

ELEMENTS OF MODELING DRAWN FROM QOHELETH: APPLIED WISDOM

Rowland Van Es

Modeling in Proverbs and Qoheleth

There is a sense in which it is correct to say that the book of Proverbs presents readers with theoretical wisdom to be applied with guidance from the clues to reading and understanding which are provided by the author-editor in the first nine, introductory, chapters. The book of Qoheleth [Ecclesiastes], in this regard, is much more a book of applied wisdom.

First of all, Qoheleth corrects a misapplication of wisdom by countering the idea that wisdom can be used as a key to the mastery of life. Then Qoheleth sets about presenting the correct framework for applying wisdom. One is to find joy in his portion, accepting such joy as gift from God in the midst of each moment of life.

This is done as one traverses the ordinary course of life, eating and drinking, in the daily pattern of affairs. In this effort, one does not hope for some sudden breakthrough into the deep mystery of life, which will bring in some entirely new element making life meaning-filled in a way never before anticipated. In this effort, one stays with a basic and simple lifestyle but remains open and alert to the joy God offers.

Qoheleth then seeks to apply wisdom's counsel to the specific situation of those young people who are considering taking some part in an incipient revolution. This brings him to consider the possibilities from various aspects. He must raise the proper questions — the causes for the movement, the motivations of the participants, the tensions between their various loyalties, the dangers involved, and the potential results, as well as the correct objectives for such an action. This is all done quite covertly, because of the tyrannical conditions under which they live and in which he provides his counsel.

After this, it only remains for Qoheleth to draw out specific elements of the modeling for ministry which he provides.

Since it has been claimed that Qoheleth is in basic harmony with the outlook and approach of the book of Proverbs, it is well to consider first a comparison of his modeling with that found in the former book.

Modeling as steering for life is a large emphasis in Qoheleth. He contrasts this idea sharply with the distortion he has found in the contemporaries who follow the spirit of Job's

friends and "Solomon," in that they seek to master life, to control their world, and thereby deify themselves.

Modeling the gaining of wisdom as a process is emphasized as an agonizing decision process (gone through in this book itself) especially in contrast to a visionary experience. Human responsibility is strongly emphasized in this way.

Modeling the responsible shaping of one's humanity is expressed in his lifestyle of disciplined reflection and action, which he insists can bring one to find joy in life. Qoheleth assumes that one can accomplish this to the point that he can urge the following of one's heart's desire and eyes' delights as God's trusted creatures.

In modeling the primacy of human relationships, the judgment on the present regime in Qoheleth's time falls right here. This is the key failure of the regime, i.e., the failure to retain this primacy through its structures and policies. On this count alone, Qoheleth finally tilts in favor of some kind of action to initiate change in the government. In reviewing the actual climate cultivated in the current situations he becomes extremely anti-materialist, which the other side of the coin of the primacy of human relations.

Modeling growth in wisdom and a recognition of limits: the latter are disproportionately emphasized. So taken up with the problem of those that want to master life is he that he must emphasize almost exclusively the limits of wisdom. In fact, the mysteries of life and God's part are brought out clearly as a foil to those who seek guaranteed success on the basis of their righteous wisdom. The balance between growth and recognizing created limits has not been properly maintained by the community, according to Qoheleth's analysis of the current situation. For him, the real sign of valid growth is to fully and correctly recognize wisdom's limits.

Modeling in Counsel to Young People Considering Revolution

1) The counselor remembers the interrelationship of life.

J.W. Gasper (1947:20) reminds us that in Israel, especially in the Wisdom Literature, "obligations of justice cannot be divorced... from religious, social and moral behavior, all of which find their fulfillment in the positive will of God." By the same token, it is impossible for the sage to consider the problem of political revolution as an isolated, compartmentalized, purely political question. The web of life is woven too closely to allow for such specialization in problems. One cannot leave social problems to sociologist, psychological problems to psychologist, economic problems to economist, and political problems to politicians as if there were no interconnections among these and all of life.

There are therefore no simplistic answers, no formulae that can be applied to situations for developing answers that conform the correct principles so that they yield proper responses when accurately adapted. There is, however, a proper use of wisdom, and Qoheleth seeks to model that as he struggles in the decisions process, using the applicable values reflects deeply on known standards and present actualities. The considerable ambivalence that can be felt concerning a political revolution should be understood not as a wavering on principles but as a definitive struggle to do what is the wise and therefore righteous thing in this matter for which guidance can never be patently clear.

