חָכְמָה/חֵכְמָה) is prevalent throughout the book, appearing fifty-one times. However, it appears twice as frequently in the second half (7:1-12:14), where the focus is on wisdom's advantage in bringing "life" (7:11-12, 19; 8:1; 9:15a, 16a, 17a, 18a; 10:10c) and how this advantage is seriously jeopardized by the consequences of man's "sin" or "folly."

³⁹The description of "good" in 2:26 conveys a moral or ethical sense (as also in 3:12; 7:20, 26b; 9:2 [twice]; 12:14). The connection here between moral "goodness" and true wisdom anticipates the otherwise cryptic association of "the righteous and the wise" in 7:16-18 and 9:1.

⁴⁰The phrase implies the notion of man's opportune participation in God's sovereign purposes. Though virtually the same construction is found in 3: 1, 17, and 8:6, neither the NKJV nor the NASB seem to recognize the connection in 8:6 in Qoheleth's use of חָפֵץ, and translate it "matter" or "delight," instead of "purpose."

While the Hebrew חָפֵץ (or חָפֵץ) does connote "pleasure" or "delight" in 5:4; 8:3; and 12:1 and "matter" in 5:8, the clear sense in 3:1, 17 and 8:6 is that of "purpose"--specifically, God's sovereign, creative purpose. This is made plain in the context of 3:1 and 17, where the thrice-encountered phrase "God does. . ." is found (3:11, 14) in close connection with the terms כֹּל ("everything," "whatever") and עֲלָם ("eternity," "forever").

⁴¹ The word-group "judge/judgment" (מִשְׁפָּט/מִשְׁפָּט) in all its occurrences in Ecclesiastes (3:16-17; 8:5-6; 11:9; 12:14) conveys the sense of man's ultimate accountability under sovereign authority (3:15, "God requires an account of what is past," NKJV). Again, given the same associated construction in both 3:16-17 and 8:5--6 ("time. . . for every purpose"), the word מִשְׁפָּט in the latter instance is clearly intended to convey the same sense of accountability to exercise proper stewardship as in 3:16-17. The NASB is thus again misleading: While the מִשְׁפָּט word group is appropriately translated as "justice" and "judge" in 3:16 and 17, respectively, it is inexplicably rendered "procedure" in the comparable construction, 8:5-6.

judgment may not be apparent "under the sun" (3:16; 7:15; 8:11-12a, 14; 9:2, 11-12).

Given all the futile consequences of selfish ambition, as well as one's accountability for the resulting failure in stewardship, Qoheleth proposed that people replace selfish ambition with the fear of God⁴² as the only viable means of fulfilling their stewardship and finding lasting meaning in life. The fear of God enables people to acknowledge and accept full accountability for sin and for proper stewardship of their "portion" from God—only the sinner who "fears before God" can "escape" the futility of radical self-determination and enlist the advantage of wisdom to become a fruitful steward.⁴³ Unfortunately most people are not convinced of the utter disadvantage of selfish ambition and therefore do not relinquish this strategy in the search for meaning, so that they might then fear God and realize wisdom's advantage.

So what moves a person to forsake a disposition of radical self-determination and fear God in the sense intended by Qoheleth? Ironically the only crisis capable of displacing self-determined commitment is the very unassuaged vexation that ultimately leads to despair. Man has two basic choices in response to such vexation. He can stubbornly cling to self-determination (6:10-11) and reap the distilled bitterness of entrenched vexation (5:16-17; 7:9-10), or he can begin to reap the advantage of wisdom (7:11-12) by fully engaging in the painful but edifying process of authentic "mourning" (7:1-4).⁴⁴ Mourning entails an honest and

⁴² The "fear of God" is mentioned seven times in Ecclesiastes (3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12-13 [three times]; 12:13, each in connection with some aspect of man's accountability before God. It is described in Ecclesiastes 7:13-14 and perhaps best defined as patient submission to God's sovereign prerogative of judging the works of man and appropriating them to His own inscrutable purposes.

⁴³ See Wayne A. Brindle, "Righteousness and Wickedness in Ecclesiastes 7:15-18," reprinted in *Reflecting with Solomon*, 301-13). Although man may strive to be "righteous" or "wise" in his own eyes (7:16-17), only the fear of God enables man to be truly righteous and wise ("good in God's sight," 2:26) and "escape" the destructive consequences of sin or folly (7:18, 26; 8:12b-13). Thus "righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God" (9:1; 2:24), so that their works are "already approved" (9:7b). This helps explain Qoheleth's apparent ambivalence toward wisdom: Wisdom as the source of meaning can never ultimately satisfy (the focus of the first half of Qoheleth's argument; cf. 2:12-23), whereas wisdom constrained by the fear of God as the path to meaning confers great advantage (the focus of the second half of the argument). The process thus accords fully with the refrain, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Job 28:28; Prov. 1:7; 2:3-5; 3:5-7; 9:10; Ps. 111:10).

