Qohelet 12:1-7 – Intimations of Mortality

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Man's end,
a mound of gleaming bones:
a flowering and a fading.[1]

For all the importance that death has in the Bible, its occurrence is generally reported in a perfunctory manner, with little more expression than וימת - "and he died", נאסף אל עמו - "he was gathered to his kin",[2] or שכב עם אבותיו - "he lay with his ancestors."[3] On relatively few occasions we find a few verses devoted to the final stages of dying, and these usually come to indicate something exemplary, be it laudable or cautionary. Two such accounts relate the end of Abimelech in Judg. 9:53-55 and Saul's death at the battle of Gilboa in 1 Sam. 31:3-4, each assisted by his armor bearer. The first describes the ignominious end of a shameful king, while the second redounds to Saul's credit, emphasizing his honor and nobility.[4] Rarer still are descriptions of the death of women, though these may be similarly exemplary, as the deeply moving report of Rachel's death in childbirth in Gen. 35:16-19, or, *au contraire*, the bloody and violent murder of Jezebel by Jehu in 2 Kgs. 9:30-37. A rather more peaceful example is found in Jacob's demise in Gen. 49:29-33: his deathbed speech to his sons is followed by the brief account of his dying – "He drew his feet into the bed and, breathing his last, he was gathered to his people" – all in all the model of a "good death." All these narrative instances

[1] The poems at the heading of each section are from the tradition of Japanese death poems, in which Zen monks and haiku poets, in anticipation of their death, would compose short poems just prior to their passing; Y. Hoffman, *Japanese Death Poems* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1986), 186.

[2] Gen. 49:29; Num. 27:13; 31:2; et al.

[3] 1 Kgs. 1:21; 11:43; 2 Kgs. 14:22; et al.

[4] On Saul's death and suicide in the Bible, see Y. Shemesh, "Suicide in the Bible in the Light of the Attitude toward Suicide in the General Culture and Jewish Tradition", *Jewish Studies Internet Journal* 2 (2003; http://www.biu.ac.il/JS/JSIJ/dei.htm) [Hebrew].

present death in the realistic and graphic manner characteristic of biblical prose.

Biblical poetry offers a somewhat different picture. The death of a significant figure may be reported in bolder terms, often to indicate a reversal of fate. Emblematic of this is the description of the demise of Sisera in Judg. 5:27, as he totters and falls after Yael's deadly blow with the tent peg:

At her feet he sank, / lay outstretched,
at her feet he sank, lay still;
where he sank, / there he lay – destroyed.

In Adele Berlin's words: "Sisera's expiration is described by a series of repeating verbs: he crumpled, fell, lay, crumpled, fell, crumpled, fell dead…the writhing of the dying Sisera."[5]

A more dramatic decline is described in the mock-dirge for the king of Babylon in Isa. 14:4-20, where his demise is depicted as a fall from heaven to a shameful death:[6]

Instead you were brought down to Sheol
To the bottom of the pit.
They who behold you stare; / They peer at you closely:
Is this the man / Who shook the earth,
Who made realms tremble? (Isa. 14:15-16)

The startled reaction to the king's undoing places the reader in the role of observer, looking at the death from without as the prophet describes his fate.

The book of Psalms takes the opposite tack, offering many descriptions of sickness and travail in which the psalmist himself expresses anxiety about his own imminent death. The speaker in Psalm 16-22:15 paints a vivid picture of being at death's door as a result of his enemies' pursuit:

[5] A. Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 14.
[6] Cf. W. L. Holladay, "Text, Structure, and Irony in the Poem on the Fall of the Tyrant, Isaiah 14," *CBQ* 61 (1999), 633-45.

My life ebbs away: / All my bones are disjointed;

My heart is like wax, / Melting within me;

My vigor dries up like a shard; / My tongue cleaves to my palate;

You commit me to the dust of death.

Yet despite the desperate tone, death is something from which the psalmist can be rescued, and his appeal to God stands at the center of the lament. Not infrequently the threat of death is a result of divine punishment – "All our days pass away in your wrath / We spend our years like a sigh" (Ps. 90:9) – from which the psalmist begs reprieve: "Turn, O Lord! / How long? / Show mercy to your servants (90:13). Similarly the sufferer in Psalm 39 pleads with God for respite from his pain in the final stages of his life:

Look away from me, that I may have some relief,

before I pass away and am gone (Ps. 39:14).[7]

The power and immediacy of these texts is a direct result of the subjective perspective of the sufferer who fears his impending demise.[8] Death is seen as an untimely intrusion, whether because of the pursuit of one's enemies or as a result of God's harsh response. In all cases the psalmist's appeal is heightened by his conviction that his death can be averted by divine intervention.[9]

The contrast between these descriptions and Qohelet's final musings on death in Qoh. 12:1-7 is striking.[10] Qohelet's poem offers a more sustained picture of the end of a person's life, presented almost entirely in symbolic terms. The poem omits the histrionic descriptions of suffering and oppression that characterize much biblical poetry about death. Here death is

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[7] Cf. M. Weiss, *Ideas and Beliefs in the Book of Psalms* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), 91 [Hebrew].

[8] Only occasionally do we find the statement in Psalms that mortality is simply the fate of all humankind regardless of sin, as in Ps. 49:10-12; cf. also Job 7:9-10; 14:10-12.

[9] See the balanced discussion of ideas about death in the Bible in S. Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth and in Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period* (Atlanta: SBL, 1999), 9-33.

[10] While 12:8 is a fitting epitaph for the poem in 12:1-7, it is actually the closing statement of the entire book, and is not a part of the poem itself. Cf. R. Gordis, *Koheleth—The Man and his World* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 349; C .L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 382.

not seen as a punishment, pain and persecution are not part of the picture, nor is Sheol mentioned as a final destination. Death is the natural end to life, albeit without any sense of satisfaction about the life lived or comforting thoughts about the continuation of one's life through one's children.[11] Death has a public aspect, but there is nothing in the poem about honor or shame, about a noble or an ignominious end. Death is not something to be railed against or denied; death is simply the end of life, the common fate of all people.[12]

But if that is so, what is it about Qohelet's final poem that evokes so powerfully both the sense of impending doom and the absolute finality of death? Is it the fact that, as Harold Fisch describes so well, at the very end of his book Qohelet the ironist finally gives us a declaration which is not ironic at all?[13] Or does the power of the poem lie in the skillful mixing of different levels of meaning which Michael Fox details—a somewhat loose interplay of the literal, the cosmic, and the figurative?[14] Or perhaps it is the ambiguity contained in the poem, the lack of certainty about the meaning of certain images which compel the reader to face death as both mysterious and yet inescapably real. All of these contribute to the poem's effectiveness, but I would like to demonstrate how the power of the poem lies precisely in its comprehensibility, in its presentation of a series of perspectives on death which come together to create a singular composition. And, *contra* Fox, I intend to show that there is a consistent use of the figurative throughout the poem, and that the progression of images in the poem moves from a general anxiety about death to a powerful expression of its finality.

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[11] On this notion as a precursor to the idea of an afterlife in the Bible, see J. D. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 74-81.

[12] The understanding of death in Qohelet's book as a whole is more complex. See the discussion in Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth*, 59-80; B. A. Davis, "Ecclesiastes 12:1-8--Death as an Impetus for Life," *Bib. Sacra* 148 (1991), 298-302; Alison Lo, "Death in Qohelet," *JANES* 31 (2009), 85-98.

[13] H. Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 178.

[14] M. V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 285.

The problem which the poet faces is, how does one write about the mystery of death? Does one describe the suffering of a painful death, the gradual loss of control of one's life, the final moments, the reactions of friends and family? The sense of loss? The futility of life? Does the poet imagine his/her own death? The death of another? Or perhaps the poet strives for abstraction by looking at the experience from a distance, assaying the meaning of death for a community or a society (or an entire race). We will see that the poet reflects on the death of "everyman" through a number of perspectival lenses, employing a wide range of figurative representations which allow for subjective identification with death as well a degree of emotional distance.

Limitations of current interpretations

The rich and varied tradition of interpretation of Qohelet's poem has not produced a consensus about how to interpret its imagery.[15] There is wide agreement that the poem moves from a general statement about approaching death (vss. 1-2) to a description of the events of the day of the death – the

[15] The poem has been much discussed in critical literature. The following is a sampling of the many discussions: M. A. Anat, "The Lament on the Death of Humanity in the Scroll of Qohelet," *Beit Mikra* 15 (1970), 375-80 [Hebrew]; T. K. Beal, "C(ha)osmopolis: Qohelet's Last Words," in T. Linafelt and T. K. Beal (eds.), *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 290-304; J. Bembry, *Yahweh's Coming of Age*, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 46-55; Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth*, 48-59; J. L. Crenshaw, "Youth and Old Age in Qoheleth," *HAR* 11 (1987), 1-13; Davis, "Ecclesiastes 12:1-8", 298-318; D. C. Fredericks, "Life's Storms and Structural Unity in Qoheleth 11:1-12:8," *JSOT* 52 (1991), 95-114; M. V. Fox, "Aging and Death in Qohelet 12," *JSOT* 42 (1988), 55-77; idem, *Contradictions*, 281-309; M. Gilbert, "La Description de la Vieillesse en Qohelet XII 1-7 Est-elle Allégorique?" *VTSup.* 32 (1981), 96-109; Gordis, *Koheleth***,** 338-49; N. Kamano, *Cosmology and Character*, (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), 222-35; H. A .J. Kruger, "Old Age Frailty versus Cosmic Deterioration? A Few Remarks on the Interpretation of Qohelet 11:7-12:8," in A. Schoors (ed.), *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom*, (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 399-411; T. Krüger**,** *Qoheleth* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 191-204; M. Leahy, "The Meaning of Ecclesiastes 12:1-5," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 19 (1952), 297-300; O. Loretz, *Qohelet und der alte Orient*, (Freiburg: Herder, 1964), 189-93; G. S. Ogden, "Qoheleth xi 7-xii 8: Qoheleth's Summons to Enjoyment and Reflection," *VT* 34 (1984), 27-28; T. A. Perry, *God's Twilight Zone: Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible,* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 125-54; J. F. A. Sawyer, "The Ruined House in Ecclesiastes 12: A Reconstruction of the Original Parable," *JBL* 94 (1976), 519-31; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 351-82; idem, "Qohelet's Eschatological Poem," *JBL* 118 (1999), 209-34; C. Taylor, *The Dirge of Coheleth in Ecclesiastes XII* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1874).

suspension of activity and the organization of a funeral in vss. 3-5 – to a figurative description of the broken body in vs. 6 and its interment in vs. 7. But beyond this there is much disagreement, centered around the lack of clarity of some of its images, and the question of the necessity of allegorical interpretation. This latter tradition has a long pedigree, from Rabbinic literature to the present day; indeed some of the images seem to lend themselves well to an allegorical reading. So particularly verse 3, where the trembling of the "guardians of the house" seems an appropriate description of the weakening of the legs or the arms, just as the "grinders which have become few" may point to the teeth, and the diminished vision of "those who look through the windows" indicates the failure of eyesight as death approaches.[16] As appropriate as some of these interpretations may be to certain images, how is one to determine when to *stop* reading allegorically? While it can be said that all interpretation is allegorical in the broadest sense,[17] the type of allegory spoken of here is of the narrower kind, in which the denotation of a word or figure is immediately translatable into another meaning.[18] Allegory of this type necessarily requires internal markers to signal when allegorical reading is intended, and there are no such signposts in Qoh. 12:1-7. Other than the suggested paronomasia of אביונה and תאוה why should the image of the caperberry of v. 5 indicate the loss of sexual desire? Why should the appearance of the almond blossom indicate the flowering of white hair and not a literal blooming? What seems to be a promising strategy of reading in v. 3 becomes awkward, if not impossible, in the continuation of the poem. The gains achieved by an allegorical reading of v. 3 are undercut

[16] For a fuller presentation of allegorical readings, see BT *Shabbat* 151b-52a and *Qohelet Rabbah* 12, as well as the critical discussions in Gordis, *Koheleth,* 338-49; Fox, *Contradictions,* 281-82; 294-98; T. Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 264; Gilbert, "La Vieillesse", 102-4.

