

Death in Qohelet

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There is a consensus that Qoh. 1:2 and Qoh. 12:8 form an *inclusio*, bracketing the whole Book of Qohelet. The thesis statement ¹הבל הבלים הכל הבל (the best known translation is “vanity of vanities, all is vanity”) is first voiced at 1:2 and reaches its climax at 12:8. This study seeks to argue that the theme of death serves to set the stage for Qohelet’s arguments, and that this theme links the whole book together within the frame of 1:2 and 12:8.² This study first analyzes how the notion of death germinates and develops in the opening poem (1:4–8). It then proceeds to examine the relationship between the death theme and Qohelet’s seven exhortations to joy. Next it turns to investigate Qohelet’s attitude towards death, and how death and life mutually define each other. Finally this work studies how the death theme culminates in the final poem (12:1–7) and how this concluding poem echoes the opening poem (1:4–8).

A. Introductory Poem³

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|------------------------|----|--|
| דור הלך ודור בא | 4. | A generation goes, and a generation comes, |
| והארץ לעולם עמדת: | | but the earth remains forever. |
| זרח השמש ובא השמש | 5. | The sun rises, and the sun sets, |
| ואל-מקומו שואף | | and it presses on to the place, |
| זרח הוא שם: | | where it rises. |
| הולך אל-דרום | 6. | The wind blows to the south |
| וסובב אל-צפון | | and goes around to the north; |
| סובב סבב הולך הרוח | | around and around goes the wind, |
| ועל-סביבתיו שב הרוח: | | and on its circuits the wind returns. |
| כל-הנחלים הלכים אל-הים | 7. | All the streams run to the sea, |
| והים איננו מלא | | but the sea is not full; |
| אל-מקום שהנחלים הלכים | | to the place where the streams flow, |
| שם הם שבים ללכת: | | there they flow again. |
| כל-הדברים יגעים | 8. | All things are full of weariness; |
| לא-יוכל איש לדבר | | a man cannot speak of it; |
| לא-תשבע עין לראות | | the eye is not satisfied with seeing, |
| ולא-תמלא אזן משמע: | | nor is the ear filled with hearing. |

1. The Hebrew word הבל literally means “breath” or “vapor.” It is used metaphorically in Qohelet. The different translations reflect different understandings of the metaphor, which include “vanity,” “futility,” “ephemerality,” “incomprehensibility,” “absurdity,” and so on. Literally הבל הבלים הכל הבל is rendered as “the merest of breaths, everything is a breath”; I. Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, 2001), 52.

2. Burkes rightly points out that Qohelet appears to have an argument to make and that he never wanders very far from his prevailing theme—death; S. Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period*, SBLDS 170 (Atlanta, 1997), 44–45.

3. The English translation in this paper is mine unless it is otherwise noted.

The theme of death first develops in the introductory poem of the book (1:4–8).⁴ Biblical scholars have different interpretations of 1:4: “A generation (דור) goes, and a generation (דור) comes, but the earth (הארץ) remains forever.” The traditional approach suggests that this verse highlights the transience of humanity by contrasting the permanence of the earth.⁵ However, denying the notion of human generation, Ogden interprets דור as cyclic movement, and he sees this verse as the contrast between the cyclic movement within nature (the sun, wind and streams) and the permanence of the earth.⁶ According to Ogden, the themes of cyclic movement and permanence set up in 1:4 are further exemplified in 1:5–11.⁷ Similarly to Ogden, Whybray also finds that דור carries a cyclical connotation and that it refers to natural phenomena.⁸ Whybray thinks that 1:4–11 is about the wonders of nature instead of the futility of their repeated activities.⁹ Loretz and Lohfink also regard this passage as a “nature” poem.¹⁰

Fox points out two weaknesses of Ogden’s interpretation (this can also apply to Loretz, Lohfink and Whybray’s): 1) etymologically, דור never means “cycle” in Hebrew; and 2) it is not “cycles” that “go and come,” but rather things “going and coming” within cycles.¹¹ He considers דור as meaning generation. However, Fox denies any contrast between the transience of generations and the permanence of the earth because he thinks that “the permanence of the physical earth has no relevance to the individual.”¹² He interprets הארץ as humanity as a whole, instead of the physical earth. In his opinion 1:4 means that the flow of generations does not change the face of humanity.¹³ However, the description of the planet’s component cycles in its subsequent context suggests that הארץ in its physical sense seems a more reasonable translation.

Crenshaw and Longman are probably right to have the notions of both human and natural cycles in mind.¹⁴ In fact it is difficult to eliminate the note of human transience here.¹⁵ The passage 1:4–8 is not a simple “nature” poem (against Loretz, Lohfink, Ogden, and Whybray). Its nearest context demonstrates that the author’s real

4. Qoh. 1:4–11 is very often seen as a unit, in which 1:4–8 is a poem and 1:9–11 serves as a prose commentary to the preceding poem.

5. G. A. Barton, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, ICC (Edinburgh, 1980), 70; D. A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary 14 (Nashville, 1993), 284–85 and Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 55.