⁴⁴ The word "mourning" (אָנָה) appears only twice in the argument within the main transition (7:2, 4) and delivers a crucial challenge to the reader who has thus far identified with Qoheleth: Given the deleterious effect of "oppression" on wisdom (7:7), her benefits cannot be appropriated without enduring the difficult transition

patient willingness, first to admit powerlessness to avert suffering or forge meaning in life, and then to submit to God's sovereign purposes and accept ultimate accountability for stewardship before God (7:13-14).⁴⁵

LITERARY STRUCTURE IN THE ARGUMENT OF ECCLESIASTES

Although an understanding of Qoheleth's use of terms is necessary to grasp his intended meaning, is this sufficient for the reader to arrive at the distinctive message and purpose of the book? Given the questions over the book's unity, distinctive Hebrew, authorship, historical context, mood and tone, and apparent internal contradictions, it is virtually impossible to adduce a coherent, logically consistent message and grasp the author's intended purpose without also considering the author's textual design in the development of the argument. Variations in textual composition provide essential clues to the expressive purpose of any given observation, exhortation, or emotive reflection in the text. As evidence is "iteratively" adduced from the text to clarify the contribution of less obvious constructions to the author's expressive purpose, the readers' grasp of the author's intended meaning in a given text progressively emerges.⁴⁶ Even the

of authentic mourning (7:4-5). This existential struggle of transition is graphically depicted in the psalms of lament. The laments "express all the difficult emotions Iwe experience today-anger, fear, jealousy, despair, shame, and contempt. . . . [B]ecause [David's] vision moves from suffering to God, there is [a] change of mood . . . from pain to joy" (Dan B. Allender and Tremper Longman III, *The Cry of the Soul* [Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994], 245-46). Without patiently traversing this "emotional gauntlet," man only becomes further entrenched in vexation.

45 The problem with self-determination as a committed disposition in life is that it requires a sustained denial of man's total inability to manipulate life and control the outcome. Though conscience should testify otherwise (cf. 3:10-15), many people refuse to acknowledge or accept their accountability as stewards of a heritage bestowed by a sovereign God. But "God does not tolerate manipulation of the truth to escape from struggle. He longs for faith that struggles and rests in His goodness. Thus the psalmist's only recourse is to appeal to God for help and wait with confidence that He will turn sorrow into joy" (ibid., 247). By honestly confronting one's natural limitations, mourning acknowledges failure of self and opens one's heart to God as the only Source of wisdom and life. Whereas the self-determined attempt to enjoy life is doomed to futility (2:1; 6:2), such enjoyment becomes possible when accepted in complete dependence on God (5:18; 9:9).

46 Johnson emphasizes the role of "type logic" in drawing out an author's intended meaning in the "associated constructions" of the text (Expository Hermeneutics, 142-54). The conclusions presented herein are the products of the iterative application of such "type logic" to the diagnostic "dilemmas" the text presents. As Osborne describes the process, "I am . . . spiralling nearer and nearer to the text's intended meaning as I refine my hypotheses and allow the text to continue to challenge and correct . . . alternative interpretations. . . . The preliminary understanding derived from the inductive study and the in-depth understanding unlocked through research interact and correct one another as we make final decisions re-

book's apparently contradictory assertions can be reconciled by paying careful attention to textual design.

The book's dominant genre of "reflection" is established by the author's characteristic use of constructions such as "I have seen," "I said in my heart," and "I applied my heart."⁴⁷ However it is the moral evolution of Qoheleth's reflection that most informs the argument: For Qoheleth, the heart is the seat of conscience—one's reflection over the events he observes "under the sun" can thus be considered moral insofar as it reflects with brutal honesty in the "mirror" of conscience.⁴⁸

Qoheleth's emotionally charged and seemingly nihilistic reflections on life as it appears "under the sun" in the first half of the argument (cf. 2:17; 4:1-3; 6:3-6) are designed to jolt the self-determined reader into openly acknowledging life's deepest disappointments. By contrast, the apparently more optimistic conclusions he subsequently reached after considering the "hand of God" (9:1-10; cf. 2:24) are designed to reassure the reader who fears God that, though he cannot presently discover the ultimate meaning of his work, there is still hope for such meaning.

The author employed certain characteristic opening and closing constructions to delineate the paragraphic units of the text and thereby facilitate the reader's understanding of each successive phase of the argument. The closing markers are more readily distinguished: The three major sections in 1:12-7:14 are each closed by some variation of the same rhetorical question.⁴⁹ The familiar phrase "This is vanity and grasping for the wind" also serves as a closing marker for smaller paragraphic units in the

guarding the original intended message of the text ...the inductive and deductive sides together to understand the 'meaning' of the text" (*The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 6, 14; cf. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics*, 76, fig. 5.1). Though the present writer has examined Qoheleth's use of terms before tracing the book's textual design, in practice the semantic and structural type-traits are mutually informing throughout the process of "drawing out" the author's intended meaning.