[17] See Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose*, 95ff; G. L. Bruns, "Allegory as Radical Interpretation," *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 83-103.

[18] See the discussion of *allegoresis* and the imposing of allegory on texts which were originally nonallegorical in R. Tuve, *Allegorical Imagery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 219-32; M. Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 25-33.

by the less successful attempts to extend it into v. 5. The application of allegory does not work well as a part-time endeavor, especially when our goal is to understand the unity of the poem. The ultimate result of such allegorical readings is the weakening of the poetic force of some of its central images by reducing them to mere equations for parts of the body.[19]

Similar problems arise when we try to read the poem as reflecting a single overriding image that would give shape to the whole. The suggestion that we read vv. 2-6 as indications of a storm—its approach, the reaction of the townspeople, the destructive power of nature, the smashing of vessels—works well for certain verses (12:2-3) but less well for others, where one is pressed to read some of the images almost allegorically in order to fit the conceit of a storm.[20] Initially promising is the approach taken by John Sawyer, who sees the overriding image as that of "the ruined house," a decaying mansion, which is aptly described in detail in v. 3.[21] This certainly is appropriate to the images in 12:3, as I will elaborate below. But in order to make this conceit fit the whole of the poem he is compelled to posit a series of overlays and rewritings of the original text, which become less and less convincing as the argument progresses.[22]

A related problem is the question of the structure of the poem. Is the poem simply a collage of images describing old age and death, with no particular attention to order? If there is no single figure that carries through the whole poem, what holds it together? It seems clear that v. 1 marks the beginning of the decline towards old age and death, and v. 7 describes the burial and decomposition of the body, but what about the verses in between? Contrary to the claims of most interpreters, vv. 2-6 do not describe the

[19] See the incisive remarks on the limits of allegorical interpretation in J. C. Exum, *Song of Songs* (OTL; Louisville: John Knox, 2005), 76-77, and the more specific critique of allegorical readings of Qohelet 12 by Perry, *Twilight Zone*, 27-28.
[20] Leahy, "Ecclesiastes 12:1-5," 297-300; Fredericks, "Life's Storms," 105-12; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 263. A variation on this is Loretz's reading of the poem as moving from a dark wintry day in vv. 2-3 to a rebirth of nature in v. 5 (Loretz, *Qohelet*, 189-93).
[21] Sawyer, "The Ruined House," 519-31.
[22] See the detailed critique in Fox, *Contradictions*, 283-84.

progressive infirmity and decline of the body in a continuous fashion. For example, if the shutting of the doors in v. 4 denotes people closing their shops in order to attend a funeral, then we must assume that the person has already died, and henceforth we should expect only images of death in the rest of the poem. Yet many hold that v. 5 describes an elderly person who has grown afraid of heights, or one who wakes early to "the sound of the bird." Such a reading of vv. 4-5 flies in the face of an orderly progression from old age to death and burial, and leaves the reader confused. Insofar as death is final and absolute, it makes little sense to highlight the problems of senile infirmity after the person has already died. If, on the other hand, the reader is not meant to connect the images in a progressive fashion, what, then, determines their order? What perspective on death and dying is the poet trying to convey? Insofar as Qohelet's argument in the catalogue of seasons in chapter 3 is that the events of life occur in an uncertain order,[23] is the poet's perspective on death similarly random? Perhaps the portrait of death is meant to balance the depiction of the cosmos in chapter 1: an endless process with no clear beginning or end, and with no apparent order other than repetition. To the contrary, I will argue below that poem is well organized and consistent in its portrayal of death and there is an overriding logic to the poet's deployment of various images.[24]

A reading of the poem

In the reading I propose, the poem divides into 6 stanzas, some of which cut across verse divisions. This division is based upon changes in perspective

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[23] So J. Wilch, *Time and Event: An Exegetical Study of the Use of* 'eth *in the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 117-28; see also the remarks of R .L. Schultz, "A Sense of Timing: A Neglected Aspect of Qoheleth's Wisdom," in R. L. Troxel et al. (eds.), *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays Offered to Honor Michael V. Fox on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday,* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 257-67.

[24] Perry (*Twilight Zone*, 129) also suggests reading the poem non-allegorically, but to his mind this is a poem of caution to a younger man, as conditioned by Qoh. 11:7ff. Perry thus gains greater continuity within the entire pericope 11:7-12:8, but his interpretation is less attentive to the immediate confrontation with death, which is central to the reading proposed here.

and language. The individual stanzas are defined not by the usual conventions of length or rhythm, but by the unmistakable shifts in focus and imagery. Both the introductory first stanza (12:1) and the concluding one (12:7) stand out from the rest of the poem in that they lack the same degree of imagistic and figurative language present elsewhere. Stanza I opens with Qohelet's exhortation to recall the creator before the bad times come, before desire and appetite diminish and disappear. In a complementary fashion stanza VI describes the death and interment of the individual in no uncertain terms: the person is buried, the body decays to dust and the spirit or source of life returns to God. Between these bookends we have four stanzas with imagistic descriptions of decline and death, each stanza contemplating the fact of death from a different perspective.

The stanzas alternate between images of the natural world (stanzas II and IV) and figures of humanly constructed artifice in stanzas III and V. Stanza II describes the blotting out of light from heavens, while stanza IV records the reactions of flora and fauna to the human death. In contrasting fashion stanza III presents images of an estate and its inhabitants, and stanza V describes the breaking of a number of man-made objects. There is no single overriding image or figure which unifies these various stanzas; rather, we find a constellation of perspectives on death, as we will elaborate below. For reasons that will become clear, the poem does not describe death in a single definitive way, but rather presents shifting points of view about the end of life which complement and illuminate one another.

One of the organizing principles of the poem is the telescoping of its temporal perspective, moving from a longer to a shorter span of time as the poem continues.[25] As the poem progresses death comes closer and closer, ineluctably and climactically. In v. 1 the poet gives the impression that there is time to spare, that life will draw to a close only gradually. The verse mentions a broad duration of time, invoking first "the days of your youth" to

[25] Fox, *Contradictions*, 299.

be followed by a period of "bad days" which may last for weeks, months, or even years. The parallel pair "days" and "years" is not uncommon in biblical poetry, and usually indicates a protracted span rather than a specific point in time.[26] But as we will see below, each appearance of the phrase עד אשר לא (12:1, 2, 6) indicates a shift in the time frame,[27] and in 12:2 a much shorter span of time is indicated. The return of the clouds after the rain in v. 2 may also imply a number of days, but it is certainly a briefer period than v. 1. In v. 3 time is telescoped still further, mentioning a single day ("In the day when…")—apparently shorter than v. 2, but not necessarily restricted to a 24-hour period. Some have taken it to include all the events described in vv. 3-5,[28] but it seems more likely that the description of the decaying estate in v. 3 indicates a process of decline that stretches over days or even weeks. The reactions to the death described in vv. 4-5 presume a still shorter interval of time—perhaps half a day or even a few hours. This is shortened still further in v. 6, where the actual moment of death is represented by the smashing of vessels. Here we find unequivocal statements about irreparable breakage, indicating the end of life in no uncertain terms. The death of the body is finally mentioned clearly in v. 7, and the Creator who is alluded to in v. 1 returns to receive the departed life spirit. In this way the poem moves from being mindful of the Creator in v. 1 during one's life to the actual reunion with the Creator/guardian of souls in death in v. 7.

Most striking in vv. 2-6 is the fact that the poem never mentions the dying person directly, not by name and not by explicit description. Only in v. 5 do we have a clear mention of death – כי הלך האדם אל בית עולמו - "For a man has gone off to his eternal home."[29] At every other point in the poem the poet avoids any direct reference, preferring instead an array of images, symbols, and figures to describe the inexorable movement towards death. These

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[26] E.g., Deut. 32:7; Ps. 90:9, 15. Job 36:11.

[27] Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 352; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 340; Gilbert, "La Vieillesse", 99; A. Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words* (Leuven: Peeters, 1992), part 1, 145.

[28] Fox, *Contradictions*, 301.

[29] On the relocation of this stich, see below.

range from nature (darkness and the storm) in v. 2, to the decay of an estate or a mansion in v. 3, to a description of the reactions of the street outside the mansion (4*ab*), to an extended depiction of elements of the natural world which observe the coming death and reflect it symbolically (4*c*-5*b*). Even in the climactic reference to the actual death in v. 6 we find only a set of figures of broken human artifice—the smashed bowl, the chain which is snapped, the broken pitcher, the wrecked wheel. Despite the absence of any specific mention of the body here, the effect of these four images is conclusive; for, in contrast to all the other depictions, they cannot be reversed, repaired or restarted. And when the poet does mention the actual body in v. 7, it only serves to reinforce what the reader has sensed all along about the inevitability of death.[30] The poem achieves this effect by changing perspective and by moving from image to image. The poem looks at death from without the person: from outside the house, from the storm clouds, and from the dual perspective of a person observing nature and nature observing a person in vv. 4-5. Despite the fact that a human is not like a silver chain or a golden bowl, these images in v. 6 convey an unmistakable sense of a person's death. There is nothing heroic here—no lamenting as in a dirge, no celebration of a life, only a relentless description of decline and inevitable death. And who is the subject of this? האדם – everyman.