6. G. S. Ogden, “The Interpretation of דור in Ecclesiastes 1:4,” *JSOT* 34 (1986), 91–92; and *Qoheleth* (Sheffield, 1987), 30.

7. Ogden, “Interpretation of דור,” 92.

8. R. N. Whybray, “Ecclesiastes 1:5–7 and the Wonders of Nature,” *JSOT* 41 (1988), 106.

9. Whybray, “Ecclesiastes 1:5–7,” 105.

10. O. Loretz, *Qohelet und der alte Orient: Untersuchungen zu Stil und theologischer Thematik des Buches Qohelet* (Freiburg, 1964), 193–94; and N. Lohfink, *Qoheleth*, Continental Commentary (Minneapolis, 2003), 39–42.

11. M. V. Fox, “Qohelet 1:4,” *JSOT* 40 (1988), 109.

12. Loc. cit.

13. Fox, “Qohelet 1:4,” 109; and *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, 1999), 166.

14. J. L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, OTL (London, 1988), 62–63 and T. I. Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, 1998), 68.

15. R. E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, WBC (Dallas, 1992), 7.

interest is human beings (1:3, 8, 10–11).¹⁶ First, the thesis statement in 1:3 shows that Qohelet is concerned with the advantage of האדם (humankind). Second, 1:8 highlights the mouth, eye, and ear of human beings, bringing out the idea that no one is able to speak of, to see, and to hear anything new or enlightening. Third, 1:10–11 point out that memory makes no difference in the coming and going of generations because no one will be remembered forever. Therefore the immediate context of 1:4–11 shows that the main concern of the author is human life, not nature.

Moving on, we see how the death theme first develops in 1:4–8. First, it is necessary to examine the meaning of הלך and בוא in v. 4. Seow rightly points out that Qohelet is not talking about the continuity of generations. Qohelet often uses הלך to speak of “death” (3:20; 5:14–15 [15–16]; 6:6, 9; 7:2; 9:10; 12:5) and בוא to signify “birth” (5:14–15 [15–16]; 6:4) in the Book of Qohelet. The verb הלך has the sense of dying too elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible: Ps. 39:14 [13]; Job 10:21; 14:20; 2 Sam. 12:23.¹⁷ Seow goes on to state:

The author gives the impression of much activity in speaking of “going” and “coming.” The language suggests that he means to speak of a continuation of the generation, but the point is that the going and coming of the generations amount to nothing.¹⁸

The going and coming of the generations give a deceptive impression of much movement and continuation. But ironically, they only reveal the stark reality of human transitoriness.

The Hebrew בא refers to people coming into existence in 1:4, but the same word refers to the setting of the sun in 1:5. Ironically, the sun “sets / goes down” (בא) as a generation “comes” (בא).¹⁹ The birth of a human being is the same as the end of a day (sunset). As a human generation goes (הולך), the wind blows (הולך, 1:6) and the rivers flow (הלכים, 1:7). The wind goes (הולך) to the south and turns (סובב) to the north, around and around. All the rivers flow (הלכים) continuously to the sea without causing the sea to overflow. As all the rivers flow into the sea and the sea is unfilled (1:7), all things are so wearying that no one is able to speak of anything new (1:8). The eye is not satisfied with seeing; nor the ear filled with hearing because nothing new emerges to satisfy them (1:8). In this poem the repetitions of הלך (six times), בוא (twice), זרח (twice), סבב (three times), שוב (twice) and מלא (twice) underscore the monotonous nature of the activities, which does not bring any advantage or anything new.

The meaning of the poem in 1:4–8 is further clarified by the prose commentary in 1:9–11. There is nothing new under the sun (ואין כל־חדש תחת השמש) because the future (הוא שיהיה) repeats the past (מה־שהיה, v. 9) and what is done (ומה־שנעשה) is what will be done (הוא שיעשה, v. 9). We cannot see anything new coming up because there is no memory (זכרון) of the past and the future (v. 11). Murphy rightly comments:

16. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 8–9; and C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, AB 18C (New York, 1997), 114.

17. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 62.

18. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 106.

19. E. M. Good, “The Unfilled Sea: Style and Meaning in Ecclesiastes 1:2–11,” in John G. Gammie et al., eds., *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (New York, 1978), 65; and Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 114.

“Memory is as flat as the experience described in vv. 3–8, and it does not serve to liberate humans from the monotony of life.”²⁰ For Qohelet, death smashes all hope of being immortal (v. 4) and also all hope of being remembered forever (v. 11).²¹ It is hard to eliminate the note of human transience here because the theme of ephemerality appears with high frequency throughout the book (e.g., 2:16).²² Next we move on to discuss the development of the death theme throughout the book.