⁴⁷ The type-traits of "reflection" in Ecclesiastes (Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, xxxi-xxxii. H. Carl Shank, "Qoheleth's World and Life View," reprinted in *Reflecting with Solomon*, 76-77) are characterized by the frequent mention of deliberative activity in the "heart" (forty-one times in Ecclesiastes, often translated as "mind").

⁴⁸ While conscience is intended to hold man accountable for "heart" awareness of God's sovereign influence in life (3:11b, 14), the heart all too often countenances evil (8:11; 9:3). As Qoheleth's reflection evolved throughout the argument, his conclusions bore witness to the progressive influence of the fear of God on this "heart" awareness (Shank, *ibid.*, 77; and Caneday, "Qoheleth-Enigmatic Pessimist or Godly Sage?" 104-5).

⁴⁹ The recurring assertion is that man cannot tell "what will happen after him" (3:22b; 6:12b; 7:14c).

first half of the book,⁵⁰ Finally the arrangement of the "enjoyment" pericopae appears to contribute to the literary structure.⁵¹ In the first half of the book they function as "oases of optimism" that balance and conclude the preceding reflections on futility and give the reader a seminal hope for meaning until the second half of the argument, where they function more as natural closing constructions.⁵²

Typical opening constructions include affirmations of intent (1:3, 13: 3: 9) and some of the constructions indicative of reflection, including "I have seen" (3:16; 5:18; 7:15, 23; 8:9; 9:13), "I said in my heart" (1:16; 2:1; 8:16), and "I returned and saw [or considered]" (4:1, 7; 9:11).⁵³ Distinguishing which of these are intended to function as true "openers" is facilitated when they are immediately preceded by a recognized closing construction, but in other instances further textual evidence must be adduced to support viewing them as such.

Such opening constructions are apparently absent from some paragraphs, which must then be recognized by noting significant transitions in thematic emphasis or literary style.⁵⁴ Given this highly versatile use of literary markers, how confidently can one justify the divisions proposed in the outline (see the Appendix)? This article suggests that the texts before and after each of these transitions cohere independently and that they contribute in logical order to the progression of the argument.

⁵⁰ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 21. The phrase occurs eight times (1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 16; 6:9); however, it is often followed by short "sayings" that seem unrelated to the subsequent material (1:15,18; 4:5-6; 6:10-11). Osborne notes that a wisdom passage "often concludes with a pithy statement that Childs calls a 'summary appraisal'" (*The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 196). These were probably aphorisms borrowed by Qoheleth (Whybray, "The Identification and Use of Quotations in Ecclesiastes") and used to substantiate why the preceding observation should be considered "futility."

⁵¹ Murphy *Ecclesiastes*, 25.

⁵² Two apparent exceptions are 5:18-20 and 11:7-10. However, they may still be viewed as "losers," in that they mark the passages they initiate as ending the book's two major sections.

⁵³ Although the construction "I returned and saw" predictably initiates a new unit of thought (4:1 [7]; 9:11), the others do not necessarily do so. "It is clear that. . . any one of these literary devices is as liable to occur in the middle of an argument as at the beginning. . . . They certainly cannot be regarded as a consistent system of markers" (Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 47).

⁵⁴ Notably challenging are the transitions at 7:1,9:13; 10:1; 11:1; and 11:7. For 7:1 and 10:1 the preceding verses provide important "hinges" to the major themes that characterize the subsequent paragraphic units: The question in 6:12a, "Who knows what is gold . . . ?" introduces 7:1-14, with its sequential comparisons of what is "better" (Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 62). Similarly the series of proverbs and word pictures in chapter 10 is introduced in 9:18, and 11:7-10 may follow "good" in 11:6.

TEXTUAL DESIGN AND THE BROAD UNITY OF QOHELETH'S ARGUMENT

The overall literary structure is essentially symmetrical. The prologue (1:1-11) and epilogue (12:8-14) refer to Qoheleth in the third person, whereas the main text (1:12-12:7) is essentially a first-person monologue by Qoheleth, with the exception of 7:27.⁵⁵ The construction "vanity of vanities" in 1:2 and 12:8 initiates and sets apart the associated text of the prologue and epilogue, thus "enclosing" the body of the argument in 1:12-12:7.⁵⁶ The emerging argument consists of two movements of reflection which can be seen to complement each other, once the literary transition linking them is understood.

Further textual evidence can be adduced to show that the argument of the book makes a notable shift after 6:12.⁵⁷ The repetition of the figure "many words" just prior to this point (6:11a) brings to a climax the preceding emphasis on selfish ambition.⁵⁸ This in turn provides the literary point of departure for exploring the roots of such "contention" (6:10c, NKJV) in the subsequent exposition of man's depravity (7:15-29). Culminating here as well is a series of rhetorical questions (5:11, 16; 6:8, 11b), each of which asserts the lack of any "advantage" to such a self-determined disposition.⁵⁹ In this way the textual design further supports Qoheleth's overriding expressive purpose in the first half of the argument: to portray man's cumulative vexation and despair over the futility of a self-determined quest for meaning.