This reading of the poem is enhanced by the relocation of the last part of v. 5 – "For a man has gone off to his eternal home // And the mourners make their turns in the square" – to a more natural location immediately preceding v. 7. In its present location it has no organic connection with what precedes and follows it. The content of the earlier part of v. 5 is entirely taken up with the responses of nature (as we will see below), and the breaking of the vessels in v. 6 is similarly unrelated. By contrast, it is of a piece with the more prosaic style of v. 7. In contrast to the suggestive quality of the images in vv. 2-6, the depiction of death and burial in 5*fg* is more

[30] Note how the double mention of שוב (returning) in v. 7 confirms what was suggested by the returning clouds (שוב) in v. 2.

realistic and concrete. The explicit mention of the death of a human subject sets it apart from all the verses which precede it, and its most appropriate context is together with the mention of death and burial in v. 7. While the expression "eternal home" may have figurative connotations, the connection of the phrase with actual burial sites (as we find in rabbinic literature and elsewhere) overshadows these associations.[31] The second part of the stich describes the funeral itself as the final act. The idea that "the mourners walk about in the street" is not connected with the lines which follow it in v. 6, neither in syntactic style nor in content. V. 6 is solely concerned with the breaking of man-made objects, and no human figures appear in the verse. V. 7 makes clear what a person's "eternal home" really is—the return to dust and the reverting of the spirit of life to God. These two declarative sentences describe the ultimate result of death—the decay of the body and the disappearance of the soul/spirit. Just as v. 1 expresses sentiments about death that are different in style and in tone from the central part of the poem in vv. 2-6, so the final stanza of the poem—12:5*fg,* 7*ab*--rounds out Qohelet's representation of death in a style more akin to his usual prose.

[31] For references in postbiblical literature see BT *Sanhedrin* 19a; Gordis, *Koheleth***,** 347; A. Hurvitz, "בית עולם and בית קברות: Two Funerary Terms in Biblical Literature and their Linguistic Background," *Maarav* 8 (1992), 64-66; M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1990), 95. The phrase occurs in the Deir 'Alla inscription with the sense of death (combination 2: line 6); cf. B. A. Levine, *Numbers 21-36* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 259; J. Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir 'Alla* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980), 58-59. Seow notes a similar phrase in Egyptian literature (*Ecclesiastes*, 364). Crenshaw ("Youth and Old Age," 9 n. 33) cites evidence from Palmyra and Carthage as well. Note also the translation of the phrase מתי עולם in Ps. 143:3, Lam. 3:6, as "eternally dead" (A. Berlin, *Lamentations* [OTL; Louisville: John Knox, 2002], 90).

Qohelet 12:1-7

				I
		וּזְכֹר אֶת-בּוֹרְאֶיךָ בִּימֵי בְּחוּרֹתֶיךָ	1*a*	Remember your Creator in the days of your youth,
		עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָבֹאוּ יְמֵי הָרָעָה	*b*	Before the bad days come,
A		וְהִגִּיעוּ שָׁנִים אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר	*c*	And the years approach about which you will say,
		אֵין-לִי בָהֶם חֵפֶץ	*d*	“I take no pleasure in them.”
				II
		עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא-תֶחְשַׁךְ הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ	2*a*	Before the light of the sun goes dark,
B		וְהָאוֹר וְהַיָּרֵחַ וְהַכּוֹכָבִים	*b*	And the moon and the stars;
		וְשָׁבוּ הֶעָבִים אַחַר הַגָּשֶׁם	*c*	And the clouds return after the rain.
				III
		בַּיּוֹם שֶׁיָּזֻעוּ שֹׁמְרֵי הַבַּיִת	3*a*	In the day when the guards of the house tremble,
	C_1	וְהִתְעַוְּתוּ אַנְשֵׁי הֶחָיִל	*b*	And the strong men have grown crooked,
		וּבָטְלוּ הַטֹּחֲנוֹת כִּי מִעֵטוּ	*c*	And the grinding women are idle, for they are few,
C		וְחָשְׁכוּ הָרֹאוֹת בָּאֲרֻבּוֹת	*d*	And the women watching at the window grow dark;
		וְסֻגְּרוּ דְלָתַיִם בַּשּׁוּק	4*a*	The double-doors close in the marketplace,
	C_2	בִּשְׁפַל קוֹל הַטַּחֲנָה	*b*	Since the sound of the grinding mill has gone low.
				IV
		וְיָקוּם לְקוֹל הַצִּפּוֹר	4*c*	And the sound of the bird rises up,
	C'_1	וְיִשַּׁחוּ כָּל-בְּנוֹת הַשִּׁיר	*d*	And all the songstresses descend.
		גַּם מִגָּבֹהַּ יִירָאוּ	5*a*	Even from on high they see
C’		וְחַתְחַתִּים בַּדֶּרֶךְ	*b*	Terror along the way.
		וְיָנֵאץ הַשָּׁקֵד	*c*	While the almond tree blossoms,
	C'_2	וְיִסְתַּבֵּל הֶחָגָב	*d*	The “grasshopper” becomes laden,
		וְתָפֵר הָאֲבִיּוֹנָה	*e*	And the caperbush buds.
				V
	יֵרָתֵק	עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא-ירחק חֶבֶל הַכֶּסֶף	6*a*	Before the silver cord is snapped,
		וְתָרֻץ גֻּלַּת הַזָּהָב	*b*	And the golden bowl is crushed,
B’		וְתִשָּׁבֶר כַּד עַל-הַמַּבּוּעַ	*c*	And the pitcher is broken at the spring,
		וְנָרֹץ הַגַּלְגַּל אֶל-הַבּוֹר	*d*	And the jug is shattered at the well.
				VI
		כִּי-הֹלֵךְ הָאָדָם אֶל-בֵּית עוֹלָמוֹ	5*f*	For a man has gone off to his eternal home,
		וְסָבְבוּ בַשּׁוּק הַסּוֹפְדִים	5*g*	And the mourners make their turns in the square.
A’		וְיָשֹׁב הֶעָפָר עַל-הָאָרֶץ כְּשֶׁהָיָה	7*a*	And the dust rejoins the earth as it had been before,
		וְהָרוּחַ תָּשׁוּב אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר נְתָנָהּ	*b*	And the spirit returns to God who gave it.

Stanza I – 12:1

The last of human desire:
he grasps at
the air.[32]

The address to the reader in the imperative is not uncommon in Qohelet, as giving instruction is a typical feature of wisdom literature.[33] The command given here – זְכֹר – hearkens back to the first part of this section (11:7-10), most noticeably to the positive command in 11:9—"Rejoice, young man, in your youth".[34] But where the thrust of the earlier section is "rejoice while you are young and able," the focus of 12:1 is more contemplative, as indicated by the object of the command, "Remember your Creator."[35] While one might usually associate "Creator" with the positive aspects of life, as in 11:7-10, here the phrase has a different nuance. Given the role of God as the receiver of the life spirit after death in 12:7, it is not surprising that many readers hear an overtone of the word בורך, "your grave," as in the apparent interpretation of our verse by Akabya ben Mehallalel in the *Ethics of the Fathers*: "Know whence you came (בארך), where you are going (בורך), and before whom you are destined to give an accounting (בוראך)."[36] The

[32] Hoffman, *Death Poems*, 83.
[33] E.g., Qoh 5:1, 5; 7:9-10; 9:7; 11:1, 6. On direct address in wisdom literature cf. R. E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature* (FOTL 13; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 50-52.
[34] It is widely accepted that 11:7-12:8 is composed of two major parts: 11:7-10 focuses primarily on the imperative to enjoy life ("Rejoice, young man, in your youth"), while 12:1-7 addresses old age and death. While 12:8 constitutes a fitting conclusion to this entire section, it should be seen as an inclusio for the entire book. On the connection between 11:7-10 and 12:1-8, see Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 369-82; Fox, *Contradictions*, 277.
[35] For a discussion on the unusual aspects of the word בוראיך, see Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 351; Fox, *Contradictions*, 299-300. While various alternative meanings have been proposed—"your wellbeing," "your vigor," "your well," "your pit"—the sense of "creator" is reinforced by the specific mention of God in 12:7 in relation to both life and death. Cf. further Gilbert, "La Vieillesse", 100.
[36] M. *Abot* 3:1; see Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 352; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 341.

"countdown" from old age to death begins here with the first occurrence of the phrase עד אשר לא, as the time frame narrows from here on in. The arrival of "the time of affliction" or "the bad days" is here weighted much more ominously than the reference to "the days of darkness" in 11:8. Whereas Qohelet mentioned this in 11:8 with the brief gloss "that they (may) be many", in 12:1 the poet extends this black period to years, and highlights the response of the aging, failing person.[37] This anticipated lack of desire is stated as a direct quote – "Until the years arrive about which you will say 'I take no pleasure in them'". The use of such direct quotation occurs only here in Qohelet, and indicates an unusual turn for the poet.[38] By placing the words אין לי חפץ בהם in the second person ("about which *you* will say") the quote personalizes and focalizes this anticipation of decline to an unusual extent. It is one thing to give advice in the second person imperative, but foretelling the despair of another in direct speech is a form of reference of an entirely different order.[39] Elsewhere Qohelet employs the citation of direct speech to represent his own thoughts (as in 2:15 or 3:17), or in the context of a negative quote: "Don't say, "How has it happened…." (7:10). But the predictive, ominous quality of the words here adds to their *gravitas*, and to the certainty that a moment like this will come for every person – including the reader.

[37] In 11:8 the "years" are a time of pleasure, while the "days" describe a period of darkness. In 12:1 the relative balance between days and years is overturned: The "days" of youth are recalled, but are soon to be overshadowed by "days" of adversity and "years" of diminished desire.

[38] I am speaking here of marked quotations; for discussion of unmarked quotations in Qohelet see Gordis, *Koheleth*, 95-108, and the critique of his position in M. Fox, "The Identification of Quotations in Biblical Literature," *ZAW* 92 (1980), 416-31; idem, *Contradictions*, 25-28.

[39] One thinks of the despair reflected in anticipated direct speech in Deut. 28:67: "In the morning you shall say 'If only it were evening!' and in the evening you shall say 'If only it were morning!'"