B. Shadow of Death and Qohelet's Calls to Joy

The death theme binds the whole book together in a special way. After setting the stage in the introductory poem (1:4–8), Qohelet's ongoing contemplation over death intertwines with his seven exhortations to joy. Each time the reflection on death comes right before the joy statement. The structural pattern is summarized as follows:

- 2:14–16 Death comes to both the wise and the fool; both are forgotten forever.
- 2:18–22 After death, one's wealth will be passed to someone who did not labor, or who may be a fool.
- 2:24 Exhortation to joy
- 3:1–11 Humans are ignorant of the future (e.g., time of birth and death, 3:2).
- 3:12–13 Exhortation to joy
- 3:16 Justice is not seen.
- 3:18–21 Man and animals have the same fate, death.
- 3:22 Exhortation to joy
- 5:15 Man comes naked and goes naked.
- 5:17–19 Exhortation to joy
- 8:10–14 The wicked are honored at death, but the righteous are left unburied.
The wicked live long, but the righteous die young.
- 8:15 Exhortation to joy
- 9:3–6 Death comes to all. The dead know nothing, but the living have hope.
- 9:7–10 Exhortation (with imperatives) to joy
- 11:7–8 Days of darkness (death and end of world) come to all.
- 11:9–10 Exhortation (with imperatives) to joy

1. First Exhortation to Joy

Qohelet boasts of his great wisdom, which exceeds that of all his predecessors in Jerusalem (1:16). Wisdom may well have an advantage over folly as light excels over darkness (2:13). However, it has its limitation because death relativizes the value of wisdom. In face of death, all mortals, whether he is wise or foolish, are equal (2:12–16). The wise is not better than the foolish as they both will die and will be forgotten forever (2:16). Qohelet thus perceives himself: “What (death) happens to

20. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 9.

21. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 117.

22. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 7.

the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?" Therefore, he detests life (2:17) when he reflects on the leveling power of death.

In addition to wisdom, Qohelet also boasts of his עַמֶּל²³ "wealth, earnings and acquisitions" (2:1–11). He realizes that earnings, like wisdom, are also limited by the stark reality of death (2:18–23). Whatever one gained from one's toil will be passed on to others, who have not labored, or who do not deserve it, or who may be foolish. One cannot stem the possibility of passing on one's wealth after death. In face of death, the value of wisdom and earnings becomes relative and limited. Such reflection over the power of death prompts Qohelet to utter his first exhortation to enjoy the goodness in one's earnings gained from one's labor (2:24) even though the possibility of joy is solely determined by God (2:26). Qohelet's first call for joy is as follows:

*Nothing is better (אֵין טוֹב) for a human being than
that he should eat and drink,
and that his soul should enjoy good in his gains.
This also, I saw, was from the hand of God. (2:24)*

2. Second Exhortation to Joy

Further elaborating God's determination of events, Qohelet gives a catalogue of times and seasons (3:1–8). The time of being born and dying heads the list: "A time to be born (עֵת לֵלֶדֶת),²⁴ and a time to die (וְעֵת לָמוּת)" (3:2). Placing the life-death issue at the head of the catalogue of times in fact alludes less to the life cycle than to the theme of fatalism that pervades the whole chapter. A person does not choose to be born or to die. "So overwhelming in Qohelet's meditation is the presence of death as the divinely predetermined point in all existence."²⁵ Fox rightly points out that the "being born-dying" pair has often been used as a key to the meaning of the entire passage.²⁶ According to Fox, "[b]irth and death epitomize events and deeds that are beyond human control, for God is their sole agent."²⁷ He further states that "[t]he timing of most of the actions in the Catalogue is to some degree in man's control."²⁸ However, the situation that calls for action is the action's time,

23. In Qohelet the verb עַמֶּל means not "to toil" but "to gain or earn (by toil)," and the substantive עַמֶּל is not "toil" but "gain, profit, or earning (through toil), or yield, or income"; H. L. Ginsberg, *Studies in Koheleth* (New York, 1950), 1, 4; R. Gordis, *Koheleth—The Man and His World*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1968), 418–20; J. L. Kugel, "Qohelet and Money," *CBQ* 51 (1989), 32. NJPS usually translates עַמֶּל with words meaning earnings and wealth. According to Fox, Qohelet is concerned with the efficacy of work rather than the value of material wealth. However, in this case (2:18–19), he agrees that עַמֶּל refers to "profit"; M. V. Fox, *Ecclesiastes קהלת*, JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia, 2004), xviii; and *Rereading of Ecclesiastes*, 186–87.

24. לֵלֶדֶת means "to give birth," and not "to be born." Most translators very often gloss it so as to better fit the second half of the pair—"a time to die."

25. P. Machinist, "Fate, *miqreh*, and Reason: Some Reflections on Qohelet and Biblical Thought," in Ziony Zevit et al., eds., *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield* (Winona Lake, 1995), 172.

