

A WISE MAN REFLECTING ON WISDOM QOHELETH/ECCLESIASTES¹

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Summary

This paper looks at Qoheleth's ambivalent attitude towards wisdom and being wise. At times wisdom is his presupposition, his strength, and his benchmark for judging everything; at other times he sees its limitations and relativity in the light of divine unpredictability and human death. This is not contradictory; rather, Qoheleth weighs up proverbs and provides an interpretation of them, fulfilling the description of him in 12:9. Whilst some see the Epilogist as critical of the wise, using Qoheleth's own words to discredit the wisdom movement, I maintain that this is not the case; rather, the Epilogue reinforces Qoheleth's approach to the wisdom task.

1. Introduction

The author of Ecclesiastes – Qoheleth – muses at length on being wise and on wisdom as a quest and goal to be attained.² In his unique self-reflective way, he describes ‘my mind (לִבִּי) guiding me with wisdom (בַּחֲכָמָה)’ (Eccl. 2:3),³ and he often quotes proverbs,⁴ contrasting the

¹ Based on a Tyndale Fellowship Conference plenary lecture on 25th June, 2019.

² The noun חֲכָמָה ‘wisdom’ is found twenty-eight times, חָכֵם ‘wise’ twenty-one times, and the verb חָכַם ‘to be wise, act wisely’ is used three times.

³ Translations are from my forthcoming commentary with T. Forti on Ecclesiastes/Qoheleth for the *International Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament* to be published by Kohlhammer, unless otherwise indicated.

⁴ Whether Qoheleth is quoting existing proverbs for his own purposes or composing them for the occasion is debated in the scholarship. In fact, it makes little difference to my argument here, as the effect of using them is the same in either case: as Michael Fox writes, ‘It does not matter much whether Qohelet has composed ... or is quoting them, for they are now *his* own.’ M. V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and A Time to Build*

benefits of being wise over being foolish, proverbs that follow similar thematic lines to those in the main sayings collections of the book of Proverbs (10:1–22:16; 25–29, e.g. 10:1,14; 12:18; 13:20). But at times he seems to question the attempt to gain wisdom, particularly when he contemplates the levelling plane of death, so that he asks of his own quest ‘why then have I been so very wise?’ (2:15) and in general ‘how can the wise die alongside the fool?’ (2:16). In short, as I will go on to discuss, Qoheleth can be seen to be both positive and negative about being wise and the wisdom exercise. At times wisdom seems to be his presupposition, his strength, and his benchmark for judging everything; at other time he sees its limitations and its relativity in the light of divine unpredictability and death. He even describes seeking by means of wisdom as ‘a grievous matter that God has given to human beings to be concerned with’ (1:13b) and yet, ironically, he chooses wisdom for himself and commends it to others. As Fox writes:

Qohelet extols wisdom, spells out its practical benefits, and judges it to be as superior to folly as light is to darkness. However, he also teaches that human wisdom has blinders on it and inevitably falls short of its goals. Qohelet’s ideas on wisdom pull in all directions, yet they do cohere, uncomfortably and unstably.⁵

The evaluation of Qoheleth’s own wisdom is also extended by that given by the Epilogist in 12:9-14, as I shall go on to discuss.

2. Qoheleth’s ‘Wisdom’ in the Epilogue

In this paper I want to tease out Qoheleth’s seemingly ambivalent attitude towards being wise, which includes how he views the category of ‘the wise’, likely to be an identifiable social group (Eccl. 4:13-16; cf. Jer. 18:18) to which Qoheleth belonged.⁶ Indeed, his qualifications are confirmed by the Epilogue to Ecclesiastes where Qoheleth, the Teacher, is described in the third person: ‘Besides being wise, the

Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999): 21. My own view is that it is likely that, given they are not found in the Proverbs collection, he is composing them himself.

⁵ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 87.

⁶ Some kind of social grouping forms an important backdrop to more abstract ideas, so M. R. Sneed, *The Social World of the Sages: An Introduction to Israelite and Jewish Wisdom Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015). Many suggestions have been made as to the dating and social context of Qoheleth’s work, but most presuppose that he has a similar background to earlier sages or scribes.

Teacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs' (12:9, NRSV). This second redactional hand⁷ describes the author's own wisdom and wise status and his teaching of 'the people', possibly a wider didactic audience interested to learn and not simply a narrow group of apprentices in a wisdom school; wisdom may well have been subsumed under a wider intellectual tradition by this time.⁸ What he teaches is knowledge (דעת, Eccl. 12:9), one of wisdom's key attributes, as described in Proverbs 1:4; indeed, Fox argues for two aspects for חכמה – 'faculty and knowledge', the former being intellectual power including common sense, practicality, reason, and orderly thinking and the latter being the communicable content of knowledge gained by learning and erudition.⁹ Whilst I see this as a useful unpacking of the scope of wisdom, it seems to me that Qoheleth does not distinguish these meanings when he uses the term¹⁰ חכמה and he does use 'knowledge' (דעת) as a separate term.¹¹

Qoheleth uses the method of 'weighing' up proverbs and providing an interpretation of them. This suggests that differing opinions, such as is often found when putting one proverb against another, is at the heart of this wise man's teaching, as it would have been for his predecessors in circles of 'the wise'. This is often described as 'contradiction'.¹²

⁷ A widely reached conclusion in studies of the book of Ecclesiastes since the rise of biblical scholarship. Indeed, often two redactional hands were found in the Epilogue, certainly amongst older scholars, e.g. G. A. Barton, *Ecclesiastes* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1912) found two stages; A. H. McNeile, *An Introduction to Ecclesiastes* (Cambridge: CUP, 1904) found three.