Following a brief transition in the argument (7:1-14) a separate and distinct expressive purpose emerges in the second half of

⁵⁵The reemergence of the editor or author at 7:27 is the subject of much debate (Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 126). The present writer holds that this literary device is intended to underscore the main result of Qoheleth's honest reflection: Nothing explains man's utter inability and vexation more definitively than his own depravity and folly (7:26b-29).

⁵⁶Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, xxxiii, xxxix-xli.

⁵⁷Although the text of 6:10-11 seems to dangle between two closing constructions--the one noted at 6:12, and the other at 6:9--the pericope 6:10-12 should be viewed as both a "summary appraisal" for 5:1-6:9 (cf. note 50) and an introduction to the transitional passage, 7:1-14.

⁵⁸The New American Standard Bible captures the repetition in 6:11 of "many words" (cf. 5:2-3, 7), which thereby forms an inclusio around 5:1-6:11. See Addison G. Wright, "The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth," reprinted in *Reflecting with Solomon*, 59. The passage (5:1-6:11) is related to the preceding text by showing how the human oppression and alienation depicted in 4:1-16 is the result of man's selfish ambition and presumption before God.

⁵⁹Though the similarity of these rhetorical questions is difficult to recognize in the New King James Version, it is brought out well in the New American Standard Bible, which appropriately translates "advantage" in each case.

the book. Without understanding the textual design and purpose of the transitional passage, however, the reader can overlook or misinterpret the expressive purpose of Qoheleth's reflections and the evolving tone and thematic content that characterize the second half of the argument. A gradual change in the prevailing mood emerges, moving from the pessimism or nihilism of the first half (:,,:12-6:12) to a cautious optimism. The prevailing themes of futility and self-determination give way to the development of the newly introduced theme of the true advantage of wisdom (7:11-12) and its relationship to man's accountability and the fear of God (3:14-15). At the same time the previously encountered darker themes of man's depravity (evil, sin, folly), uncertainty, and mortality are explored more deeply with a view to shepherding this advantage wisely.

THE PIVOTAL TRANSITION IN QOHELETH'S ARGUMENT

Structurally the transitional passage is distinguished from the foregoing and following text by its use of chiasmic parallelism⁶⁰ and the repetition of key thematic words, "good/better" (eleven times); "wise/wisdom" (six times); "heart" (five times); "fool(s)" (four times, "vexation" (three times); "mourning" (twice); "advantage" (twice); and "oppression" or "adversity" (once each). The repetition of "vexation" and "better" seems to look back to the rhetorical question asked at the close of the previous section (6:12a; cf. 5: 17),⁶¹ while the themes of "wisdom," the "heart," "advantage," and the "fool" look forward by highlighting the importance of the benefits of wisdom and moral reflection to an effective stewardship, responsive to God's sovereign prerogatives (7:15-12:7, (:f. 7:13-14). The closing marker (7:14c) then repeats in declarative form the assertion of the rhetorical questions that closed the two previous larger units.⁶²

Consisting simply of a series of wise proverbs that describe what is "better,"⁶³ the passage provides the occasion for a reorientation of Qoheleth's (and the readers') perspective toward wisdom. It contrasts the vantage point of self-determined man portrayed so well in the first half of the argument with a "better" perspective

⁶⁰Chiasmic parallel (a:b / b':a') can be seen in the relationship of groups of verses as follows: a = 7:1-4 ("wisdom"); b = 7:5-7 ("folly"); b' = 7:8-10 ("folly"); and a' = 7:11-14 ("wisdom"). Delineation of the more detailed Hebrew parallelism and rhyme observable within each of these groups is beyond the scope of the present article. See Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 108-13; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 61-62; and Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* 112-19.

⁶¹Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 62.

⁶²Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 112.

⁶³Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 108-13.

involving the wisdom of mourning and patience. To this point in the argument Qoheleth's expressive purpose has been to portray in his reflections the progressively frustrating results of a self-determined strategy to find the meaning of things (1:3; 3:9) by applying unparalleled human wisdom (1:12-18). Thoroughly discouraged by this cumulative "vexation," Qoheleth now reflected again on the inevitable mortality and oppression that characterize human existence and discovered a "better" side to wisdom, an advantage that is fully achieved only after authentic mourning (7:1-7) and is sustained through adversity only by means of patient confidence (7:8-14).