26. Fox, *Rereading of Ecclesiastes*, 201.

27. Loc. cit.

28. Loc. cit.

not the person's. Furthermore, God frustrates people by placing the aspiration and "striving"²⁹ to know what God has in store in their hearts, even though they can never know it (3:10–11). They can only respond to the events, but cannot control them. The timing of events is determined by God (3:14–15). Due to the presence of death and the frustration of not knowing God's activity, Qohelet urges the reader to enjoy life (3:12–13):

I know that *nothing is better* (אֵין טוֹב) for them *than* to rejoice,
and to do good in their lives,
and also that every person should eat and drink
and enjoy the good of all his wealth—it is the gift of God.

3. Third Exhortation to Joy

Qohelet sees that injustice pervades the world. There is no justice where justice should be found (3:16). In response to this situation, he affirms that God will judge the wicked and the righteous (3:17). However, he painfully realizes that death eliminates distinctions and "cuts across all moral categories of humans."³⁰ It befalls the just and unjust equally. Similarly, death "cuts across the human-animal division."³¹ The same fate befalls both humans and beasts. In fact humans have no advantage over the animals. They all go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to the dust (3:18–20). Humans are totally agnostic about life after death because God does not let them know (3:21). Human ignorance of what follows death motivates Qohelet to advise his reader to seize the moment and enjoy one's life (3:22):

So I perceived that *nothing is better than* (אֵין טוֹב)
that a person should rejoice in his own works, for that is his lot.
For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?

4. Fourth Exhortation to Joy

Even though one has achieved wealth, the achievement is cancelled by the fact that one cannot carry away anything in his hand. As a person came naked from his mother's womb, so shall that person return naked (5:14–15 [15–16]). Again death relativizes the value of pursuing wealth. Responding to the finality of death, Qohelet presses on to advise his reader to enjoy life (5:17–19 [18–20]):

Here is what I have seen: *It is good* (טוֹב)
and fitting for one to eat and drink,
and to enjoy the good of all his gain
in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him;
For it is his lot.

29. It is worth noting that עֹלָם is spelled without the preposition ל. Therefore העֹלָם should not be translated as "eternity" here. Following Ginsberg and Fox, I read עֹלָם as עֹלָם "striving." Evidence is found in Qoh. 8:17, where the verb עֹלָם is used to designate a human's hopeless endeavor to understand the work of God; Fox, *Rereading of Ecclesiastes*, 210–11; and *Ecclesiastes קהלת*, 23.

30. Machinist, "Fate, *miqreh*, and Reason," 166.

31. Loc. cit.

As for every person to whom God has given riches and wealth,
and given him power to eat of it,
to receive his lot and rejoice in his gain—this is the gift of God.
For he will not much remember the days of his life,
because God keeps him busy with the joy of his heart.

5. *Fifth Exhortation to Joy*

It is surely true for Qohelet that death is the great leveller. Everyone, whether powerful or powerless, must die (8:7–8). Seow rightly states:

Ironically, the levelling effect of death is perceived to be itself an injustice, for those who are wicked and those who are righteous end up exactly the same way. Death provides the sameness of fate for all, but the sameness of fate is not quite fair, because there are inequities in life. The sameness of fate at the end only heightens the injustice.³²

However, Qohelet uncovers another intolerable injustice even at death. He notes that the wicked are honored with a funeral procession from a holy place, while the righteous are not given a proper burial (8:10; cf. 7:15). Seow further comments:

For Qohelet, the injustice is even more intolerable because, in stark contrast to the wicked, those who have acted righteous are not properly interred. Denial of a proper burial is a curse that the worst sinners were supposed to suffer (Deut. 28:25–26; 1 Kgs. 14:10–11; Jer. 16:4). Yet, not only are the righteous left unburied, they are forgotten in the city, a particularly humiliating fate, since their abandonment is public and apparently deliberate.³³

Reflection on how people are treated unfairly when they die (8:10) triggers Qohelet's thought on an even more severe injustice: 1) God's judgment is delayed (8:11); and 2) the wicked may live long, while the righteous may die young (8:12a, 14).³⁴ Ironically it is not the fullness of evil leading to death, but the inequity of death as a common fate leading to evil. The delay of judgment encourages the wicked to do even more evil (8:11). In the face of such inconsistent retribution—undeserved brevity or length of life—Qohelet exhorts his reader to pursue the joy of life on this side of grave (8:15):

So I commended enjoyment, because a person has *nothing better* (אין טוב) under the sun *than* to eat, drink, and be merry;
for this will remain with him in his wealth all the days of his life
which God gives him under the sun.

6. *Sixth Exhortation to Joy*

Earlier in the book, both the wise and the foolish are said to share the same fate (2:14–15). Furthermore, both human beings and animals have one fate (3:19). Now Qohelet continues to point out that common fate comes to everyone: the righteous

32. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 294.