⁸ R. N. Whybray, *The Intellectual Tradition in the Old Testament* (BZAW 135; Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1974).

⁹ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 73. In Qoheleth specifically Fox sees three aspects of wisdom stressed – ingenuity, good sense, and rational intellect, engaging in 'an open-ended search for new knowledge' (74), finding this last of the three particularly distinctive to Qoheleth's worldview (73-75).

¹⁰ Indeed M. V. Fox, 'Wisdom in Qoheleth' in *In Search of Wisdom: Essays in Memory of John G. Gammie*, ed. L. G. Perdue, B. B. Scott, and W. J. Wiseman (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) makes the point that whilst modern interpreters might 'unpack' Qoheleth's wisdom in various ways, for the author wisdom is a single unity of concept (along with knowledge, used interchangeably): Fox writes 'He treats smartness, knowledge, judiciousness, common sense, and intellect as manifestations of a single human faculty and holds that they must be inspected and judged together' (129). (There is overlap in material between this article and the material in *A Time to Tear Down* on the subject of wisdom in Qoheleth.)

¹¹ Qoheleth uses the noun דעת seven times and the verb ידע 'to know' 36 times.

¹² Contradictions have regularly been seen as a 'problem' of the book, even amongst the rabbis. See K. J. Dell, 'Ecclesiastes as Wisdom: Consulting Early Interpreters', VT

However, in my view, ‘weighing’ (אָזן) (alternatively ‘assessed/trying out’) is perhaps a better description than ‘contradiction’ of what is going on in such passages that use proverbial material. Qoheleth often uses proverbs as a starting point for a wider ‘interpretative’ discussion, or as a means of airing more than one view, which he can then expound upon, as I shall go on to discuss.

More qualities are enumerated in Ecclesiastes 12:10 – ‘The Teacher sought to find pleasing words (דְּבַר־חֶפֶץ) and he wrote words of truth (דְּבַר־אֱמֶת) plainly’ (NRSV). Truth is another attribute of the wise – Woman Wisdom in Proverbs 8:7 speaks of her mouth uttering ‘truth’ and despising wickedness, but ‘pleasing words’ [from the root חֶפֶץ ‘delight’, ‘desire’] is more singular as a description of a wise person. The word (דְּבַר) is used by Qoheleth himself (often translated ‘matter’ as in ‘a time for every matter’ in Eccl. 3:1 [NRSV]) and interestingly חֶפֶץ is used often in 1 Kings in descriptions of Solomon, so linking desire to wisdom (1 Kgs 5:8-10; 9:1,11; 10:9,13; cf. Wisd. of Sol. 9:9-10 of the figure of Wisdom).

The Epilogue also offers us a general description of the value of such sayings in a shift from the personal to the general (one of Qoheleth’s own techniques as in 2:15-16, see below). So, the Epilogist moves to the general when he says ‘the sayings of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings that are given by one shepherd’ (12:11, NRSV). I take this in an entirely positive way to mean that there is a fixity about the teachings of any one wise person, as collected in this short book, and that not every aspect of the teaching will be easy for the student to accept.¹³ The

XLIV (1994): 301-32. It is also used in modern scholarship on Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and their interrelationship – see P. T. H. Hatton, *Contradiction in the Book of Proverbs: The Deep Waters of Counsel* (SOTS MS; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), who compares the two texts. For Proverbs, see C. Yoder, ‘Forming “Fearers of Yahweh”: Repetition and Contradiction as Pedagogy in Proverbs’ in *Seeking out the Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays Offered to Honor Michael V. Fox on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. R. L. Troxel et al. (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2005): 167-83.

¹³ A goad is a sharp metal instrument, paralleled by ‘nails firmly fixed’. As C.-L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (AB 18C; New York: Doubleday, 1997) writes, ‘We should think here of spikes or nails implanted at the ends of sticks to be used as prods’ (387). This may well refer to the kinds of prods used for cattle or working animals, e.g. an ox-goad (cf. 1 Sam. 13:21). R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (New Century Bible Commentary, London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989) likens them to spurs used in horse riding and writes ‘Their function is thus through persuasion to spur their audience or readers to action: that is, to base their conduct on their advice’ (172).

famous edict follows about ‘making many books’ (Eccl. 12:12, NRSV), which in the context of verse 11 suggests that a short collection of wise words is preferable to endless proliferation of scholarly material. I see this as a general statement rather than referring to Qoheleth’s own work as a criticism of him. However, not all scholars take the Epilogue in such a positive way, nor in such an integral way to the rest of the book, as I shall now go on to describe.