Wisdom confers life-giving advantage (7:11-12) on those who wisely choose to mourn and confidently endure adversity in response to life's vexation (7:3, 9, 13, 14). Such wisdom is grounded in the fear of God, which justified Qoheleth's renewed hope for meaning in the second half of the argument.⁶⁴ The author's exposition of this advantage is leavened with caution, however, as wisdom's benefits are then found to be subject to the pitfalls of man's inherent depravity, uncertainty, and mortality. By systematically alerting the reader to the ways in which wisdom's advantage may be jeopardized by the corrosive effects of each of these influences the author intends to equip the reader for optimum stewardship of his "heritage" from God.

THE LITERARY INFRASTRUCTURE OF QOHELETH'S TWO-PART ARGUMENT

Once the structural and thematic relationship between the two main parts of Qoheleth's argument is recognized, it becomes feasible to distinguish subordinate literary transitions within each major section. The first half (1:12-6:12) consists of two large subsections that are distinguished from each other by a substantive transition in textual design and expressive purpose beginning at 4:1. The two subsections are concluded by virtually identical closing markers (3:22b; 6:12b) and linked by a transitional pericope (4:1-6) delineated by the repetition of an opening construction.⁶⁵ While both sections feature the themes of futility and vexa-

⁶⁴The second half of the argument is immediately preceded by the book's most succinct description of the fear of God (7:13-14), which in turn plays an increasing role in Qoheleth's reflections, as he proceeded to develop the concept of "wisdom's advantage" (7:11-12).

⁶⁵Although Whybray asserts that 4:1-3 is unrelated to the surrounding text (*Ecclesiastes*, 81), it is in fact contextually related to 4:4-6 by the repeated opening marker in 4:1 and 4:7. In effect the selfish ambition portrayed in 4:4-6 explains the unjust oppression observed in 4:1-3; in this way the transitional pericope 4:1-6 sets

tion, there is a change in emphasis from the futile search for the significance of man's striving in life (1:12-3:22) to the vexing outcomes that result from selfish ambition (4:1-6:12). The disillusionment that attends these outcomes is characterized in this second section by the author's expansion on the subthemes of oppression of others) and presumption (upon God), as well as humankind's inherent inability to be satisfied with goodness.⁶⁶

Additional, less prominent transitions can be recognized within the first half of the argument. Within the first subsection (1:12-3:22) the transition at 3:1 is heralded by the intrusion of the enjoyment, pericope at 2:24-26,⁶⁷ as well as the obviously different literary type trait that emerges in 3:1-8. Notwithstanding this abrupt stylistic change, however, the unity of the entire section is maintained by the repeated affirmation of intent in 3:9-10 (cf. 1:3, 13) and a consistency throughout of the theme of the elusive significance of human labor (1:14, 17; 2:11, 15, 19; 3:11c, 21, 22c), whether this significance is sought in the visible realm "under the sun" (1:12-2:23) or within the transcendent realm of God's sovereign purposes (3:1-22).

The transitions in the second subsection (4: 1-6: 12) are dictated by another change in type trait at 5:1⁶⁸ and another enjoyment pericope at 5:18.⁶⁹ However, there is a consistent exposition throughout of the deleterious effects of selfish ambition, whether manifested as relational alienation (4:7-16), the erosion of material accumulation in life (5:1-17), or the impossibility of satisfying one's soul apart from God (5: 18-6: 12). While 5:8 may seem to initiate another major transition,⁷⁰ it is probably only a minor

the stage (cf. 4:7, "Then I returned. . .") for the expanded exposition of selfish ambition in 4:7-6:12.

⁶⁶ These themes are not emphasized at all in the first section (1:12-3:22); note especially the distribution of constructions representing oppression, presumption, and satisfaction or fulfillment. (See notes 21, 35, 36.)

⁶⁷ Given the closing construction in 2:26, the pericope 2:24-26 belongs to the previous section (1:12-2:23); yet it also serves as the transition to the next section by introducing the concept of the sovereign purposes of God, a prominent theme in 3:1-22.

⁶⁸ Qoheleth abruptly shifts from the proverbial "better" sayings of 4:7-16-unified by the motif of "the second" (Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 41)--to the genre of direct exhortation in 5:1-17.

⁶⁹ The construction "Here is what I have seen" (5:18) seems to initiate a conclusory thought rather than conclude the previous reflection. The pericope of 5:18-20 properly belongs to the passage that follows because of the unmistakable repetition of several constructions in 5:18-6:6: "God has given riches and wealth. . . [and] power to eat of it" in 5:19 and 6:2; "see goodness" in 5:18 and 6:6 (Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 102, 106); and "the days of his life [or years]" in 5:18, 20; and 6:3.