Stanza II – 12:2

I wait, white clouds
and dark clouds passing–
a cuckoo cries.[40]

V. 2 begins with a repetition of the phrase עד אשר לא to signal a new temporal moment, more immediate than the "days" and "years" of the previous verse. The language of v. 2 relates exclusively to the natural world, the world of the heavens and the storm.[41] But while the images of darkening in 2*a* and 2*b* indicate an immediate loss of light, the final stich of verse 2 points toward a more gradual process.[42] The complete extinguishing of all sources of light—sun, moon, and stars, even the unspecified אור of 12:2*b*[43]--is followed by a less dramatic image, the return of the clouds after the rain. Some have connected the initial blackout with the idea of the Day of the LORD,[44] an association which has encouraged an eschatological reading of the poem.[45] In wisdom literature, however, the imagery of light and darkness refers not to cosmic disaster but rather to the metaphorical fate of the individual.[46] The

[40] Hoffman, *Death Poems*, 156. The cuckoo is a seen as a harbinger of death in Japanese poetry; ibid., 34.
[41] See above, n. 20.
[42] On the basis of Ruth 1:15 it has been suggested that לשוב אחרי means "return with"; see Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 354; but his claim that the return of the clouds after the rain "does not make sense" misses the point of the image. The fact that it is without parallel in the Bible indicates the uniqueness of the situation, the sense of continuing darkness and trouble. Cf. Schoors, *The Preacher*, part 1, 203; Perry, *Twilight Zone*, 137.
[43] It seems best to take השמש והאור as a hendiadys for "the light of the sun." So J. L. Kugel, *The Great Poems of the Bible* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 338; Gordis prefers to read the hendiadys forward, "the light of the moon and the stars" (*Koheleth*, 341). Fox, *Contradictions,* 300, and Seow, *Ecclesiastes,* 353, see the light of day here as independent of heavenly bodies, as in Gen. 1:3-5.
[44] E.g., Isa. 13:9-10; Amos 5:18; Joel 2:1-2.
[45] Seow, "Eschatological Poem," 213; Beal, "C(ha)osmopolis," 296. While Seow's discussion of the language of the poem has much to recommend it (see below), I find little in the rest of the poem to support his eschatological reading. The references to the blotting out of light which he brings are primarily from prophetic literature and as such are of minimal relevance to Qohelet. More significant is the use of this imagery in a personal sense in Job 3 as discussed below.
[46] Light imagery is rare in Proverbs, referring almost exclusively to the idea of the divine light of favor which shines on the righteous (4:18; 13:9; 29:13) in a metaphorical sense. It is much more common in Job, but there, too, it focuses on the fate of the individual as in the discussion below of Job 3; cf. also Job 18:6; 22:28; 30:26; 33:28.

third stich undercuts those cataclysmic associations by appealing to the more conventional aspects of a storm—clouds and rain. The truly unusual element here is not the figure of darkness but the exceptional return of the clouds *after* the rain. Their return signifies a storm that abates only temporarily; the clouds return in order to drop more rain, and thus fulfill the threat of continuous "bad days" from the previous verse. James Kugel has suggested that the clouds return empty after dropping their rain, their reappearance signifying a sense of depletion.[47] But such an image is foreign to the Bible, for clouds are always laden—with rain,[48] with divine presence,[49] with darkness.[50] The order of the images—first darkness, then clouds—is significant here. Elsewhere clouds appear only in the initial stage of the appearance of the divine warrior, to blot out the light or to transport the deity.[51] In 12:2 the return of the clouds after the darkness softens the potential cataclysm of the loss of light, but portends the bad times yet to come.

The effect of the verse is the evocation of an initial disaster—a total blackout with no source of light—followed not by relief, but by continued oppression marked by the returning clouds.[52] This trope recalls Job's opening lament in Job 3. His initial response to his suffering is to call for the day of his birth to be turned into utter darkness, where the language of cosmic cataclysm is applied to his individual fate.[53] But as Job continues his lament, he realizes that what has befallen him is only the *beginning* of his

[47] Kugel, *Great Poems*, 322.
[48] 1 Kgs. 18:44; Isa. 18:4.
[49] Exod. 19:9; Job 22:14.
[50] 2 Sam. 22:12.
[51] E.g., Judg. 5:4; 2 Sam. 22:12 = Ps. 18:12; Isa. 19:1; Ps. 77:18. In all the instances cited by Seow the clouds are part of an initial theophany/storm; in no case do they return after the rain. Qohelet is clearly aiming at a different image.
[52] One thinks of the popular expression "the lights went out"—less to evoke a complete blackout than as a sudden break with one's everyday reality. As it was phrased powerfully by Kugel after receiving a terminal diagnosis (which fortunately proved to be incorrect), "Suddenly the music stopped…" http://www.jta.org/news/article/2011/02/07/2742888/approaching-god-from-the-still-small-self
[53] Cf. M. Fishbane, "Jer. 4 and Job 3: A Recovered Use of the Creation Pattern", *VT* 21 (1971), 151-67; L. Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt*, (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1991), 91-108.

travail—"I am neither tranquil, nor quiet, and I have no rest; turmoil comes."[54] For Qohelet as well, what initially seems to be the ultimate disaster proves to be only the beginning of decline. The portentous return of the clouds is less immediately calamitous than the blotting out of light, but it is far more ominous.[55]

Stanza III – 12:3-4ab

> Stumble,
> fall,
> slide down the snow slope.[56]

This decline is taken up in the following stanza, vv. 3-4*ab*, but not in the narrow allegorical fashion that has often been suggested for these images. Instead of referring to the body directly, the poet uses the figure of an estate in decline as a trope for the approach of death. To be sure, the failure of the estate can easily be taken to represent the debilitation of the body, but the figure is most coherent and effective when the focus is on the decay of the thing as a whole. The many attempts to decode a point-for-point correspondence between the images and parts of the body have not led to a consensus among commentators.[57] On the contrary, this lack of agreement has only served to diffuse the force of a figure whose power lies in its systemic depiction of deterioration and incapacitation. The deformation, inactivity, and neglect of the various parties who inhabit or visit the estate reflect its decline *as an integrated whole*.

V. 3 begins a new temporal moment, opening with the term בַּיּוֹם שֶׁ-. While the term may indicate simultaneity, that is, that the things described in

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[54] Job 3:26; E. M. Good, *In Turns of Tempest*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 57; R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 83.

[55] The suggestion that this echoes the cloud of divine manifestation as found in a number of theophany texts is not convincing. In texts such as 2 Samuel 22 and Exodus 19 the ענן or the עב is but part of a fuller display of divine presence. While the blotting out of light may recall the imagery of the Day of the LORD, there are no further indications of divine presence in Qohelet's poem. God is not an active presence in the poem, appearing only in the mind of the addressee in 12:1 or as the (passive) receiver of the life force in 12:7.

[56] Hoffman, *Death Poems*, 170.

[57] For an overview of these attempts, see Gordis, *Koheleth*, 338-49; Fox, *Contradictions*, 294-98, as well as the critiques by Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 377, and Gilbert, "La Vieillesse", 102-4.

the four stichs of v. 3 all occur on the same day,[58] a gradual unfolding may better fit the images. Thus Kugel translates "In the days when…," implying a longer process of decline.[59] The stanza divides into two strophes, 12:3*abcd*, and 12:4*ab*. The first strophe describes the cessation of activity of four distinct groups of people identified with the estate, two male and two female. The first two, the שמרי הבית and the אנשי החיל, seem to indicate men of lower and higher status, respectively. The guardians of the house are likely hired custodians or stewards,[60] while the second group consists of either strong men or wealthy men (or both) who live in the estate (or frequent it) and represent its interests.[61] In each case the decline is described by a verb which severely qualifies the upright status of the noun. The verb זוע has a primary sense of movement attached to it (Est. 5:9) but can also indicate an emotional reaction, as in its Aramaic cognate in Dan. 5:19; 6:27. In its repeated occurrence as a noun in Jer. 15:4; 24:9; 29:18 (זעוה) it refers to something visible which evokes fright in all who see it. The trembling described here implies a physical reaction as well as an emotional aspect, indicating that these custodians of the estate have been seized with fear and disabled by some unknown force. The second group, the strong men, are similarly afflicted, but the verb which describes them connotes a bent-over posture, indicating both weakening and decay. These strong, well-to-do men have been disabled in a way that complements the trembling of the stewards. Together they embody extreme privation, a paralyzing fear which has brought about a reversal of their normal, healthy state. The estate can no longer be protected and managed because of the decrepitude of these two groups of men. Whether the men of stature are inhabitants of the house or

[58] Seow, "Eschatological Poem," 213; Fox, *Contradictions*, 301.
[59] Kugel, *Great Poems*, 305.
[60] Fox, *Contradictions*, 301, notes correctly that they are not watchmen, as against Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 354.
[61] See Gen. 47:6; Exod. 18:21; 2 Kgs. 2:16; Ps. 76:6; Ruth 2:1; Schoors, *The Preacher*, part 2, 292. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 265, translates the term as "landowners"; Perry refers to them as "the moral guarantors of the city" (*Twilight Zone*, 138).

people who visit the estate on business, their crippled physique also indicates the depleted and dysfunctional condition of the entire complex.

In a similar fashion the second half of the verse describes the cessation of the activities of two groups of women. The first, the "grinders," also seem to be lower-class employees not unlike the watchmen, and the verb which describes their ceasing to work indicates diminution of their number and their productivity. We are not told why they have become few, but the two verbs together – מעטו[62] and בטלו – heighten the sense of stopping short, of labor unfinished and abandoned.[63] The second group of women, those who watch through the windows, is usually taken to be upper-class women, not unlike the figure who is elsewhere described as נשקפת בעד החלון - "looking through the window."[64] In the cases of Michal (2 Samuel 6), Sisera's mother (Judges 5) and Jezebel (2 Kings 9) the woman's perspective is presented as she watches from the window with a degree of anticipation. In Qoh. 12:3 their seeing has been cut short, and the verb applied to them (חשכו) recalls the darkening skies of the previous verse. Now, however, it is the women's eyes that have grown dark, as the poet moves us from the world of nature to the inhabited space of the estate.[65] The association with the trope of the woman at the window suggests that all expectation on the part of the women has also disappeared.[66] They have stopped looking because there is nothing more to be seen, for activity at the estate has ceased. The inactivity of both groups of women indicates the end of productive labor at

[62] The term carries with it sense of curse in Lev. 26:22, and is also reflected in the fear of becoming diminished and (ultimately disappearing) in texts like Jer. 29:6; Ps. 107:38-39.

[63] The explanation that "they have gone to join the mourning" (Fox, *Contradictions*, 303) mixes the figurative with the literal, and weakens the power of the image. I agree with Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 377, that we do not need to know why they are fewer, only that, taken together with the other images in the verse, the termination of production and normal activity is unceasing and unmitigated.

[64] On this trope see N. Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 23-41; A. Ashman, *The Story of Eve* (Israel: Yediot Ahronot, 2008), 146-59 [Hebrew]; S. Avramsky, "The Woman Who Looked out the Window," *Beit Mikra* 25 (1980), 114-24 [Hebrew]; D. Seeman, "The Watcher at the Window: The Cultural Poetics of a Biblical Motif," *Prooftexts* 21 (2004), 1-50.

[65] The verb is associated with the eyes and seeing in Lam. 5:17 and Ps. 69:24.

[66] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 378

the estate (cessation at the mill) as well as the disappearance of any hope for the amelioration of their situation.