3. Evaluating Shields’ View of the Epilogue

Notably, Martin Shields, first in the *Tyndale Bulletin* 1999¹⁴ and subsequently in more detail in his 2006 book *The End of Wisdom*,¹⁵ has argued that the Epilogist of Ecclesiastes is the main author,¹⁶ is critical of the sages, and is using Qoheleth’s own words (although Qoheleth may not have existed as a separate person) to discredit the wisdom movement.¹⁷ So he takes the general statements of verses 11 and 12 as criticisms of Qoheleth’s words. He puts the emphasis though on ‘the end of the matter’ (12:13, NRSV), i.e. on the last part of the Epilogue – ‘Fear God and keep his commandments’ in Ecclesiastes 12:13 (NRSV). This is, of course, one of the main reasons for thinking that this section is a redaction (and some think that 12:12-14 are from a separate hand to 12:9-11¹⁸) in that the emphasis on keeping commandments (מצוות) is nowhere else found in the book, nor is it typical of wisdom books in general. The fear (אִי) of God is known, particularly from Proverbs (e.g. in the framing sections alone, Prov. 1:7,29; 2:5; 8:13; 9:10; 31:31 [YHWH here rather than Elohim]) and from within the main body of Ecclesiastes (5:7; 7:18; 8:12-13), but it is the conjunction with commandment, and ultimately with God’s commands as recorded in

¹⁴ Martin A. Shields, ‘Ecclesiastes and the End of Wisdom’, *Tyndale Bulletin* 50:1 (1999): 117-39.

¹⁵ Martin A. Shields, *The End of Wisdom: A Reappraisal of the Historical and Canonical Function of Ecclesiastes* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2006).

¹⁶ Building on M. V. Fox, ‘Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet’, *HUCA* 48 (1977): 83-106.

¹⁷ He is, in part, picking up on an evaluation known in older scholarship but usually expressed in a more historical context. See Charles W. Reines, ‘Koheleth on Wisdom and Wealth’, *JJS* 5 (1954): 80-81.

¹⁸ E.g. older scholars such as Barton, *Ecclesiastes* and M. Jastrow, *A Gentle Cynic Being the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1919) even found four hands in the Epilogue!

Torah, that is different and more reminiscent of the later apocryphal book Ben Sira.

Shields sees this verse and the next as a conclusion indicating the path of ‘true wisdom’ over against the dangerous teaching represented by Qoheleth. He aligns it with passages elsewhere in the Old Testament where the wisdom of God is praised over human wisdom, notably in Deuteronomy (Deut. 5:29; 6:2; 8:6; 13:5). He regards Proverbs as advocating a naïve and primitive wisdom which is critiqued by Qoheleth, but still falls short of the prophetic vision of God’s wisdom, which in turn is pitted against the shortcomings of human wisdom and circles of the wise. Hence Shields sees the Epilogue (and the occasional third-person intrusions into the main work in Qoh. 1:1-2; 7:27; 12:8) as from a hand that is deliberately citing the words of Qoheleth to discredit the wisdom movement – the message is to beware of sages who might lead you astray and instead choose the path of true wisdom. Shields writes:

In using Qoheleth’s words to disclose the failings of speculative wisdom, the epilogist presents a unified work possessing a specific overarching purpose of deterring prospective students of speculative wisdom from embracing the wisdom movement and pointing them to their religious heritage, which offered a way out of the senseless and futile world of the sages.¹⁹

I disagree with Shields’ assessment on a number of levels, not least because he seems to ignore the many links between the Epilogue and Qoheleth’s own words. For example, ‘fear’ (אָרֵר), which he consistently interprets within Qoheleth as fear of a distant, unknown God rather than of a God who has revealed his will through commandment. Surely Qoheleth would have known the nuances of its reference? He would probably have known Deuteronomy’s use of it (e.g. Deut. 6:2; 10:12). He would probably have agreed with Proverbs 15:33, ‘The fear of the Lord is instruction in wisdom’ (NRSV), which may not use the language of commandment but still links the fear of God with a concrete practical outcome. I also disagree with his highly negative assessment of the main body of Ecclesiastes and with his assessment of Proverbs as also falling short of the ‘wisdom’ of the Epilogist.²⁰ Whilst Shields represents an extreme position, there are

¹⁹ Shields, *The End of Wisdom*, 239.