⁷⁰ So according to Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 90, 100.

one. The coherence of 5:1-17 is grounded in the recognition that both 5:1-7 and 5:8-17 describe the material consequences of self-ish ambition directed against God (5:1-6a) and others (5:8-9).⁷¹ These consequences are summarized (5:6b-7) and then particularized in the case of the king himself (5:10-17) just as in 4:13-16.⁷²

The literary infrastructure of the second half of Qoheleth's argument (7:15-12:7) is widely debated. While several commentators are persuaded that it is primarily dictated by constructions such as "cannot find" and "know" or "do not know"⁷³--and these constructions do predominate in the second half of the book--the present writer agrees with Ogden's criticism "that man's inability to know his future is an idea implicit in the earlier chapters of the book."⁷⁴ If it is correct to identify "wisdom's advantage" as the unifying theme of 7:15-12:7, then it should be possible to demonstrate that each of the transitions in this phase of the argument introduces some new wrinkle in Qoheleth's reflections on wisdom's advantage.

A major structural transition can be recognized at 9:11, as suggested by the immediately preceding "enjoyment" pericope (9:7-10) and by the reappearance of the opening marker "I returned and saw." Although 9:11-12 may seem to be contextually isolated, it logically introduces the material that follows (9:13-12:7).⁷⁵ The governing theme of "wisdom's advantage" is rein-

⁷¹While the difficulty of translating 5:9 has been duly noted (Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 46, n. 8a; Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 97-98; Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 101-102), it is best viewed as the logical conclusion of 5:8. The notion of unjust advantage reintroduced in 5:8a (cf. 4:1-3) is observed to "trickle up" (5:8b) all the way to the king (5:9)--the ultimate "pyramid" scheme. A reasonably "unforced" translation of 5:9 might therefore read, "Indeed, the ultimate [or overall] advantage of the land is this: A king is served by the field."

⁷²In other words even royal ambition and advantages eventually erode completely (5:9-17). This parallels the thrust of 4:13-16, which shows that the initial advantage of ascending the throne is inevitably eroded by the oppression and alienation that characterize ambitious rule.

⁷³See Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 81-82, 89; Wright, "The Riddle of the Sphinx," 55; and Donald R. Glenn, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985), 996-1002.

⁷⁴Ogden, "Variations on the Theme of Wisdom's Vulnerability," 332. In fact, such constructions are prominent enough to serve as closing markers (3:22b; 6:12b; 7:14c) for the three main sections that make up 1:12-7:14. See note 49.

⁷⁵Murphy's attempt to associate 9:11-12 with the preceding material is unconvincing (*Ecclesiastes*, 88-95). Both Eaton (*Ecclesiastes*, 129-30) and Whybray (*Ecclesiastes*, 145-46) recognize the overwhelming need to find a major transition

roduced in 9:11-12 by the contrast between nullified natural advantage and the previously described advantage of true wisdom (7:11-12). Whereas the preceding exposition of human depravity (7:15-29) was undertaken with the intent of convincing the reader that it is impossible on one's own to gain wisdom's true advantage (7:15-9:10), Qoheleth then "returned" (9:11a; cf. 4:1, 7) to remind the "convinced" reader that natural advantage is nullified by "time and chance" (9:11-12).

This caveat in turn facilitates the recognition of the flow of Qoheleth's thought from 9:11 through 12:7.⁷⁶ Notwithstanding the familiar interpretive difficulties of chapter 10,⁷⁷ the author's exposition of the vulnerability of wisdom's advantage in 9:11-10:20 is to prepare the reader who fears God to preserve this fragile advantage. Should wisdom's advantage be forfeited, it would be foolish indeed to return to man's natural advantage (9:11-12). Only by vigilantly maintaining wisdom's advantage in the face of inherent depravity (9:13-10:20), uncertainty (11:1-6), and mortality (11:7-12:7), can God's steward ultimately realize wisdom's inheritance (cf. 7:11).

As in the first half of Qoheleth's argument, several less prominent yet important transitions can also be recognized; these occur at 8:1, 16; and 11:1, 7. Having introduced wisdom's advantage as the governing theme of the argument's second half (7:11-12) and having exposed man's innate depravity as the major obstacle to realizing this advantage (7:15-29), Qoheleth then posed the obvious dilemma confronting the reader who has followed the argument thus far (8:1).⁷⁸ Given the devastating effect of sin on

at 9:11. Whybray's outline leaves 9:11-12 unrelated to either the preceding or following material (*Ecclesiastes*, 145-46), just as he does with 4:1-3. Eaton aligns 9:11-12 with the following text by asserting that "the verses introduce the themes of wisdom and its limits, as well as counterbalancing vv. 7-10. The wise man must not be so taken up with the contented life as to forget life's frustrations; for these do not disappear when the wise man is assured of God's approval" (*Ecclesiastes*, 130).

⁷⁶ The absence of clear-cut opening markers between 9:13 and 12:7 supports viewing the entire section as a major cohesive unit. The minor transitions at 9:13; 10:1; and 11:1, 7 are dictated by more subtle changes in type trait and theme.