The combination of the four groups presents a multiple merism—all men, all women, upper and lower classes, workers and people of leisure, employees and even people who come to the estate on business.[67] The verbs associated with their actions (or their ceasing) display the type of intensification that we often find in biblical parallelism.[68] Whereas יָזֻעוּ indicates a trembling, being shocked and startled, the second verb הִתְעַוְּתוּ indicates an actual physical change that has overcome the men of strength as they have become bent or twisted.[69] We move from trembling anxiety to actual physical deformity. The verbs referring to the women show a similar intensification. The first, בטלו, is a hapax in the Bible, but its meaning is clear from later Hebrew.[70] It is coupled with a second verb, מעטו, which also indicates a slowing down, either because less grain is being ground, or because the women themselves have departed.[71] In either case the verb implies that although work has all but ceased, there still may be some grinders left. But the final verb in v. 3, חשכו, indicates that the activity of the women at the windows has ceased altogether, whether because they have simply stopped looking or they have turned blind. In any case, there is nothing more to see, and all expectation has come to an end. A sense of paralysis may also be inferred from this verb, for darkening in the Bible not infrequently carries with it the added sense of immobility. During the darkness plague in Egypt we are told that "no one could get up from where one was" (Exod. 9:23). The darkness which is threatened in Ps. 69:24 indicates a cessation of all activity, if not of life itself (see also Job 3).

[67] For a discussion of complex merismus, see W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 321-24.
[68] Cf. Alter, *Biblical Poetry*, 11-26; J. L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 7-12.
[69] Note the Aramaic cognate term עוית, "convulsion"; cf. BT *Ḥullin* 60b; *Giṭṭin* 70a.
[70] The verb occurs in Biblical Aramaic (Ezra 4:21, 23, 24; 5:5, as well as in Mishnaic Hebrew (M. *Avot* 1:5; 2:4; 5:16).
[71] The verb indicates fewer people in Jer. 29:6; 30:19; the *hiphʿil* sense of the verb implies diminishment on a more radical scale; cf. Lev. 26:22; Ezek. 29:15.

Captives who are imprisoned and "sit in darkness" (Isa. 42:7) are likewise immobilized. Thus the verbs describing all four groups of people indicate a deathly stillness, a halting of all activity. Indeed, there is no movement at all in v. 3, for each sentence portrays a stationary posture or an inability to act.[72]

The use of the figure of the estate is part of a poetic strategy in which impending death is described figuratively by the deterioration of its occupants.[73] The failure of the house from without and within is reflected in the cessation of all activity, in the various infirmities which befall the different figures, and in the diminishing numbers indicated by the verb מעטו. Characteristic of this description of decline (and of the poem as a whole) is its external perspective. We are not asked to identify with any of the four groups, only to observe them. With the poet we stand outside the mansion and observe the cessation of activity, the twisted movements of those formerly powerful people who guard the house and populate it. At the same time, the disabilities and deformations of the human subjects are powerfully affective.

The connection between stanzas II and III is strengthened by the repetition of the verb חשך: whereas in stanza II the heavens have become dark, in stanza III it is the louring of the eyes of the women watching at the windows. The movement, then, is from the natural world darkening to the dimming of the human world, of all activity slowing down and finally coming to an end. By moving from the heavens to the estate, the poet has brought us closer to the actual death, even though everything remains within the realm of the figurative. Prior to this verse we glimpsed death only through the anxiety associated with the images of imminent demise (darkness, the return

[72] Fox, *Contradictions*, 303, points out a striking parallel with Ps. 38:7, where we find the verbs עוה, שחח (see below on 12:5), and קדר, a synonym of חשך. The connections with the psalm point to additional motifs in Qohelet's poem, as the psalmist describes himself as near death, weakened in body and dim of sight, as well as abandoned by his friends. Qohelet may well have used the conventions of the lament psalm as one of the bases of his poem.

[73] Sawyer, "The Ruined House," 524-26, argues that the estate image functions as the model for the entire poem. While this image fits v. 3 very nicely, the variety of images in the rest of the poem gives little support to the idea that a single image lies at the original core of the poem.

of the clouds after the rain), but in stanza III the cessation of human enterprise and productivity serve to ground this anxiety in a far more immediate human reality, as it becomes clear that death is drawing close.[74]

The stanza continues into a second strophe in v. 4*a* by extending this external view from the private to the public. Not only are the affairs of the house winding down, but life outside the estate is affected as well. The double doors in 4*a* can be understood in two complementary ways: they may be the gates of the estate itself, which open onto the street, or the doors of actual stores in the marketplace.[75] Since the word שוק has the sense of a public place, it can be understood as either a street or a marketplace.[76] When read as the doors leading out of the estate, their closing signifies that the shutting down of activity within the house, which we saw in 12:3, has now spread to the world outside and has impacted upon the street as well.[77] What takes place within the estate is not simply a private matter but has clear implications for the world outside. The closing of the doors indicates that the estate is no longer open to the outside world: there will be no more business conducted, there will be no more visitors, and the estate will no longer play a role in the life of the community. So the dead person is lost to his community in all his aspects—his physical presence, his posture, his productivity, even his social self.

On the other hand, if these are the doors of a stall or a shop within the market itself, their closing impacts upon the street or the town in a somewhat different way. Once the estate ceases to function, the market, too, shuts down, for the cessation of productivity in the estate causes the market

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[74] Kamano, *Cosmology*, 231.

[75] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 357, sees the dual form דלתיים as indicative of the gates to the marketplace. But other cases of city gates which he cites use the plural form – שערים (e.g. Prov. 1:21; 2 Sam. 18:24), דלתות (e.g. Judg. 3:23; 2 Chron. 28:24). The dual form can refer to a city gate (Deut. 3:5; 1 Sam. 23:7) but always with the added term בריח (e.g., 1 Sam. 23:7; Jer. 49:31; 2 Chron. 8:5; 14:6). Without the additional term it can refer to other structures as well, such as the temple gates in Mal. 1:10.

[76] Schoors, *The Preacher*, part 2, 370-71; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 357; Prov. 7:8; Song 3:2. Cf. Akkadian *sūqu* (*CAD* S, 401) as well as other cognates cited in *HALOT,* s.v. שׁוק.

[77] Cf. Gordis, *Koheleth*, 343.

itself to suspend its activity. While the doors represent the portal through which the estate connects to the street, the relationship between life in the estate and life outside it coalesces around the image of the mill in 3*c* and 4*b*. It represents both life and productivity (or the end thereof) within the estate and the corresponding decline in the marketplace.[78] But notice the change here: only the *sound* of the mill has diminished in 4*b*, in what will likely prove to be only a temporary lull. The dumbing down of the mill also represents a communal response to the death, whether in a subdued reaction or in preparation for a funeral.[79] But in contrast to the finality of the images in the first strophe, the things described here are only temporary—the funeral will end, the market stalls will reopen, and the mill will once again become productive. In this way stanza III admits to a tension between the living and the dead—the death implied here may now involve everyone, but only temporarily. Some die while others continue with their lives, and the finality of death is balanced by the ongoing life of the world. This will be developed further in stanza IV, where the natural world observes the reactions to the death, but at the same time remains oblivious to it and, ultimately, unaffected by it.

The interrelationship of the estate and the street lies not only in the realm of production, but also in their poetic function. Both are externalized spaces, and the correspondence of estate = person and street = community objectifies both as complementary realms. In both spheres what was previously open now closes up; in both there is a diminishing of sound and action. We see the closing of doors and become aware of the waning of the mill-sounds as the community prepares itself to deal with the death. In this way stanza III presents two contrasting pictures of the decline: strophe 1 (12:3*abcd*) describes the actual decay of the house—the decline of the person, if you will—while strophe 2 (12:4*ab*) reports the responses of the

[78] Cf. Jer. 25:10, where the sound of the millstones, together with the sounds of rejoicing and the light of the lamp, are signs of life in the community.
[79] Cf. Anat, "Lament," 379.

town. The effect is like that of a split screen—the person declines toward death in the first strophe and the community shuts down in response to that death in the second strophe. By repeating the root טחן from v. 3, the poet marks the connection between the estate and the town—as חשך was carried over from v. 2 to v. 3, so is טחן carried over from v. 3 to v. 4.[80]

Stanza IV - 12:4cd-5abcde

My companion in the skies
of death,
a cuckoo.[81]

In the second half of v. 4 the poet shifts the perspective once again, presenting a description of events in the natural world which accompany or complement the decline in the human world. Similar to the previous stanza, this also consists of two strophes, each of which depicts the response of nature in a different manner. The first four lines, 4*cd* and 5*ab*, show the perspective of the natural world regarding the events of the previous stanza, namely, the death of the individual and the reactions of the community. A birdsong rises up, while other birds descend to observe the anxiety of the crowd in response to the death. These elements of nature are attentive to the human reaction in a distant fashion—they observe but do not comment. By doing so the poet allows the reader to glimpse the scene from above, with greater detachment than in stanza III, for here the reader observes the birds observing the people. But this limited engagement with the human world also serves as a bridge to the second strophe, 12:5*cde*, which describes other elements of nature—flora—which are entirely indifferent to human terror and suffering. One might expect that the broader perspective of the entire stanza would offer greater comfort, but this is not the case. If, in stanza III,

[80] We should not overlook the sexual connotation of the verb טחן (Isa. 47:2; Lam. 5:13; Job 31:10) and the attendant decline in sexuality with the cessation of grinding. As the lack of חפץ in 12:1 also implied the decline of sexual desire in old age (cf. 2 Sam. 19:37), in this stanza sexual activity has come to a complete halt.
[81] Hoffman, *Death Poems*, 163.

the death was of great significance to the community outside the estate, here the death and funeral are of temporary interest at best. The natural world as a whole takes limited notice of the death, and then continues on its way.

There is little unanimity about the precise meaning of these lines; nearly every phrase requires comment. The first problem that arises in 12:4*c* is the question of the subject of the sentence: what, precisely, "rises up"?[82] It seems best to take the voice of the bird as the subject, and to explain the *lamed* of *ləqōl* either as a phenomenon of Late Biblical Hebrew[83] or as an asseverative *lamed*, as in Qoh. 9:4.[84] The sentence should be translated: "Verily, the sound of the bird rises up" or "And the bird begins to sing."[85] The word קול links the image to the previous stanza, as the emergence of this song or sound serves as counterpoint to the diminished sound of the mill. This is a new element in the poem, one whose primary purpose seems to be contrastive with what has come before. Insofar as there has been no audial element prior to this, the birdsong is a foreign sound which intrudes upon the relative silence of the scene, a disturbing accompaniment to the reactions of the human community.

Parallel to this "rising up" of birdsong is a descent in the following stich, where the identity of the בנות השיר in 12:4*d* is no less uncertain. While some claim that these are professional mourning women,[86] the fact that this stich is parallel to 12:4*c* argues strongly that the expression should be

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[82] The idea that this refers to the supposed sleep difficulties of the aged (Gordis, *Koheleth*, 344; Rashi, Ibn Ezra ad loc.) is highly unlikely, both because of the absence of an appropriate antecedent for the subject of the verb, as well as the very questionable nature of such a diagnosis. See the critique of this position by Fox, *Contradictions*, 303-4; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 358; idem, "Eschatological Poem," 218.

[83] See, e.g., 1 Chron. 28:1; 2 Chron. 7:21; Joüon-Muraoka §125.1.