²⁰ D. Estes, ‘Seeking and Finding in Ecclesiastes and Proverbs’ in *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually*, ed. K. Dell and W. Kynes (LHBOTS 587; London:

quite a few other commentators who go along a similar line in seeing the Epilogue as a distinct worldview²¹ more in line with other parts of the Old Testament, but who do not assess either the wisdom of Proverbs or Qoheleth's wisdom in such a negative way.²² Indeed, the fact that Shields can even argue this position – that the Epilogist is critical of the sages and uses Qoheleth's own words to discredit the wisdom movement – highlights the fact that there is ambivalence within the main book in Qoheleth's attitude towards the wise and wisdom and furthermore that there is some redactional comment that would seem to take a step beyond what Qoheleth himself actually said. As I said, I see 12:9-12 as entirely in line with the description of what Qoheleth is doing as a wise teacher in the main book, but 12:13-14 can arguably be seen as a variant on his approach – but I would still not use the word 'critique'. Boda mentions that although most scholars agree on the existence of a frame surrounding Qoheleth's testimony, 'scholarly opinions on the relationship between the Epilogist and Qoheleth can be arranged on a continuum that ranges from the extremes of affirming on the one side and antithetical on the other' (p. 258).²³ Perhaps Fox is closer to the mark than Shields when he says

Bloomsbury, 2014): 118-29, in looking at the language of seeking and finding in both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, concludes that there is clearly a close relationship between the two texts – Ecclesiastes both cites and reverses proverbial teaching – and sees Ecclesiastes as 'supplementing rather than subverting Proverbs' (127).

²¹ L. G. Perdue, *The Sword and the Stylus: An Introduction to Wisdom in the Age of Empires* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008) tries to find a historical setting for this 'revolt'.

²² Ecclesiastes is often seen, with Job, as directed against proverbial wisdom, as 'wisdom in revolt', or protest literature. So, they are both seen as different developments away from an earlier aphoristic model contrasting wise and foolish behaviour in a rather simplistic way and often acclaimed as a more profound exploration of wisdom's themes. I have written elsewhere that I refute this model, seeing Proverbs and Ecclesiastes as on more of a 'wisdom continuum' than including Job would merit. See K. J. Dell, 'Ecclesiastes as Mainstream Wisdom (Without Job)' in *Goochem in Mokum/Wisdom in Amsterdam: Papers on Biblical and Related Wisdom Read at the Fifteenth Joint Meeting of The Society of Old Testament Study and the Oudtestamentisch Werkgezelschap, Amsterdam July 2012*, ed. George J. Brooke and Pierre Van Hecke (Oudtestamentische Studien [OTS] 68; Leiden: Brill, 2016): 43-52.

²³ M. J. Boda, 'Speaking into the Silence: The Epilogue of Ecclesiastes' in *The Words of the Wise are like Goats: Engaging Qoheleth in the 21st Century*, ed. M. J. Boda, T. Longman III, and C. G. Rata (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2013): 257-79 cites T. Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998) at one extreme, who argues that the Epilogist rejects Qoheleth's viewpoint entirely, offering his own alternative, and C. G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009) at the other, who sees the Epilogist as endorsing Qoheleth's

‘The epilogue serves to buffer the words of Qohelet and to assure the reader of their legitimacy’.²⁴ He sees the mention of religious principles as setting a boundary on wisdom rather than undermining Qoheleth’s quest or even referring directly to Qoheleth’s words – it is directed at wisdom as a general comment. Fox continues, ‘By giving piety the final word, the postscript blunts the thorns imminent in the roamings of human intellect at the very same time it allows Qohelet – and other intellectuals – freedom of movement for their enquiry.’²⁵

4. Qoheleth’s Personal Quest for Wisdom

I argue that the fluctuation between positive and negative poles on the subject of wisdom, or indeed on other subjects, is very characteristic of Qoheleth’s thought in general. This is not just because he appears to cite one position and then qualify it, but also because in different parts of the book he seems to take different lines of argument, almost as if he is in different moods or at various stages in the development of his thought. One of his regular phrases is ‘I said to myself’ (1:16; 2:1; 2:15 [twice], almost as if he is speaking internally); also ‘I said to myself [lit. I said in my mind/heart to myself]’ (3:17,18). One gets the impression of someone not only in dialogue with others, but also, and essentially, in dialogue with himself. This leads to internal dispute, which is in many ways typical of human nature itself, and which is not, in my view, to be seen as a negative factor in his self-presentation or in his thought. When it comes to wisdom it is clear that for Qoheleth it is a very personal quest: ‘I applied *my* mind/heart (לְבִי) to understand wisdom and knowledge’ (1:17).²⁶ I think this aspect is sometimes under-stressed. Again in 2:3, adopting the Solomonic persona, ‘I explored in *my* mind (בְּלִבִּי) how to anoint my flesh with wine, *my* mind (לְבִי) guiding me with wisdom but grasping folly’ and ‘*my*

concluding viewpoint and advocating it to others (259). There are other scholars at different points on the continuum: see chart on pp. 260-61 of Boda’s article. Boda himself prefers the affirmative view, arguing that the call to ‘fear God’ and ‘remember’ in 12:13-14 echoes Qoheleth’s own sentiments in the main text. Cf. T. Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary* (Hermeneia, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) and A. G. Shead ‘Reading Ecclesiastes “Epilogically”’, *Tyndale Bulletin* 48 (1997): 84-86.