⁷⁷ Ogden reviews the notorious difficulty "of determining some thematic arrangement of the material" in *Ecclesiastes* 9-10 and offers a plausible solution ("Variations on the Theme of Wisdom's Strength and Vulnerability," 331-35). His five-fold division of thought units within chapter 10 (*ibid.*, 336-40) is to be commended for its exegetical clarity and its consistency with Qoheleth's emphasis on the vulnerability of wisdom's advantage in 9:13-11:6.

⁷⁸ The question asked by Qoheleth at 8:1 is a logical question to pose in response to the demoralizing conclusion of the previous subsection (7:15-29). By conveying in effect the hot lest realization that for a person truly to benefit from wisdom requires some efficacious way to overcome the inevitable consequences of his depravity, this question leads directly to 8:2-15, which describes one's liability to God's Judgment for evil done.

wisdom, who can possibly appropriate wisdom's life-giving benefits? As this dilemma is only compounded by liability to judgment for one's sin (8:2-8), it then becomes clear why a person's only hope to benefit from wisdom is to fear before God (8:9-15). Following the enjoyment pericope at 8:14-15, Qoheleth's reflection in 8:16-17 concerning the inscrutability of God's "work" should be recognized as another transition. By acknowledging that the advantage of wisdom is sourced in the inscrutable realm of the "work of God" (8:16-17)-and therefore not to be sought "under the sun"--Qoheleth set the stage for the message of 9:1-10: Wisdom's advantage is retained by the "righteous and the wise" who are in "the hand of God" and thus have the hope of "finding" the ultimate meaning of their works within the "work of God." The transition at 11:1 is marked by a shift to a sustained exhortation that continues through 12:7. Wisdom's advantage can be realized in the face of uncertainty only by the expeditious investment of labor and resources when the opportunity presents itself (11:1-6). Regarding the minor transition at 11:7, the case has already been made that 11:7-10 should be viewed as an enjoyment pericope that initiates the conclusion of the argument. The prevailing theme of wisdom's advantage is reintroduced with the imagery of light and darkness in 11:7-8, which recalls similar imagery in 7:11 and 8:1b, also intended to reflect the benefits of wisdom. The coherence and unity of 11:7-12:7⁷⁹ is then established by the repetition of several associated constructions within the passage⁸⁰ which collectively underscore the importance of early and opportune appropriation of wisdom's benefits to maximize fruitful stewardship of one's "portion" from God before debility and death ensue.

CONCLUSION

The approach to the literary composition of Ecclesiastes presented in this article establishes the unity and coherence of Qoheleth's message as both consistent with human experience and compatible with the truth revealed in the rest of Scripture. The message can be summarized as follows: Aided even with unprecedented human wisdom (cf. 1:13, 16), self-determined individuals are

⁷⁹See Murphy, Ecclesiastes, 114-15.

⁸⁰The repeated constructions include "remember" (11:8 and 12:1), "vanity" (11:8c; 10c; and 12:8), "the days of darkness" (11:8b), "the difficult days" (12:1), and "before" (12:1,2,6).

incapable of finding or forging lasting meaning "under the sun" (1:12-6:12). However, wisdom may still yield a meaningful "inheritance," if one is willing to endure the transformation of authentic mourning (7:1-14). But to realize this inheritance fully, one must learn that wisdom's benefits are precluded by depravity (7:15-29) made possible in the face of Judgment only through the fear of God (8:1-15). These benefits find their source only in the inscrutable "work of God" (8:16-9:10), are preserved by moral vigilance (10:1-10:20), and are finally realized by opportune stewardship of a person's God-given "portion" (11:1-12:7). This approach also supports a unified effective purpose or intended response to the message⁸¹ that addresses the needs of all humankind. This message and purpose are articulated by the following three-part summary statement that reflects the author's (a) chosen expressive purpose or type of meaning; (b) intended message for his audience; and (c) intended effective purpose (or application of his message) for the reader:

By reflecting on his futile search for any advantage to human labor "under the sun," the author exposes man's existential inability--tracing it to his inherent uncertainty, depravity, and mortality--and consequently locates the only hope for meaning in patient submission to God's sovereign (though inscrutable) purposes, so that the reader might despair of self-determination, mourn his own inability, and accept his "portion" from God, thereby enabling him to enjoy the advantage of wisdom as an accountable steward of the "work of God."

APPENDIX: PROPOSED OUTLINE OF ECCLESIASTES

I. Thematic Prologue: What Profit Has a Man? (1:1-11)

II. Man's Futile Search for Meaning "under the Sun" (1:12-3:22)

A. Man's Futile Search for Satisfaction in Achievement (1:12-2:26)

1. Introduction: Qoheleth's Futile Quest (1:12-18)

2. The Futile Pursuit of Pleasure (2:1-11)

3. The Futile Pursuit of Wisdom (2:12-17)

4. The Futility of All Toil "under the Sun" (2:18-23)

⁸¹The author's "effective" purpose (in contrast to "expressive" purpose) is defined as the "effect" intended by the author for his message to produce in the heart of the reader. See Roy B. Zuck, "Application in Biblical Hermeneutics and Exposition," in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, ed. Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody, 1982) 15-38; Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 344-47; and Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics*, 215-64.