[84] *GKC* §143e; cf. Seow, "Eschatological Poem," 219 n. 39. On the asseverative *lamed* attached to nouns, cf. J. Huehnergard, "Asseverative **la* and hypothehetical **lu/law* in Semitic," *JAOS* 103 (1983), 591.

[85] Taylor, *Dirge*, 12, translates "rises to voice," understanding the *lamed* as part of an idiom like קום למשפט in Ps. 76:10; 132:8.

[86] Fox relies on Ugaritic *bnt hll* and the Hebrew term הַשָּׁרוֹת as singers of dirges in 2 Chron. 35:25 (*Contradictions*, 304). But Seow ("Eschatological Song," 220) notes correctly that the meaning of Ugaritic *hll* is just as likely to be "shine," and that the joyful sentiments associated with the term שיר make it an unlikely term for professional mourners.

understood as also referring to birds, on the model of בנות יענה.[87] While the identity of the fowl referred to in 12:4*c* is not clear, the context makes such a reading more likely than a human singer.[88] The verb וְיִשַּׁחוּ depicts birds descending to observe what the people mentioned in the previous stanza are doing: their reactions to the death and their preparations for the funeral.[89] There may be an ominous sense to the appearance of the birds, as we find with the birds mentioned in the Deir ʿAlla inscription.[90] The subject of 12:5*ab* continues to refer to these birds, as indicated by the particle גם at the beginning of the phrase.[91] In keeping with a number of ancient witnesses and manuscripts, the vocalization of יראו should be corrected to read *yir'û*, "they see."[92] The sense of 12:5*ab* is "Even from on high they see terror along the way," a description of the birds observing human society thrown into disarray by the death.[93] The strophe as a whole gives increasing importance to the birds—first their voice is heard, then they fly low over the scene, and

[87] Cf. Isa. 13:21; 34:13; 43:20; Jer. 50:39; Mic. 1:8; Job 30:29. A strong connection between this bird, often translated as ostrich, and traditions of mourning can be found in Mic. 1:8. Seow ("Eschatological Song," 220 n. 44) argues that the name יענה is related to the verb ענה, "to sing."

[88] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 359. T. Forti, *Animal Imagery in Wisdom Literature* (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2000), 137-39 [Hebrew], discusses attempts to identify the bird in question.

[89] Forti, "Animal Imagery," 139; the verb *šḥḥ* indicates descent from some height, usually with a moral connotation (Isa. 2:9, 11), but it is also applied to animals (Job 38:40; cf. Ps. 10:10); Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 360, posits that the birds are "ready to attack the corpses," noting that in Job 38:40 it seems to indicate a posture of attack. The picture of birds swooping low fits the funerary scene, but his apocalyptic reading of the image (*Ecclesiastes*, 379) is overdone.

[90] Cf. Hackett, *Deir 'Alla*, 29, 46-48; Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 251; J. Hoftijzer, "What Did the Gods Say?" in J. Hoftijzer, G. van der Kooij (ed.), *The Balaam Text from Deir 'Alla Re-evaluated* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 138; Seow, "Eschatological Poem," 220.

[91] Fox, *Contradictions*, 305; Seow, "Eschatological Poem," 221.

[92] There is strong support for this reading in the ancient versions and in the manuscript traditions. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 360, suggests that the MT punctuation *yīrāʾū* was the result of the influence of *wəḥatḥattîm* in the next line.

[93] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 360, notes the connection of seeing and fearing in Job 6:21. The perspective of the bird looking down on the earth can be seen in the image of the eagle looking from above, spying out food for its brood in Job 39:29, and in the description of the ostrich laughing at creatures on the ground in Job 39:18. (On the identity of רננים see A. Walker-Jones, "The So-called Ostrich in the God Speeches of the Book of Job," *Biblica* 86 (2005), 494-510.) Cf. also the perspective "from the eyes of every winged creature" in Prov. 1:17 and the discussion of the text in T. Forti, *Animal Imagery in the Book of Proverbs* (VTSup. 118; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 27-29; M. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 88-89.

finally they observe and record the human reactions of fear and terror in response to the death.

The second part of the stanza consists of three parallel phrases of two words each, a verb followed by an element of nature. Each phrase is structured in the same way, and all three are somewhat oblique in their relation to what is going on in the poem. Some have taken them as indicating a malfunction of nature in sympathy with the human death—the almond tree is "despised," the grasshopper becomes a "burden," and the caperberry "bursts."[94] Symbolic readings related to the body are also frequently suggested: The almond tree represents the white hair of old age (Rashi); the bent grasshopper is a trope for swollen ankles (Targum); the caperberry signifies the loss of sexual desire (Ibn Ezra).[95] But, apart from the white color of the almond blossom, the symbolism suggested has little to support it. More to the point, what would be the poetic logic of injecting such unclear symbolism at this point in the poem? Having begun the stanza with natural imagery—the flight and song of the birds—it is more logical that the poet would continue in this vein and present us with descriptions of actual phenomena in nature. The first should be understood as the blossoming of the almond tree, the *aleph* in וינאץ likely being an orthographic addition, the verb itself derived from the root נצץ, "to blossom".[96] The "grasshopper" is best taken as another floral object, the locust tree, as described by Seow.[97] The verb ויסתבל is from a root meaning to bear a burden, and is translated variously as "becomes laden"[98] or "droops,"[99] here in the sense of fecundity as in Ps. 144:14. The image is of a plant flourishing, heavy with seed pods, not in sympathy with dying, but in spite of it. The final image of the

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[94] Gordis, *Koheleth*, 345; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 361; Anat, "Lament," 380.

[95] See the treatment of the text in BT *Shabbat* 151b-52a.

[96] On the orthography, see Gordis, *Koheleth*, 345; Schoors, *The Preacher*, part 1, 42; *HALOT* s.v. נצץ; *GKC* §73g. On "blossom," cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 361, following LXX, Peshitta, and Vulgate.

[97] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 362; Fox, *Contradictions*, 306, also supports a floral reading, but prefers emending the text to חצב, "squill".

[98] Fox, *Contradictions*, 280.

[99] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 362.

caperberry should be emended to read ותפרח – "and the caperbush buds,"[100] or ותפרה - "bears fruit".[101]

The three floral images—two trees and one bush—depict nature continuing in its pattern of rebirth, taking no notice of the human world.[102] This lack of connection is reinforced by the syntax of the section, as none of the three verbs take an object, direct or indirect—they just "are." They portray the natural world as "blind" or insensible to anything outside itself. This section has been compared to Job's well-known contrast between human life and the life cycle of a tree in Job 14:7-10.[103]

> For a tree has hope:
> If it is cut down it will renew itself; / its shoots will not cease.
> Even if its roots grow old in the earth,
> And its stump dies in the ground,
> At the scent of water it will bud
> And produce branches like a sapling.
> But mortals languish and die; / Man expires; where is he?

But where Job speaks about an emotion such as "hope" for a tree, Qohelet's trees are not anthropomorphized—they show no relation to the human world. In contrast with the images of the birds in the previous strophe, nature is self-referential, solipsistic. It does not offer human hope for rebirth, but simply exists on a different plane. So, too, the blossoming of the almond: whereas the flowering of the natural world in the spring in the Song of Songs (6:11; 7:13) is in perfect harmony with the ripening of love, Qohelet points up the disjunction between human death and the ongoing cycle of natural renewal.

The effect of stanza IV is to remove the reader further from the immediacy of human death, while at the same time offering no solace; if

[100] So LXX; Fox, *Contradictions*, 280; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 346; contra Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 363.
[101] Following Aquila; cf. H. L. Ginsberg, *Koheleth* (Tel Aviv: M. Newman, 1977), 132 [Hebrew]; Forti, "Animal Imagery," 134.
[102] Sawyer, "The Ruined House," 529; Fox, *Contradictions*, 305; Loretz, *Qohelet*, 19.
[103] Fox, *Contradictions*, 305.

anything, it heightens the sense of loss. The bird's-eye view of human despair described in the first strophe is one with which the reader can identify and may even embrace as a strategy for dealing with the immediacy of death. One must look at the larger picture, one must see death as part of a broader perspective on the world in which both life and death have their place. But the complete disconnect between nature and human death in the second strophe places the reader in a difficult position. Either one must numb oneself to the reality of death, and, like Qohelet's trees, simply go on about one's life. Or one must reject this insensate quality of nature as incommensurate with a human perspective and admit that the contemplation of death sets one apart from the world of nature. This conflicted response recalls the complex of reactions to Qohelet's initial meditation on the ways of nature in chapter 1.[104] There, too, the reader is called upon to recognize nature's lack of attention to the human condition and to face the frustration inherent in such a position.[105] But here the sharp contrast between death and life makes this frustration more difficult to ignore. Readers know full well that their death, too, will be met with the same responses from nature: limited interest, at best, seen from a great height, but mostly complete disregard. If nature as depicted in Qohelet 1 is unmindful of human life, in 12:1-7 that inattentiveness is extended even to the death of a person.

Stanza V – 12:6

My whole life long I've sharpened my sword
And now, face to face with death
I unsheathe it, and lo–
The blade is broken–
Alas![106]

[104] Forti, "Animal Imagery," 134; Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth*, 48-52.
[105] C .D. Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth* (New York: Ktav, 1970), 260-61; Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth*, 51.
[106] Hoffman, *Death Poems*, 94.

V. 6 marks a new and more immediate stage in Qohelet's description of the end of life. Its distinctiveness is indicated first by the recurrence of the phrase עד אשר לא, which once again signals a shift in the poem's temporal perspective on death. We saw that in v. 1 it was broad and indefinite, encompassing both "bad days" and years which were accompanied by the loss of desire. Its incidence in v. 2 ushered in a more immediate sense of distress, heralded by the failure of light and the return of the clouds. The final appearance of the phrase in v. 6 is even more immediate, for all the actions described are marked by acute brevity: a chain is snapped, a pitcher smashed in a matter of minutes or seconds. The temporal aspect of the poem has been telescoped from years to days to moments in order to focus on the moment of death itself.[107]

Stanza V presents the reader with a series of images describing objects being shattered and broken. C. L. Seow has read the verse as a poetic description of an actual funerary rite in which objects were shattered as the conclusion of the funeral to symbolize the irreparable nature of the death.[108] While there may be some degree of historical or anthropological truth to this, we should be careful not to reduce this set of images to a mere approximation of an actual practice, thereby diminishing the poetic power of the verse. Some have tried to unify the four images into the breaking of one or two objects, a lamp attached to a silver tendril, and a pitcher on a pulley at a well.[109] Here, too, the reduction of parallel elements to a prose equivalent ignores the unique interaction between the parallel couplets presented here.[110] A proper understanding of the verse requires attention to all four images, to their careful construction and placement, and to their relation to

[107] Cf. Gilbert, "La Vieillesse," 99.
[108] Seow, *Ecclesiastes,* 366, 381; idem, "Eschatological Poem," 231.
[109] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 364-65, 381, develops the image of the lamp, while R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 167-68, favors a wheel that lifts a pitcher.
[110] Kugel (*Biblical Poetry*, 40-45) emphasizes the important point that parallelism is not simply the division of a single idea into separate phrases for the sake of design, but indicates a highly complex paratactic relationship between two non-equivalent stichs. A full understanding of the poetic line requires attention to both difference and similarity between the stichs. See also Alter, *Biblical Poetry*, 3-26.

one another. Why were precisely these images chosen? What does the close parallelism of the stichs indicate here? Why are the first two described with modifiers indicating value (silver, gold) and the second two with indications of place (the spring, the well)?[111] How is the order of the images significant? How do they contrast with earlier images in the poem, and how do they achieve their climactic effect?