33. Loc. cit.

34. Given the context of 8:10b–13, Fox rightly points out that 8:14 is best understood as a complaint about undeserved brevity or length of life, instead of about all kinds of undeserved contingencies; see Fox, *Rereading of Ecclesiastes*, 287.

die with the wicked; the clean with the unclean; those who sacrifice with those who do not. The righteous and the wise and all their works (both of love and hate)³⁵ are under God's control (9:1–2). The common fate is seen as the evil in all that is done under the sun. Death relativizes the value of doing good deeds. "The evil is in injustice of this sameness."³⁶

The vision of death compels Qohelet to take note of this life: whoever is among the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion (9:4). Life is better than death because the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing (9:5). This ironically reveals a paradoxical connection between life and death—despite the fact that death is terrible, it in fact defines life.³⁷ The urgency of Qohelet's advice to enjoy life is fully expressed by his first use of imperatives (go/לך, eat/אכל, drink/שתה, enjoy/ראה, do/עשה), which indicate a strong sense of significance. In addition to the joy in eating, drinking and labor, Qohelet recommends enjoying life with one's wife (9:7–9). He also advises doing work according to one's ability because there is no work, thought, knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which they are going (9:10). It is the brevity of life that needs to be enjoyed. The advice in 9:7–10 stresses how to live life in the context of the reality of death:

Go (לך), eat (אכל) your bread with joy,
and drink (שתה) your wine with a merry heart;
for God has already accepted your works.
Let your garments always be white,
and let your head lack no oil.
Enjoy (ראה) life with the wife whom you love all your fleeting days of life
which He has given you under the sun, all your fleeting days;
for that is your portion in life,
and in the gain which you earn under the sun.
Whatever your hand finds to do, do (עשה) it with your might;
for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom
in the grave where you are going.

7. Final Exhortation to Joy

Qohelet proceeds to affirm: light is sweet and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun (11:7). Both light and the sun are often used as metaphors for life (Job 3:16; 33:28, 30; Pss. 36:10 [9]; 56:14 [13]). Despite the bitterness of life, the fact remains that people desire to live. Qohelet sets a contrast here: light is life (11:7), while darkness is death (11:8). He urges people to live life to the full. If one lives many years, one should rejoice in them all.

In fact Qohelet implicitly brings out the contrast between the days of death that are many and the days of life that are brief. Provan rightly claims that 11:8 should

35. Many commentators (Crenshaw, Fox, and Longman) take the view that "love and hate" refer to divine favor or disfavor. But Seow convincingly points out that 9:6—"even their love, even their hate, even their zeal"—clearly shows that the love and hate in 9:1 are human and not divine. Qoh. 9:6 further defines the works of the righteous and the wicked; see Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 303.

36. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 304.

37. E. Scheffler, "Qohelet's Positive Advice," *OTE* 6 (1993), 256–57.

be understood in this way: “Let him bear in mind the days of darkness, for they will be many; [by contrast] all the days to come [in life] will be brief.”³⁸ Life and death are therefore closely connected together. In view of the brevity of life, the young man is commanded to enjoy life while young (11:9–10) and to remember the Creator in the days of his youth (12:1). Similarly to the sixth exhortation to joy, Qohelet uses imperatives to utter his final but most powerful call:

*Rejoice (שמח), O young man, in your youth,
and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth;
walk in the ways of your heart,
and in the sight of your eyes;
but know that for all these God will bring you into judgment.
Therefore remove sorrow from your heart,
and put away evil your flesh, for childhood and youth are fleeting. (Qoh. 11:9–10)*

*Remember (זכר) now your Creator in the days of your youth,
before the difficult days come,
and the years draw near when you say,
“I have no pleasure in them.” (Qoh. 12:1)*

To sum up, there is a special relationship between Qohelet’s reflection on death and his seven calls for joy. It is not accidental that each time right before Qohelet advises people to enjoy life, there comes a reflection on the issue of death first. Obviously the brevity of life is the key factor prompting him to utter such exhortations. Furthermore, death relativizes the value of wisdom, wealth, and good deeds, and dashes people’s false faith in them. Since the death theme was first developed in the introductory poem (1:4–8), it continues to penetrate throughout the rest of the book, directly reformulating Qohelet’s view of life.

C. Qohelet’s View of Death

There is tension arising from Qohelet’s conflicting views on death. On the one hand, Qohelet expresses his hatred of life, seeing death as something to be desired. But on the other hand, he affirms that the living have hope. After all the pondering, he urges people to live life to the full. His views on death throughout the book are as follows:

- 2:17 Qohelet hates life
- 4:2–3 Death and non-existence are better than life
- 6:3–6 A stillborn child is better than life with longevity, wealth, and progeny
- 7:1–4 It is better visiting the house of mourning than going to a wedding banquet
- 7:26–29 Being ensnared by a woman is more bitter than death
- 9:3–6 The living have hope

1. Death is Better than Life

Despite Qohelet’s affirmation of wisdom’s value over folly (2:13–14a), the great levelling power of death makes it pointless to be wise (2:14b–16). Such a reflection brings Qohelet to a shocking conclusion: “Therefore *I hated life* because the work

38. Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 207.

that was done under the sun was distressing to me, for all is futile and a striving after wind" (2:17).