- 5. Hope for Meaning from the Hand of God (2:24-26)
- B. Man's Futile Attempt to Discern God's Purpose (3:1-22)
 - 1. All Life's Events Reflect Purpose (3:1-8)
 - 2. God's Inscrutable Purpose for Man's Labor (3:9-15)
 - 3. Man's Inscrutable Destiny in God's Plan (3:16-22)
- III. The Futility of Selfish Ambition (4:1-6:12)
 - A. The Pervasive Tyranny of Selfish Ambition (4:1-16)
 - 1. Unjust Oppression: First Sign of Selfish Ambition (4:1-6)
 - 2. Bitter Alienation: Ambition's Ultimate "Harvest" (4:7-16)
 - B. The Costly Presumption behind Selfish Ambition (5: 1-17)
 - 1. Man's Ultimate Loss in Presuming on God (5:1-7)
 - 2. The Cumulative Cost of Presuming on Others (5:8-17)
 - C. No Ultimate Advantage to Selfish Ambition (5:18-6:12)
 - 1. The Utter Despair of an Unsatisfied Soul (5:18-6:6)
 - 2. The Ultimate Inability of the Self-Determined Soul (6:7-12)
- IV. Despair as a Turning Point to Wisdom (7:1-14)
 - A. Authentic Mourning Is Better than Unfounded Optimism (7:1-7)
 - 1. The Wisdom of Authentic Mourning (7:1-4)
 - 2. The Folly of Appeasing Despair (7:5-7)
 - B. Patient Confidence Is Better than Angry Pride (7:8-14)
 - 1. The Folly of Angry Pride (7:8-10) -
 - 2. Wisdom's Ultimate Advantage (7:11-14)
- V. The True Path to Wisdom: The Fear of God (7:15-9:10)
 - A. Total Depravity: Man's Greatest Obstacle to Wisdom (7:15-29)
 - 1. Man's Hopelessly Inadequate Righteousness (7:15-22)
 - 2. Depravity Exposed in the Search for Wisdom (7:23-29)
 - B. The Fear of God: Man's Only Hope in Judgment (8:1-15)

1. Wisdom's Advantage in the Face of Judgment (8:1-8)
2. Man's Only Hope: To Fear before God (8:9-15)
- C. The Work of God: Man's Ultimate Source of Meaning (8:16-9:10)
 1. Man's Uncertain Role in God's Inscrutable Plan (8:16-9:2)
 2. Man's Hope for Meaning in His "Portion" from God (9:3-10)
- VI. Shepherding Wisdom for the Work of God (9:11-12:7)
 - A. Wisdom's Vulnerability: The Need for Moral Vigilance (9:11-10:20)
 1. Time and Chance: "Natural" Advantage Nullified (9:11-12)
 2. Wisdom's Advantage Dismissed by Fools (9:13-18)
 3. Wisdom's Advantage Forfeited by Folly (10:1-20)
 - B. Opportune Stewardship amid Life's Adversity (11:7-12:7)
 1. Expeditious Stewardship in the Face of Uncertainty (11:1-6)
 2. Early Stewardship in the Face of Mortality (11:7-12:7)
- VII. Epilogue: Qoheleth's Moral Authority (12:8-14)
 - A. Qoheleth's Teaching-The Reliable Word of God (12:8-12)
 - B. The Purpose of God's Word (12:13-14)

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Unity Near You. Unity Worldwide Ministries. You are here. Home ⁹ Resources ⁹ Interpret This. Ecclesiastes 4:6. Passage

The book of Hebrew scripture known as Ecclesiastes, or The Preacher, is from the third century B.C.E. Its inclusion is unusual in that it is a work of philosophy rather than religion. In fact, many of the author's conclusions are very much at odds with Jewish teaching. Its basic theme is that human life is neither more nor less than all other expressions of life in the world. It is what it is, and trying to change things achieves nothing. "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; and there is nothing new under the sun" (1:9). And yet, he explains.

F. The Unity and Structure of the Book. 1. Some have viewed Ecclesiastes as a combination of the contradictory views of three men (a skeptic, a writer of wisdom, and a believer), but this has largely been abandoned³⁸. 2. Some see the book of Ecclesiastes as having a thematic unity, but no real structural unity or argument; rather, it is viewed as a loose collection of wisdom sayings similar to the book of Proverbs³⁹.

G. The Purposes of Ecclesiastes. 1. To reach unbelievers through a "cultural apologetic" so that they might straighten out their thinking, acting, values and prepare for their eternal destiny⁴³. 2. To explain for unbelievers and believers that meaning in life is not to be found in life (which is unintelligible and hostile--meaningless, vanity), but in the God who gives life.