²⁴ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 95.

²⁵ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 96.

²⁶ Note that ‘wisdom’ and ‘knowledge’ are paired together in this verse and yet remain distinct terms.

wisdom (חכמתִי) sustained me' (2:9 in the context of becoming king); and in 7:25 'I turned, I and *my* mind (לְבִי) to know and to search around and to seek wisdom and an account of things, so as to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness which is madness.'²⁷ The slipping in and out of the Solomonic persona is a side issue here, as he is still describing a very personal quest, whether he is teacher of the people, or the greatest wise king ever known – the use of Solomon simply gives gravitas to his quest.

Qoheleth undoubtedly cites proverbs, sometimes in clusters (eg 7:1-12) and sometimes individually (eg 2:14a), but within the context of a wider discussion. It is sometimes unclear whether there is in fact a proverb citation or simply the citation of a different view in the midst of an extended reflection. In all cases, Qoheleth relativises them with his own view, the most common of which is 'this also is futility/vanity' (הַבֵּל). Robert Gordis argued that Qoheleth uses four techniques of citation: first, he cites a proverb reinforcing his own argument (e.g. 10:18; 11:1); second, a proverb is cited in disagreement with his view, but he gives us the full proverb instead of simply the part with which he disagrees (5:1-2; 11:3-4); third, proverbs are used simply for commentary with no direct refutation (7:1-13; 4:9-12; 5:9-12; 8:2-4); and fourth, contrasting proverbs are set against each other in order to highlight contradiction (4:5-6; 9:16-18). Gordis aired the idea of quotation, but he thought they could be either genuine quotations or restatements of conventional wisdom in Qoheleth's own words.²⁸ Gordis thought that those that represent Qoheleth's own view are quite likely to be made up by him. Whybray, in similar vein, spoke of some proverbs being cited in order to be refuted whilst others were used in 'staged' arguments.²⁹

²⁷ J. L. Crenshaw, 'Qoheleth's Understanding of Intellectual Enquiry' in *Qoheleth in the Context of Wisdom*, ed. A. Schoors (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998) characterises this language from Qoheleth as an 'intrusive ego' that 'intervenes between the topic under exploration and the audience's perception of his discoveries' (205), giving the impression of confession. He notes though that this style is already known from autobiographical narratives in Proverbs, e.g. 7:6-27 and 24:30-34 (as well as Agur in Prov. 30:1-14), and latterly in Ben Sira (e.g. 24:30-34). The issue is further complicated by Qoheleth's part-adoption of a fictional persona, King Solomon.

²⁸ R. Gordis, 'Quotations as a Literary Usage in Biblical, Oriental, and Rabbinic Literature', *HUCA* 22 (1949): 157-219.

²⁹ R. N. Whybray, 'The Identification and Use of Quotations in Ecclesiastes', *VTSupp* 32 (1981): 435-51 finds eight clear examples of quotation (2:14a; 4:5,6; 7:5,6a; 9:17; 10:2,12); see also D. Michel, *Untersuchungen zur Eigenart des Buches Qoheleth* (BZAW 183; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989).

5. Qoheleth's Contextualisation of Wisdom in 2:13-19

There is no doubt that the proverbs within Ecclesiastes are on the same 'continuum' with traditional proverbial material.³⁰ Qoheleth uses the same contrasting categories as Proverbs, notably 'the wise' versus 'the fool' in the context of reflection on the wisdom quest. Ecclesiastes 2:13-19 is a good example of a pair of straightforward proverbs contextualised in a longer discussion. The two proverbs in vv. 13-14 are relativised both by Qoheleth's own personal introduction and subsequent comment: 'Then I saw that (personal introduction) *wisdom has an advantage over folly; just as light has an advantage over darkness* (proverb 1). *A wise person has his eyes in his head whereas a fool walks in darkness* (proverb 2), Yet I perceived that the same fate befalls them all.' Qoheleth's personal thought is that the same fate – death – awaits both wise person and fool. This is then followed by a self-reflecting question that takes the proverb further still – 'Then I said to myself, "The fate of the fool will befall me too; why then have I been so very wise?"' Why has he even troubled with trying to be wise? The very grounding of his quest in wisdom is open to questioning.³¹ This surely is הַבַּל too. He then moves from this to this statement in verse 16: 'For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise just like the fool; as the days to come roll by, all is forgotten. How can the wise die alongside the fool?' So the first two proverbs, which may be cited or composed for the occasion but which have the ring of traditional proverbial wisdom, seem to start a whole chain of thought that continues for the subsequent two verses, one point feeding off another. And yet this is not the end of Qoheleth's reflection on this matter. His idea that death relativises the attempt to be wise in that the same fate befalls wise and foolish leads on to questioning his own life's work in the attainment of wisdom³² and then leads him on to the idea of

³⁰ Fox, *A Time to Tear Down* notes that 'their language is not archaic or even archaizing. More important, even if Qoheleth did not write these proverbs, he used them as his own words. That's what proverbs are for. Unless the quoter distances himself from the idea, it becomes his own' (21). Cf. Pirke Avot 4:19, which cites Prov. 24:17 without identifying its source.