Similarly as in 3:16–17, Qohelet sees wickedness and oppression pervasive under the sun (3:16; 4:1). The most heart-breaking thing is that in such oppression (the root עשק appears three times in 4:1), the oppressed "have no comforter" (twice in 4:1). This view prompts Qohelet to extol those who have already died more than those who are still living (4:2). The point is that the living still have to witness the injustice of the world, while the dead are no longer subject to cruelty. In Qohelet's mind death as relief from oppression becomes a powerful metaphor.³⁹ However, he perceives that better than both the dead and the living is the one who has never existed, because that person has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun (4:3).

Similarly as in 4:1–3, Qohelet seems to take a positive view of death in the circumstances of 6:1–6. If someone who has a hundred children (6:3) and lives two thousand years (6:6), but he is unable to enjoy the goodness of life and does not have a proper burial (6:3),⁴⁰ it is better to be a miscarried child, who goes from the darkness of the womb to the darkness of Sheol (6:3). Though the child has not seen the sun, nor has he known anything, this stillborn child has more rest than that man (6:5). Given Qohelet's recurring melancholy, he may well praise death for releasing one from the awareness of injustice and the toils to which birth exposes one (4:3; 6:3). However, his purpose is not the praise of death, but an exhortation to life. He just uses death to define the quality of life to which one needs to aspire. Crenshaw convincingly explains Qohelet's preference of death over life as follows:

Let it be noted that Qohelet's despair arose in large measure from a powerful conviction that life ought to be embraced wholeheartedly. Hatred of life and a concomitant flirtation with death signal Qohelet's fundamental opposition to injustice. Life devoid of equity, both human and divine, is hollow mockery. In such situations, death's lure can hardly be resisted.⁴¹

The reality of death surfaces again as the central issue in 7:1–6. Previously death has been used to relativize the value of wisdom, here it is considered as an impetus to embrace wisdom rather than folly.⁴² In this section Qohelet advocates a somber awareness of mortality. Just as a good name is preferred, so is the day of death more important than the day of birth (7:1). Qohelet's point is not the meaninglessness of human life. Basically Qohelet values life, but since death is the inescapable destiny of every person, the living should take it to heart (לֵב; 7:2). The wise live in awareness of the reality of death (7:4a), whereas the foolish play around (7:4b, 5b). It is better to visit the house of mourning than to be caught up in the gaiety of a wedding banquet.

39. J. L. Crenshaw, "The Shadow of Death in Qohelet," in Gammie et al., eds., *Israelite Wisdom*, 207–8.

40. The text "he . . . does not receive a proper burial" in 6:3 is ambiguous because most rich people are given elaborate funerals. Gordis emends the text from נָלַח to נָלַח and thus reads: "Even if he has an elaborate funeral"; see Gordis, *Koheleth*, 258–59. Crenshaw thinks that the burial refers not to the rich, but to the stillborn child. Thus he reads: "Even if it (the stillborn child) does not have a proper burial, I say that the stillborn is better off than he"; see Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 120. However, these two interpretations seem to be forced.

41. Crenshaw, "Shadow of Death in Qohelet," 207.

42. Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 139.

“It is part of the wisdom one needs to live the good life that we should embrace forthrightly the fact of death. Recognizing the brevity and preciousness of life, we should live life seriously.”⁴³ Ps. 90:12 also reminds us: “So teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” In this way, “death and life are intertwined, and mutually defining.”⁴⁴

There is another utterance revealing Qohelet’s view of death: “And I find something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and traps, whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God will escape from her, but the sinner will be captured by her” (7:26). A man is vulnerable in the face of a seductive woman’s deadly snares, nets and fetters. Death is better when life is ensnared by sin of lust and adultery. Again death defines the quality of life one ought to pursue—a life of pleasing God.

Crenshaw rightly states that Qohelet’s positive view of death and non-existence applies only to certain specific circumstances. In 7:16–17 Qohelet warns against being overly righteous or overly wicked, and he backs up his advice with two rhetorical questions: “Why should you destroy yourself?” (7:16) and “Why should you die before your time?” (7:17). This clearly demonstrates that Qohelet does not advise people to embrace death with open arms.⁴⁵

The poem in 12:1–7 also shows that Qohelet does not recommend the days of death’s darkness to anyone. In view of the encroachment of death, he suggests the correct attitude of living one’s life. He exhorts his reader to enjoy life by remembering that days of darkness will far outnumber the longest life (11:8). The concluding poem in 12:1–7 (the climax of the death theme) will be studied in the final section of this paper.

2. *Life is Better than Death*

Qohelet’s positive view of life can be seen in 9:4–6. He affirms that “A living dog is better than a dead lion” (9:4). Whoever is among the living has hope, “for the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and have no more reward, since their memory is forgotten” (9:5). Furthermore, the dead’s love, hatred, and passion have already perished, and they no longer have a portion in anything that is accomplished on earth (9:6). Does the hope of the living have any advantage over the dead? Crenshaw comments: “At least those who have entered the land of darkness have sloughed off every vestige of passion and do not participate any longer in human madness.”⁴⁶ Though in specific situations, death and non-existence have superiority over life, Qohelet shuns the easy way of resolving his misery by simply choosing death. In view of the finality of death, he enjoins his reader to live life to the full (9:7–9a, 10b; 11:9–10) and remember the Creator (12:1).