This atmosphere may be somewhat frustrating to those who are used to dealing with the prophetic style of "Thus saith the Lord". But the style of Wisdom Literature is always, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." One must take his own choice. The counselor helps clarify the issues and brings in the relevant questions. The counselee must supply the will and the response.

2) The counselor models reflective coolness.

The cool man is the sage who keeps his head in emotional crises. He does not evidence a hot spirit. His reflective responsibilities force him to carefully evaluate the situation as it develops and to weigh choices before acting. This style applies to a sage who is counseling revolutionaries as well, as Qoheleth exemplifies. He must not let enthusiasm for a "righteous cause" carry his counselees away from their good judgment and clear insight. A sage will advise his counselees as well not to be swept away with dreams and visions (5:3,7). They are often self-induced, and they are often just projections of what one wants to have confirmed — even if a prophet be induced to mediate them. By the same token, one must take care not to really try to manipulate God in any way. One must counsel coming to him to listen and not to inform him in an attempt to get God to bless what they have already decided to do (4:17, 5:7). This latter course partakes of the same self-serving self-sufficiency as is found in all commercialists, in or out of power.

This reflective coolness keeps one from being rushed into a popular uprising of people who are basically merely malcontents (7:10). There is no end to the complaints and vague desires of malcontents who simply seek the "good old days". These are never sought in wisdom. Those who would accuse sages of simply conserving the status quo must seriously consider this counsel.

3) The counselor urges moderate alternatives to rebellion.

Recognizing that there may be some bona fide grievances, Qoheleth helps his counselees seek some valid alternatives to an all-out revolution (8:5). It is not possible to work within the present system responsibly, and thus work the necessary changes? One must posit that here Qoheleth has the ear of some of the present officials. His wisdom value of constancy shines through as he challenges them to look at their oath sworn before God (8:2).

Certainly court wisdom would remind them of this, too. But within that framework a wise man could “know a time and way” — i.e., he could work within the framework of the king’s command to counteract ill effects of an evil command. There are, contra to court wisdom, no absolutes expressed by wisdom sayings about always obeying a king’s commands, just as the “law of retribution” is not an absolute to be idolized. Perhaps if their use of court wisdom could be revised they could still humanize the present regime, as they carried out orders with proper motivations, values and goals.

4) The counselor helps the young people recognize valid and invalid grounds for revolt.

The fact that Qoheleth airs so many grievances against the current atmosphere of commercialism in the land and connects it with the ruling powers indicates that he recognizes some legitimate grounds for action to promote positive change. The mere airing of grievances, giving articulation to the actual evils, is in itself a call for change. One must not underplay the fact that the intelligentsia giving articulation to their perception of current situations is a very significant factor in public perceptions — although Qoheleth himself distrusts public response to the expressions of the wise (9:15), because they tend to go along with military might rather than wisdom.

The grounds in this case, expressed by Qoheleth, are rampant injustice and oppression — expressed in the crucial passage 3:1- 4:4. This situation is bad enough, but it is made worse by the fact that it is sustained by officials who, as Qoheleth expresses it, protect each other in their corrupted practices to gain personal advantage and wealth (5:7).

In addition, Qoheleth sees the regime as under the control of debauched officials who induce sloth among themselves so that the interest of the people are genuinely endangered (10:16-18). The rampant commercialist-materialist atmosphere of the dog-eat-dog social expressions in the land are exacerbated by the materialist stupor of the debauched, slothful officials who feel money answers everything (10:19). Cannot the counselees appeal to the processes of law? “In the judgment place I saw wickedness, and in the seat of justice, iniquity” (3:16 NAB). In these circumstances, appealing to the process of law is impossible.

The one who counsels that joy is to be found in the basic life of each man as he goes about his toil articulates the fact that under the present conditions, set up by the powers that be and submitted to by the people, life is difficult and depressing. He submits that the most that can be said for it is that it is one step ahead of death (9:4,7,10). As a philosophy this is hardly tenable. But if one sees it as a commentary on misappropriation of power and its effects on people, it is a powerful statement giving articulation to the need for change—by revolution if all else fails. The beautiful exultation in youth has the following phrase: “Remove vexation from your heart and put away pain from your body” (11:10). If conditions

are such that it is inconceivable to do this, then, the counselor implies, they may have to think toward revolution. There is no such thing as innocent poetry.