³¹ 'This leveling makes it pointless to grow very wise, but it does not, to Qoheleth's mind, eliminate wisdom's superiority' (Fox, *A Time to Tear Down*, 184). Fox says this contra those scholars who see Qoheleth as being 'anti' wisdom, e.g. J. A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qoheleth* (BZAW 152; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979). See also G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM, 1970).

³² R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (Old Testament Guides; Sheffield: JSOT, 1989) makes the point that for Qoheleth wisdom 'was, like everything else, an entirely

remembrance, a topic found elsewhere but linked here specifically with this idea of death as a kind of moral leveller. Since all are forgotten in time, what again is the point of being wise if there is no lasting remembrance – the same fate of non-remembrance (like death itself) falls on both categories of person alike and seem to put them on the same level.

After a moment of anger in verses 17-18 in which ‘I hated life’ and ‘I hated all the toil’, Qoheleth comes back to the wise and foolish in verse 19, linking it to toil and inheritance. He muses in on the fact that he will leave the fruits of his toil to another after he dies, ‘And who knows whether he will be wise or foolish? Yet he will control the fruits of my toil for which I laboured and acted wisely under the sun. This also is futility/vanity’ (2:19; cf. 2:21). Thus, he links together his own personal, and yet general, wider discussion to this basic distinction between wise and foolish, bringing in issues of toil, inheritance, and remembrance. The wise/foolish distinction is as we might find it in Proverbs (e.g. Prov. 21:20, ‘Precious treasure remains in the house of the wise, but the fool devours it’, NRSV), but Qoheleth’s personal musings take the topic on further. As I wrote in a previous article:

The balancing of opposites is at the heart of the wisdom exercise and is featured in both texts. Maybe Ecclesiastes is to be characterized less as simply overturning and questioning the proverbial world view, and rather as presenting further alternatives, highlighting existing contradiction and deepening different possibilities.³³

Hence I disagree with scholars who see Qoheleth as mounting ‘a great polemic against wisdom’³⁴; rather, fresh insight is constantly being added during the process of exploration.³⁵

personal possession, valuable, if at all, only to its possessor; and it died with him’ (69). He finds this point ironic in the light of the existence of Qoheleth’s book to this day; however, maybe the very fact that Qoheleth wrote his thoughts about wisdom down indicates that he did after all think that his musings might benefit future generations.

³³ Dell, ‘Ecclesiastes as Mainstream Wisdom (Without Job)’, 49.

³⁴ W. Zimmerli, ‘Das Buch des Predigers Salomo’ in *Sprüche/Prediger/Das Hohe Lied/Klagelieder/Das Buch Esther* (ATD 16, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962): 123-53 (translated quotation p. 223).

³⁵ R. E. Murphy’s characterisation of Qoheleth’s stance towards wisdom as dialectical rather than polemical is closer to the mark. R. E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (Word Biblical Commentary 23A; Dallas, Texas: Word): lxi-lxiv.

6. The Poor Wise Man (4:13-16 and 9:15-18)

A group of ‘wise’ (חכמים) are often associated with the upper classes or the elite, but there is a surprising example used in Ecclesiastes of the ‘poor wise man’ (Eccl. 4:13-16). This in itself suggests a category of ‘wise’ but does not equate it with riches, as would normally be the outcome of the practice of wisdom (as promised by Woman Wisdom in Prov. 8:18). It is sometimes thought that a specific historical example is being thought of here (David, who at different times of his life fulfils both roles, Solomon at the end of his life, or a later Ptolemic king, e.g. the very young Ptolemy V Epiphanes [age 6] taking over from the spent Ptolemy IV Philopator), or perhaps that there is a more generalised and schematic historical reminiscence here as found in ‘collective memory’.³⁶ I would argue that this historically orientated interpretation is not necessary when reading Qoheleth in the context of general didactic teaching. We read ‘Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king, who no longer has the sense to heed warnings’ (4:13). This sounds like a proverb, but it states the opposite of what would be expected.³⁷ Wisdom here is better than its promised outcomes, wealth and power. The wise youth displaces the foolish king (4:15).³⁸ Interestingly, in 6:8 the poor are brought into the discussion of wise and foolish in an ambiguous verse: ‘For what advantage has the wise over the fool?’ asks Qoheleth, recalling his previous idea of ‘profit’ (יתרון) in 2:11. Instead, though, of following this with a reflection on death as the leveller of both, as we have had before, he strikes off in a new direction in the second half of the verse, ‘And what do the poor know about getting on in life?’ I take this to be a reflection on the fact that even the ‘wise’ poor do not seem to have an ‘advantage’ because they are poor. This would be in line, then, with the idea that the poor wise youth is better off than the foolish, but powerful, king. The wisdom/power/wealth nexus is being challenged here. This example of the poor wise man who ‘by his wisdom delivered the city’ (NRSV) is taken up again in 9:15. This may or may not be the

³⁶ J. Barbour, *The Story of Israel in the Book of Qoheleth: Ecclesiastes as Cultural Memory* (Oxford: OUP, 2012): 87.