The first image is of a cord or a chain being snapped.[112] The figure calls to mind the breaking of a rope, perhaps not unlike what we see in Judg. 16:12 with Samson, an act indicating both strength and immediacy. Rarely do we find ropes being torn asunder in the Bible, and nowhere else do we find a silver cord. The mention of a precious metal indicates an object of value, yet it is unlikely that it indicates something other than an item of luxury, since a cord coated with silver would not be very useful.[113] Most likely it indicates a precious object like an ornament or a piece of jewelry. It is in this context that we find silver used most frequently in the Bible—paralleled with gold as an expensive gift (Gen. 24:53), as decoration (Est. 1:6) or as an ornament (Prov. 25:11). The rope or chain seems to be something fragile that, once broken, is difficult if not impossible to repair.[114]

We should not overlook that other sense of חבל as a plot of land indicating family holdings. The breaking of the line of connection between a person and one's land, between a person and one's family, may be hinted at as well. The breaking of the cord marks a disruption of continuity, a severing

[111] Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 272.
[112] The Qere ירתק is preferable, but the versions offer some support for emending the text to ינתק, as in the snapping of a cord in Isa. 33:20; cf. Qoh. 4:11 (Fox, *Contradictions*, 307). Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 365, argues that רתק in the *nipḥal* can have a meaning "broken" or "crushed" based on Aramaic evidence.
[113] Seow's claim that this refers a silver tendril or thread used on a lamp (based on Zech. 4:3) is possible though unlikely. Since the term is never used in reference to a lamp in the Bible, the connection he draws between the images in this verse and a lamp is tenuous at best; *Ecclesiastes*, 364-65, 381; "Eschatological Poem", 230. Fox and others suggest a cord used to suspend a pitcher, but silver would seem to be a poor choice for such a purpose; *Contradictions*, 307.
[114] Ginsberg, *Koheleth*, 131.

of ties that bind, even, perhaps, the return of a pledge to its owner.[115] The חבל is used as a lifeline or a means of protection in Jeremiah 38, as Jeremiah is pulled up from the pit. A striking parallel in Hos. 11:4 describes חבלי אדם as parallel to "cords of love," phrases which imply divine guidance. The rope and the cord are what God uses to shepherd Israel while it is young. All these nuances—protection, guidance, continuity—are lost when the cord is snapped, when a life comes to its end.

While the golden bowl is more likely to have been an object put to actual use, our focus here is on its poetic sense. The order of the parallel pair silver//gold is fairly common in biblical parallelism, and the combination of the first and second stichs is one of intensification—not only is the *silver* object *broken*, but the *golden* one is *crushed*.[116] The roundness of the bowl, emphasized by the root of the word גֻּלָּה, is often seen as a trope for fullness or completeness. The image of the bowl conveys a sense of gathering, of containment, of holding and preserving.[117] As a symbol for a lifetime of gathering the various bits of reality that make up one's existence, the bowl is the repository of all that is contained within that life. It is crushed and can no longer hold anything within it.

Taken together, the breaking of the two objects signals the ruin of something beautiful and valuable, yet fragile. As a figure for the ending of a life the two images intertwine in multiple ways. The cord suggests a sense of connection, of being bound together, while the bowl has the connotation of containing and preserving something for continued use. The acts of gathering and binding together represent central preoccupations of human existence that here come to an end. They can also be seen as masculine and feminine symbols—the cord as a phallic-like image, the bowl/container as feminine.

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[115] Cf. Exod. 22:25; Deut. 24:6, 17. Might this anticipate the idea of the return of the spirit of life to God in the next verse, "paying back" of a loan as the spirit is returned to God?

[116] See Alter, *Biblical Poetry*, 62-74, on "structures of intensification." The verb רצץ is used in the context of shattering an object – Isa. 42:4; Ezek 29:7 (*nipḥˁal*); Judg. 9:53 (*hipḥˁil*) – an action more extreme than the breaking of a chain. On the vocalization of the verb, see Seow, "Eschatological Poem," 229.

[117] While elsewhere גלה is used for oil (Zech 4:2, 3), here its use is indeterminate.

Their composition of silver and gold presents a complementary picture of objects of value,[118] and their sundering indicates what is lost in the moment in which a life ends. The verbs applied to both—snapping the cord, crushing or smashing the bowl—emphasize the totality of the loss.

The final two objects are qualified not by an adjective indicating their value, but by mention of a location. Both of them are situated by water, the pitcher by the spring, the jug/wheel by the well.[119] This emphasizes a different aspect from the one we saw in the cord and the bowl, namely the use of the objects, the jug for collecting water at the spring, the jar[120] for drawing water at the well. The difference between the two receptacles is not very clear, but both are likely ceramic containers. The two locations are similar in being sources of water; however, their resonances are very different. The term מבוע indicates a natural spring, something that flows freely. It is a symbol of life-giving in Isa. 35:7 and 49:10, a spring which stands in contrast to the parched land and offers sustenance to the returning exiles. The root נבע indicates gushing forth, whether of water or of human speech,[121] imparting to the noun a sense of abundance, of unceasing supply. By contrast, the term בור, a cistern, indicates still waters which must be plumbed in order to obtain the water contained within. A cistern is a pit dug by humans, often plastered, whose purpose is to hold rain water.[122] As a source of water, it too implies life; but the very same word is also used to

[118] Silver and gold are not intended to express relative value here, i.e., that the bowl is more valuable than the cord. They are a typical parallel pair in biblical poetry, sometimes occurring in the order silver/gold (e.g. Isa. 13:17; Jer. 10:9; Nah. 2:10; Hos. 2:10; Hag. 2:8; Prov. 17:3; 27:21) and sometimes in the reverse order (e.g. Isa. 46:6; 60:17; Song 1:11; 3:10; Prov. 25:11; Job 3:15).

[119] The transition from the previous images to water is enhanced by the term גלה in the previous line, which has additional meaning of spring of water in Josh. 15:19; Judg. 1:15.

[120] Following Fox, *Contradictions*, 307, and Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 367, we should understand גלגל as a receptacle of some roundness rather than as a wheel (see M. Dahood, "Canaanite-Phoenician Influence in Qohelet," *Biblica* 33 [1952], 216-17). The parallelism would make a wheel an unlikely counterpart to the pitcher, and the similarities between this stich and 6*b* make the meaning "jar" more likely.

[121] Cf. *HALOT* s.v. נבע.

[122] Cf. M. Avi-Yonah, "Bor," *Encyclopedia Miqra'it* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1973), 41-43 [Hebrew].

describe the pit as an image of death, a place of no return, as in Isa. 14:19.[123] Those who die or are near death are called יורדי בור.[124] The use of the word here recalls the ambiguity of the term בוראיך at the beginning of the poem. "Remember your Creator" (12:1) means both recalling the moment of creation and anticipating the inevitable end of that creation which will be described in the next verse. The two images resonate with the figure of a broken vessel by the water, but, like the previous pair in the first half of the verse, the latter image intensifies the former. The pitcher that is shattered at the spring signals perhaps only a temporary inability to gather water, but the jar smashed at the cistern leaves the water inaccessible. The jug is broken but the spring flows on, not unlike the images of nature at the end of the previous stanza. But the fracture at the pit transforms a source of water into a locus of death.

Like nearly all the images in the poem, all four objects are marked by a definite article—the golden bowl, the silver cord, the jug at the well.[125] This is unusual in biblical poetry, where the absence of the definite article is noticeable.[126] There is a tendency in poetry to use the article to indicate singularity, as in Amos 5: the lion who bites is to be translated as "a lion." But this idea of singularity in poetry rarely carries over for more than a verse or two. Yet in this poem the definite article occurs no fewer than 25 times in seven verses! While some of these could be considered generic occurrences – האלהים, השמש, הירח, etc. – many others are not. The frequency of the article makes the objects more real in their definiteness—not just any bowl but this one, specific object. No matter that we lack a context for the bowl and the cord; they have become real objects in the poem, representing a real life that is now come to an end. And that end comes suddenly, despite all the

[123] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 367.

[124] E.g. Isa. 38:18; Ezek. 26:20; Ps. 28:1; 30:4; 88:5.

[125] There is no article attached to כד but all commentaries translate "the jug."

[126] Kugel, *Biblical Poetry*, 90; Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 54; *GKC* §126h; N. M. Sarna, "Notes on the Use of the Definite Article in Job," in M. V. Fox et al. (eds.), *Texts, Temples, and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 279-82.

intimations of mortality in the previous stanzas. The vessels are not broken by anyone, for all the verbs are in the passive voice—death "happens" when it happens, in an impersonal way.[127] These four acts of breakage are not gradual but sharp, precise moments which distinguish between wholeness and brokenness, the living from the dead. By the end of v. 6 the absolute finality of death is brought home indelibly by these four images. Like the golden and silver objects, his beauty and value has passed away. Like the vessels for gathering water, so his usefulness, his place in society and his role in the household is broken and lost forever.