It is noteworthy that chapter 9 is the turning point of the book, where Qohelet positively affirms the advantage of life over death (9:4–6). In Qohelet’s sixth

43. Loc. cit.

44. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 101.

45. Crenshaw, “Shadow of Death in Qohelet,” 208.

46. Crenshaw, “Shadow of Death in Qohelet,” 210.

(9:7–10) and seventh (final) calls to joy (11:9–10; 12:1), the “nothing better than” (אין טוב) and “it is good” (טוב) statements are no longer used. Instead, imperatives are employed to heighten the sense of urgency and significance in order to summon people to live life to its fullest. In sum, the death theme and joy statements develop in the same crescendo. Life and death are mutually defining.

D. Concluding Poem

The introductory poem in 1:4–8 echoes the concluding poem in 12:1–7. This *inclusio* structure clearly demonstrates the significance of the death theme in the Book of Qohelet. There is a wide consensus that the end of life is at issue in 12:1–7 despite the various approaches of interpretation among scholars.⁴⁷ Fox rightly points out that eschatological overtones, which point to the end of the world, may lie in the background of 12:2.⁴⁸ This section deals with how the death theme reaches its climax in the final poem, and how this final poem echoes the opening poem in 1:4–8.

The three ער אשר “before” statements (12:1, 2, 6) bind the poem tightly together with the themes of death and the end of the world. In the first ער אשר “before” clause (12:1), Qohelet urges readers to “remember” the Creator before death (“the day of unpleasantness,” “the years” in 12:1 = “the days of darkness” in 11:8) comes to life. Ogden rightly states: “Creation and death, the two extremities of existence, are bound together in Qohelet’s final comments.”⁴⁹ Death intensifies the sense of urgency in his exhortation. The injunction to remember the Creator recalls the failure of remembering the past in 1:11.

The second ער אשר “before” clause sets another time frame for “remembering”—i.e., “before” the dimming of all the lights, and the return of the clouds after rain (12:2). The “light” and “sun” in 11:7 refer to life. At the surface level, the extinction of sun, light, moon, and stars brings to mind the arrival of death. However, the eschatological overtones may lie in the background. The dimming of all the lights points not only to the end of life, but also the end of the world (everything). One finds the

47. There are generally three approaches to understand the meaning of 12:1–7—allegorical, eschatological, and literal but with symbolical intent. For detailed discussion on the history of interpretation of this passage, see M. V. Fox, “Aging and Death in Qohelet 12,” *JSOT* 42 (1988), 55–77 (reproduced in Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, 281–98; and Fox, *Rereading of Ecclesiastes*, 333–49). It has been correctly pointed out that the allegorical interpretation cannot be applied consistently throughout. For example, it cannot be applied at 12:5, but it seems appropriate at 12:3. However, there is hardly any consensus on the meaning of the allegory. Scholars like Fox, Provan, and Seow (see n. 48) note the eschatological tone of the poem. There is no agreement on what the poem portrays among the scholars who take the literal approach with symbolical intent. For example, Sawyer views the portrayal as a house in disrepair, while Ginsburg sees it as an experience of a thunderstorm; see J. F. Sawyer, “The Ruined House in Ecclesiastes 12: A Reconstruction of the Original Parable,” *JBL* 94 (1976), 519–31; and C. D. Ginsburg, *Cheleth, Commonly Called the Book of Ecclesiastes* (London, 1861; reprint: New York, 1970), 457–69.

48. Fox, “Aging and Death in Qohelet 12,” 64–67; idem, *Qohelet and His Contradictions* (Sheffield, 1989), 290–94; and idem, *Rereading of Ecclesiastes*, 339–43. See also Lohfink, *Qohelet*, 139–40; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 116; Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 214; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 376; and idem, “Qohelet’s Eschatological Poem,” *JBL* 118 (1999), 209–34.

49. Ogden, *Qoheleth*, 199.

sun rising and setting as a continuous endless routine in the opening poem (1:5). The sun shines and shines again, without bringing anything new into the world—“there is nothing new under the sun.” But now the sun is darkened. Ironically, “[i]t is as if creation is being reversed by the same Creator whom the reader is called to remember” (cf. Gen 1:3–4, 15–17).⁵⁰

The temporal clause . . . **ביום ש** “in the day when” (12:3) links up with the preceding **עד אשר** clauses, bearing a similar reference—the “before it is too late” theme. When metaphorical darkness falls across the land, different people have different reactions to it (12:3). The male servants (“keepers of the house”/ **שמרי הבית**) tremble while the male nobility (“strong men”/ **אנשי החיל**) stoop in response to the darkening. The female servants (“grinders”/ **הטחנות**) stop their grinding because their number has diminished. The women of leisure/ higher social status (“those looking through the windows”/ **הראות בארבות**) grow dim in response to the darkness.