³⁷ Cf. Eccl. 9:11, where Qoheleth says that expected outcomes are not guaranteed – ‘the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to the skilful’.

³⁸ Cf. P. T. H. Hatton, *Contradiction in the Book of Proverbs* on similar yet also contradictory attitudes to the powerful in Prov. 6:6-8; 30:24-31 and Eccl. 10:16-17.

same person, although Qoheleth may be inviting us to read one in the context of the other.³⁹ Majority opinion seems to think that the prophet Isaiah is in mind, although he is never specifically described as poor (only ‘naked and barefoot’ in Isa. 20:2-3), but here Qoheleth links this poor wise man to the theme of remembrance: ‘Yet no one remembered that poor man’ (9:15, NRSV). Was this linked to Isaiah’s remembrance after the Hezekian crisis of 701 BC was over? Or is this more of a didactic point that a poor wise man was not remembered simply because he was poor (9:16)? Would a well-known rich wise man (such as Solomon) *have* been remembered? I would tend towards this not referring to a specific historical situation,⁴⁰ but rather as providing the example that provides the opportunity for wider reflection on power and shouting versus weakness and quietly spoken words of wisdom, as Qoheleth goes on to explain in verse 17: ‘The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouting of a ruler among fools’ (NRSV). In this passage he also compares wisdom positively to both ‘might’ and ‘war’ using ‘better than’ sayings (vv. 16,18).

7. Wisdom’s Pitfalls and Benefits in Ecclesiastes 7

In chapter 7 we have the greatest collection of proverbial sayings, many of them ‘better than’ sayings. It is not a miscellany; rather, Qoheleth places his ‘quotations’ carefully. In part of the chapter, Qoheleth pursues an interesting theme regarding mourning versus mirth. He says in 7:4 in his usual elusive way ‘The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of frivolity.’ This certainly looks like a proverb, but perhaps one composed by Qoheleth as overturning normal sentiment and in agreement with his own viewpoint. This makes one ask why would mourning be preferable to mirthful frivolity? This is part of a wider theme that finds serious reflection not only on death, but also on the reputation of the one deceased, in the context of a funeral preferable to

³⁹ Stuart Weeks in K. Dell and W. Kynes, ed., ‘The Inner Textuality of Qoheleth’s Monologue’ in *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually*, 142-53 suggests this when he writes ‘Through clear verbal allusions to a number of things that he has said earlier, Qoheleth uses his story to draw into a new context some of the claims and issues that have already been laid out on the table: in doing so, he asserts continuity within his discourse, but also forces some qualification and re-evaluation of those claims’ (148).

⁴⁰ *Contra* Barbour, *The Story of Israel in the Book of Qohelet*, 133-35.

uncontrolled laughter and frivolity in the context of people trying too hard to enjoy themselves.⁴¹ This proverb is then in line with the next ‘better than’ saying in 7:5: ‘It is better to listen to the rebuke of the wise than to listen to the song of fools.’⁴² This brings us to the theme of words and communication which is so prominent in Proverbs (12:25; 13:13; 15:1,23; 25:11; 30:5) but also used by Qoheleth in the context of his wise/foolish theme, e.g. Ecclesiastes 9:17 (cited above) and 10:12: ‘Words spoken by the wise bring them favour, but the lips of fools consume them’ (NRSV).

There is also in chapter 7 a rather contradictory theme from Qoheleth of the wise person who tries too hard and becomes ‘over wise’. Perhaps he is thinking of those who set themselves up so much as moral exemplars that they become almost parodies of their own wisdom. So, he says in 7:16, ‘Do not be too righteous, and do not act too wise; why should you destroy yourself?’ This links up with his questioning of his own attempt to gain wisdom in chapter 2 – ‘why then have I been so very wise?’ (2:15). It also links up with the sentiment in 1:18 that ‘[for] in much wisdom is much vexation, and whoever increases knowledge increases pain.’ The quest has certainly proved a difficult one for him personally. He is also aware that the wise can be diverted from their course – we read in 7:7 ‘for a bribe makes the wise foolish, and a gift corrupts the heart.’ Here, power may lead to oppression, and wealth and influence easily converts into succumbing to a bribe. Qoheleth sees all sides of the quest to become wise and its pitfalls.