Stanza VI – 12:5fg, 7ab

Empty cicada shell:
as we come
we go back naked.[128]

The poem draws to a close by finally making explicit mention of the death which has thus far been referred to only figuratively. The stanza does so in four stichs, which look at the physical aspect of death from different angles: the funeral, the grave itself, and the "divine" perspective—the return of the life force to God.[129] For the first time the subject – האדם – is mentioned, marking the conclusion of the life of an actual person.[130] While the term בית עולם is unique in the Bible, it has the meaning "cemetery" in later Jewish texts.[131] The mention of mourners in 5*g* and the context of tangible death as described in 7*a* and 7*b* also argues for a concrete reading of this term. At the same time the language of this stich is imagistic, and the reference to an "eternal house" calls to mind the "house" that has gone to seed in 12:3. The

[127] I owe this insight to my colleague David Frankel, whose comments on an earlier version of this article have been extremely helpful.
[128] Hoffman, *Death Poems*, 163.
[129] Qohelet clearly sees death as the end of existence, with no possibility of an afterlife. See Fox, *Contradictions*, 308-9.
[130] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 364, translates this as "humanity," but this misses the point that Qohelet's imagery, while universal, speaks of death as the fate of individuals.
[131] On extra-biblical support for understanding the phrase as a place of burial, see Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 364; idem, "Eschatological Poem," 225; Gordis, *Koheleth*, 347.

disrepair of a person's former home in 12:3 stands in contrast to the eternality of this new "house." The irony is reinforced by the fact that, while Qohelet uses the verb הלך elsewhere to refer to death, the person referred to here is certainly not moving on his own power.[132] At the same time this is one of the most active verbs applied to human behavior in the entire poem. The attachment of a possessive suffix to the noun—"*his* eternal home"—is unusual in the poem and recalls the term בוראיך in 12:1, where "your Creator" is similarly inflected. The connection between the two is significant—in the end the only things that "belong" to a person are one's creator and one's grave.[133]

Complementary to the person's going to the grave are the actions of mourners in 5*g*, which are described in terms of actual movement. The stich can be read in two ways. The verb סבב may denote an orderly march, as we see in Josh. 6:3, 7, 14, in the context of the attack on Jericho, and in Ps. 48:13 with regard to a ritual procession.[134] In this case the stich relates the activity of the community accompanying the dead person to the grave, and the emphasis would be on the similarity between הלך and סבב – both verbs of movement tied to the burial. But equally possible is the sense of סבב as changing direction, turning aside to engage in something else (cf. Gen. 42:24; 1 Sam. 15:27). According to this reading the mourners, having finished with the burial, return to their occupations, as emphasized by the appearance of the word שוק. The line would then be sharply contrastive with the previous,

[132] The term הלך calls to mind Qohelet's opening meditation on human existence – דור הלך ודור בא – in which the verb clearly refers to death, as it does in 3:20; 5:14-15; 6:6, 9; 7:2; 9:10. In 1:4 the earth stands forever (לעולם) in contrast to humanity's passing; here the dead person is bound up with that eternity. Cf. Seow, "Eschatological Poem," 233.

[133] Burkes, *Death in Qohelet*, 50.

[134] Anat, "Lament," 379; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 357. Seow, "Eschatological Poem," 226, contrasts the ordered sense of the verb here with the repetitive cyclical sense of going round and round in Qoh. 1:5. M. Gruber, "Ten Dance-Derived Expressions in the Hebrew Bible," *Biblica* 62 (1981), 335, suggests that the verb indicates that the mourners walk around the bier; cf. also Ginsberg, *Koheleth*, 132. Contrary to the opinion of Sawyer ("The Ruined House," 529), there is no reason to assume that the mourners' actions indicate futility—the fact that they may be professional mourners need not detract from the gravity of their actions.

emphasizing the difference between the "eternal home" of the dead person and the locus of ongoing life represented by the marketplace.

The third stich describes the decay of the body in concrete terms, referring to the Bible's initial mention of death in Gen. 3:19. The fourth and final stich, the return of the life-force to God, alludes specifically to the creation of man in Genesis 2:7. The absence of figurative language in 12:7 renders the death clear and final in a way which the poet has avoided until this point. As such it acts as a counterweight to the four images of breaking in stanza V, as well as to the vagueness of earlier images in the poem.[135] The description of burial and decay marks the ending of a life in no uncertain terms, events which follow the actual moment of death.[136] The final line, recalling of the divine source of human life, might be seen as offering the possibility of continuation—the life force may be passed on to new lives in the future, as in Ps. 104:29-30.[137] But it is also of a piece with Qohelet's worldview of the cyclical progression of generations as הבל. While the following verse (12:8) is not actually part of the poem, it serves as a fitting point of closure for both the poem and the entire book.[138] The הבל of life, which was the subject of most of Qohelet's book, now finds its conclusion in a description of death which offers the reader little solace as to life's significance.[139]

[135] Bembry (*Coming of Age*, 54 n. 179) points to a suggestive connection between the smashing of ceramic vessels in the previous verse and the dust in our verse—both the human body and pitcher are seen as emerging from clay.
[136] It is striking that Qohelet makes no mention of She'ol as the final resting-place of the person, perhaps because, as Levenson demonstrates clearly, the Bible holds out the possibility of being lifted up from there and restored to life; Levenson, *Resurrection*, 35-66. Qohelet's "eternal home" does not allow for this possibility.
[137] "Take away their breath, they perish and turn again into dust; send back your breath, they are created, and You renew the face of the earth."
[138] Cf. Fox, *Contradictions*, 309; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 382.
[139] Fox, *Contradictions,* 29-48, presents a very convincing argument for understanding הבל as "absurd."

Structure—diachronic and synchronic

> Death poems
> are mere delusion–
> death is death.[140]

The structure of the poem as a whole follows two trajectories, one linear and the second chiastic. As mentioned above, the linear path of the six stanzas moves through various stages of the end of life, first looking ahead fearfully to old age and decline in stanza I, and concluding with the actual burial and the departure of the life force in stanza VI. The four intermediate stanzas describe the approach of death from a variety of perspectives, alternating views of nature (stanzas II, IV) with aspects of the humanly constructed world (stanzas III, V). The poet uses figurative language in a variety of ways to bring out these perspectives, moving from images of meteorological disturbance, to the decay and disruption of a household, to the reactions of the natural world, and finally to a series of images of objects being irretrievably broken. There is a consistent progression from a more immediate engagement with death in the form of the storm and the estate to a more distant perspective in the reactions of nature and the symbolic breaking of objects in stanza V. The images of storm and darkness in stanza II convey the sudden awareness that death is approaching (the blotting out of light) together with a growing realization that there will be no reprieve (the clouds returning after the rain). The deterioration of the household in stanza III describes the weakening and termination of those external aspects of a life—one's body, one's property, one's supporters—as well as the reactions of the community as it too prepares for the death—doors are shut and work in the market ceases. In stanza IV nature observes these reactions (the birds watching from above), but continues its cyclical path (the almond blossoming, etc.), ultimately untouched by the end of a life. Stanza V presents the death in symbolic terms, the breaking of vessels which make no mention

[140] Hoffman, *Death Poems*, 329.

of a person or any human configuration. Temporarily we have the sense that we are to be spared the actual details and will be allowed to relate to the death in a purely symbolic fashion. Such figurative representation has the effect of shielding the reader from the reality of death, allowing one to see it at a distance.

This distancing aspect is counterbalanced by the telescoping of time in the poem, according to which the moment of death draws nearer, becoming more immediate in stanza V. The symbolic and the temporal trajectories complement one another, the first creating distance from the death, the second bringing it closer and closer. In the final stanza the poet brings us in contact with the actual death through the graphic details of the mourners, the burial and decay of the body, and the departure of the life spirit. In the end the reader is allowed no escape from the harsh realization that this will be her fate as well. By bringing together multiple perspectives on death in the various stanzas—meteorological (II), physical (III), natural (IV), and symbolic (V)—the poet makes it impossible for the reader to escape the contemplation of death.

The second path of the poem follows a chiastic pattern, as can be seen by the ABC//A'B'C' pattern. Sections A and A' are the outside markers of the poem, both of which are framed in language which is primarily non-figurative. Both reflect the most human aspects of the experience—first the growing awareness of old age and the approach of death, and finally the explicit description of burial and decay. Sections B and B' employ the most broadly symbolic groups of images—the storm as a figure for approaching death, and the breaking of vessels as a trope for the actual moment of death. Neither makes explicit mention of a human subject, and, despite their deep symbolic resonances, neither is tied to the body in any explicit way. If the blotting out of light has cosmic implications, then the breaking of vessels verges on the mundane. The sense of growing darkness which continues unabated (the clouds return after the rain) is complemented by the

shattering of vessels which cannot be repaired. Both are ominous harbingers of death, the first gradual, the second more immediate.

More complex is the pair C and C'. These two central stanzas describe the effect of the decease, first in a more localized manner and then on a wider scale. C_1 describes the decay of the household, enumerating four different groups within the household who cease to function, or whose performance is seriously impaired. C_2 describes the effect of this dysfunction on the life of the community. In C_1 the grinders cease to work at the mill, but only in C_2 do we hear of the effect of the cessation. With the closing of the double doors and the growing silence of the mill, work in the marketplace comes to a halt. The corresponding section, C', depicts a twofold response of the natural world to human death. In C'_1 we hear of a particular reaction of nature—the movement of birds in the sky. Their gathering and flight may be ominous as in the Deir ˁAlla inscription,[141] but their primary role in the poem is to act as observers of the human activity. It is their song that is heard more clearly once the mill has gone silent. A flock of birds swoops down to observe the human activity of funereal procession, or the general disarray in reaction to the death. But C'_2 presents a larger picture—the response of nature as a whole. And that response is not one of identification or empathy, but of a continuation of natural cycles—a tree blooms, a bush blossoms according to their own rhythm, oblivious to human death.[142] In this way C and C' contrast human and natural responses in a way which recalls Qohelet's description of natural cycles in Qoh. 1:4—"One generation goes, another comes, but the earth remains the same forever."[143]

In this synchronic understanding of the poem the four perspectives of stanzas II-V are *simultaneous* descriptions of this death, none of which takes precedence over the others. The diachronic reading of the poem traced the

[141] See above, n. 90.

[142] Note also the internal chiasm of sections C and C': C_1 and C_2' reflect private or individual reactions, while C_2 and C'_1 observe larger gatherings responding to the death.

[143] Cf. Seow, "Eschatological Poem," 233; Lo, "Death in Qohelet," 86-88; W. Anderson, "The Poetic Inclusio of Qoheleth in Relation to 1,2 and 12,8," *SJOT* 12 (1998), 202-13; D. Ingram, *Ambiguity in Ecclesiastes*, (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 57.

process of decline from the initial awareness of approaching death, through the decline of the body and its ceasing to function, to the four images of breaking which mark the absolute end of a life. But the synchronic reading does not allow us to pinpoint the moment at which death becomes an actuality, because in the Israelite conception of death there may be no single objective point at which this happens. Our contemporary biological orientation encourages us to identify death with the cessation of breathing or the termination of brain activity. But, as Jon Levenson has pointed out, in the ancient world death might more easily be identified with falling ill, long before the body has ceased to function:

> We are predisposed to think that ancient Israelites conceived of death as involving two stages, one characterized by intense affliction but capable of reversal and another permanent and irreversible.… In fact they saw illness as continuous with death and thought of the reversal of illness as so miraculous as to be in the nature of a resurrection….[144]

Perhaps the natural images in stanza II should be taken as the real onset of death, the time when light is blotted out. Or should death be identified with the decline of the estate in 12:3, particularly when taken as a figure for the failing of the body? Is it at the moment when the body dies? Or is it only at the point of burial that one truly confronts the reality of someone's passing? This realization may come only with the awareness of absence, or even when a symbolic act suddenly conveys the full impact of the death of a person. Qohelet's poem in 12:1-7 allows us to see death not only as a linear decline from illness to biological death to burial, but as an assemblage of perspectives which reflect the multiple ways in which we begin to realize that a death has taken place.

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[144] Levenson, *Resurrection*, 39.