In the face of the terrors outside, a general withdrawal inside the house and a cessation of normal activities are depicted in 12:4. The double doors of the market place are closed (v. 4a), leading to the cessation of economic and social activities. The desperate situation is reinforced by the silencing of the mill—the cessation of the domestic activities (baking daily bread). The sound of the mill is a sign of human life. One used to rise to the sound of the birds in the morning, but now all the singers (“daughters of song”/ **בנות השיר**) are brought low (v. 4b).⁵¹ This may refer either to the effect of the darkness on the birds, or to the female servants, who are shut indoors and are now no longer audible in the morning. All sounds vanish when all daily activities cease. Significantly, the circularity of things in 1:4–8 is broken here.

All the people are afraid of what is happening above them in the heavens, and of great terrors along the path (12:5a). The almond tree (**השקד**) spurns those who look for fruit from it. The locust tree (**החגב**) droops. The caper plant (**האביונה**) fails to stimulate appetite for food and sex. The three dying trees bring to mind the death of nature (12:5b). The end times of the individual human being are depicted in terms of the end of the world—darkness, terror, cessation from normal activities, and the death of nature. It reaches its climax at 12:5c, which explains for all the gloom in the preceding verses—“because a human is going to his grave (‘eternal home’) and the mourners make a procession in the streets.” In 1:4 a generation comes and goes (**הולך**) while the earth remains as ever (**לעולם**). Here a human being goes (**הולך**) to the house of eternity (**בית עולמו**). The root **סבב** is used to describe the wind turning around and around in 1:5. Now the mourners are portrayed as going around (**סבב**) the streets in a funeral procession (12:5c). Here **סבב** no longer refers to cyclical activities, but to the final mourning ritual for **האדם** (12:5c). The human being is going (**הולך**) to a place without returning.⁵²

50. Seow, “Qohelet’s Eschatological Poem,” 214; and idem, *Ecclesiastes*, 376.

51. Seow interprets 12:4 differently. He claims that the lowered sound of the mill is replaced by the loud sound of the birds. According to Seow, the birds move into the depopulated land. The “daughters of song,” who are birds, swoop down to their new haunt in response to the depopulation of the human habitat; see Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 379.

52. Seow, “Qohelet’s Eschatological Poem,” 226; and idem, *Ecclesiastes*, 381.

The third **עַד אֲשֶׁר** “before” clause reminds the reader to remember the Creator before death finally comes. Here both the lampstand (cf. Zech. 4:2–3; Prov. 13:9) and water (fountain and well; cf. Ps. 36:9; Prov 10:11; 13:14) are the metaphors for life. The “silver tendril” (**חֶבֶל הַכֶּסֶף**) and “golden bowl” (**גִּלְתָּהּ הַזָּהָב**) of the lampstand are broken. The symbol for the tree of life is destroyed (12:6a). The pot (**כֵּד**) is shattered at the fountain, and the wheel (**הַגִּלְגָּל**) crushed at the well (12:6b). The water can neither be carried in a broken jar, nor drawn up from the well by the wheel.⁵³ The broken lampstand, broken vessels, and unavailable water point to the finality of death.

Then the poet concludes: “Dust returns to the place as it was, and the spirit (**הָרוּחַ**) returns to God who gave it” (12:7). The original creation is reversed (Gen. 2:7; 3:19). Human beings return to the dust whence they came, and the life-breath (**הָרוּחַ**) returns to its original possessor, God. The life-breath (**הָרוּחַ**) in 12:7 forms a pun with the wind (**הָרוּחַ**) in 1:6. The wind is turning around and around, returning on its circuits in the opening poem. But ironically the life-breath in the final poem goes in one direction—returning to God.⁵⁴

The theme of death first develops in the opening poem (1:4–8). It then penetrates the whole book (intertwining with Qohelet’s calls for joy) and finally culminates in the concluding poem (12:1–7). In the final poem the sense of urgency is reinforced by its double message—1) the end of human life and 2) the end of the world (everything) that will inevitably arrive. Qohelet reminds people to live life to the full before the end of one’s life and the last day of the world come. The final occurrence of “vanity of vanities” at 12:8 echoes the first appearance of “vanity of vanities” at 1:2. The recurrence of the death theme helps define the term “vanity” (**הַבֵּל**) too. The transitoriness and ephemerality of human beings are especially underscored, giving weight to Provan’s translation of “Vanity of vanities. All is vanity” (**הַבֵּל הַבָּלִים הַכֹּל**) in the following way—“Fleeting, Fleeting. Everything is fleeting!”⁵⁵

53. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 120.

54. Seow, “Qohelet’s Eschatological Poem,” 233; and idem, *Ecclesiastes*, 382.

55. Provan, *Ecclesiastes*, 218–19. This translation is in line with Provan’s literal rendering of 1:2—“The merest of breaths. Everything is a breath”—which brings out the ephemerality and elusive nature of reality; *ibid.*, 52.