Qoheleth’s mood seems to change on this matter. At times he is unrelentingly positive about wisdom’s benefits, e.g. 7:11-12: ‘Better is wisdom with an inheritance, and it is even more profitable for those who see the sun. For to be under the shelter of wisdom is like the protection of money, and the advantage of knowledge of wisdom is that it gives life to the one who possesses it.’ In the same chapter, ‘Wisdom gives strength to the wise more than ten rulers who are in a city’ (7:19), but then four verses later ‘All this I have tested by wisdom; I said, “I

⁴¹ See K. Dell and T. Forti, ‘Janus Sayings: A Linking Device in Qoheleth’s Discourse’, *ZAW* 128/1 (2016): 115-28.

⁴² R. Gordis, *Koheleth – The Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes* (New York: Schocken, 1968) saw 7:1-14 as a collection of seven wisdom sayings linked by ‘better than’ (בטו), arguing for their individual amplification by the personal views of Qoheleth.

will be wise,” but it is far from me’ (7:23). This idea of the limits of his own – and hence other people’s – wisdom is a recurring one for Qoheleth. It links up with Job 28’s view that wisdom is hidden and out of reach of human beings, known only to God (cf. Zophar in Job 11:7). It is also expressed in 8:17: ‘even though the wise claim to understand [the work of God] they cannot find it out’ (cf. Agur in Prov. 30:3-4; Sir. 43:31-2). And yet, on the other side of the argument, ‘The wisdom of a human being illuminates his face’ (8:1) – there is something transforming about the question for knowledge, truth and understanding and much is positive such that ‘the wise mind will know the time of judgement’ (8:5b; cf. 12:14). And yet, ultimately, God holds the final card – in 9:1, again in a spirit of heartfelt examination of the issues, Qoheleth concludes that ‘the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God; whether it is love or hate one does not know’ (NRSV). Scholars have found a theme of providence in Ecclesiastes (cf. Eccl. 3:1-8) that sees ultimate wisdom and knowledge in the hands of God and unknowable to human beings and this verse would seem to support that view. But Qoheleth’s thought on this issue is by no means monochrome.

8. Conclusion

I have shown, then, by looking at various sections of his book that Qoheleth’s views on wisdom and the wise are varied and at times ambivalent even though he seems to have a basic trust in the currency. I want finally to return to Shields’ question. Does he in some way ‘discredit’ the wisdom movement or its task in the way he shows the advantages and yet the pitfalls of the quest to be wise? Does he discredit it in the way that he makes unusual, upside-down contrasts and vignettes (such as the poor wise man) and in his manner of statement with alternatives and meanderings that leaves the reader not knowing what to believe? Shields’ ground for saying that Qoheleth discredits is based on the Epilogue’s seeming judgement. However, as I have already mentioned, it seems to me that much of the Epilogue confirms the task that we have seen Qoheleth engaged in – ‘being wise’, teaching, ‘weighing and studying and arranging’ (12:9, NRSV) many proverbs. Whilst not all of his words were ‘pleasing’ to all, at least he displays an honest wrestling with the issues, and it is certainly

right that he ‘wrote words of truth plainly’ (12:10, NRSV). Qoheleth does not balk at difficult topics such as death, mourning, inheritance, wealth, poverty, and inhumanity. His is a distinct collection – one of the most unified of the books of the Bible in terms of consistency of style and theme.⁴³ What then of the ‘fear God and keep his commandments (מצות)’ epithet in 12:13? Are these two verses different enough to overturn the positive value of Qoheleth’s honesty? In Ecclesiastes 8:5b Qoheleth says ‘whoever obeys a command will meet no harm’ – here the word used is מצוה as in 12:13, and it shows an awareness of authority and its demands (either referring to God’s command or that of an earthly ruler or leader).⁴⁴ In Proverbs 1–9 the link with Deuteronomic ideas is clear.⁴⁵ There is a close relationship between wisdom and not just the fear of the Lord, but also with parental ‘instruction’ (מוסר) and commandment(s) (מצות, e.g. Prov. 2:1), which is in turn linked to משפט (justice/judgement) (e.g. Prov. 2:8-9). These same words are found in 12:13-14 – מצות (commandment(s)) (v. 13); and משפט (judgement) (v. 14). Even if it is another hand here (or maybe even two, in 12:9-12 and 13-14), I believe this is a summary and it is one that links back to Proverbs 1–9 and looks forward to Ben Sira, but without being contradictory to Qoheleth’s basic ideas. It loses any sense of ambiguity and has a pious tone, but when summarising the thought of another that is hardly unsurprising. I do not see any essential contradiction here, nor any undermining of Qoheleth’s own position. It is almost as if the Epilogist is saying ‘This book needs rounding off, otherwise we are in danger of “making many books” and “wearying the flesh”, and that would never do!’

⁴³ John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (London: DLT; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1996). Barton uses Ecclesiastes as a test case for trying out different interpretive methods and makes the point that it is a good contender for this because of its essential unity of authorship and theme.

⁴⁴ The referent is clearer in 8:2: ‘Keep the King’s command (פי) because of your sacred oath’ (although here מצוה is not used).

⁴⁵ See Katharine J. Dell, *The Book of Proverbs in Social and Political Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 18-50.