5) The counselor warns about the structure of monarchy and its effects of personnel.

This point complements the fourth. Kings, in the experience of Qoheleth, tend to play at the role, and they see it in very personalistic terms rather than in democratic terms. The "study" in chapter two seems to be carried out by a king very willing to "play" at his post, and he ends up unhappy because even the efforts he does make may only be inherited by an "unworthy" successor. Qoheleth could well be making a reflection on the attitude of the present rulers. Their well-being and success comprise the scope of their "national" view. This constitutes further grounds for working for change.

But it also gives pause to consider the whole structure, and the possibility that a change in personnel will change anything at all is thrown into question by the illustration of the young king who comes into office with plenty of popular support but leaves office with no remembrance (4:13-16). The revolutionaries will have to seriously consider whether the personnel they are seeking to bring in will in actuality be any better. Will they really be an improvement, or will it simply mean that power (and corruption) will be in different hands benefitting different people? This is an agonizing question for those who see "nothing new under the sun". Again their values and motives and objectives are called up for review. They cannot be mere enthusiasts.

Perhaps the change called for really entails a change in structure and philosophy of government. One where the whims of personnel cannot play such a dominant role. Qoheleth can be understood to imply that the young king also falls out of popular favor for very good reasons (4:16). The revolutionaries face here a very agonizing reality that they must deal with now, at this point. They cannot simply hope things will turn out for the best or that they will straighten themselves out as the revolution takes shape.

6) The counselor formulates hard questions: about the people.

The young people who have come to Qoheleth to consult about their situation have heard him help them articulate the correct understanding. Now, they also hear him formulate difficult questions and challenges about the practical situation which, with all their idealism, they will have to deal with in setting their course.

In dealing with people, the counselees must remember that people do not always have the right outlook. The commercialist- materialist profit-seeking set of life is not limited to the rulers. There is no wild-eyed euphoria about Qoheleth that indicates poverty teaches people the right values or that poor people have automatically the correct approach to life.

The materialists are in ascendancy throughout society because the people would have it that way (6:7-9). Therefore, there are many malcontents who would delight in revolution, but for the wrong reasons (7:10).

Nor do people tend to follow wisdom, necessarily, even when it is taught them (9:15). They more often are swayed by brute force. In addition to this, they are fickle and quick to turn on kings, even those who have come into power through popular support and overthrow of the predecessor (4:16). Their evaluation of leadership personnel is grossly inaccurate, so their judgments cannot be taken at face value. In echoes of retribution logic, their contention might be expressed, "success breeds success".

This idea comes to the fore in the experience recounted by Qoheleth in 8:10-13. Apparently the people admire the man who can get away with his wickedness and make it pay for him without his having to pay for it. Right in the place where he has taken advantage of people he is praised — even by the religious leaders! Money talks, and money answers for everything! The body politic is difficult to deal with.

Qoheleth warns that the fact that people may be ready to join in with his counselees' righteous cause does not make them righteous themselves. They must beware the motives and objectives of those who join in with them (9:17-10:1). This is double reason for not joining "lightly into a base plot (for overthrow)" (8:3). Perhaps they should not join in with a movement in progress, but should set up their own. Always there are plenty of self-righteous people around. But self-righteousness is a trap (7:16). It means that they also will be no longer open to advice nor will they be able to see their own false motives.

In any case, when dealing with the public, the revolutionaries must keep their appeals short and sensible (10:12-15). Qoheleth is not positively impressed with the public's ability to follow good thinking. If wisdom will get through to them it will have to come in short sentences.

7) The counselor forces the counselees to anticipate the difficulties of the revolutionary process.

The process of revolution, so Qoheleth indicates, is extremely vulnerable. There are always internal problems to deal with. The problems regarding the people at large and the "joiners" have already been mentioned in connection with the preceding part (6). Wisdom can help stave off problems. It can anticipate the realities that will be met, but a little folly can undo much wisdom in a revolution (9:18-10:1). That folly can well come from within the movement itself. They will have to keep their ranks clean and free from the "single slip (that) can ruin much that is good" (9:18 NAB).

Besides these slips to worry about, there are the spies (particularly women) who are always so numerous and omnipresent in the realm of oligarchs who are determined to

maintain their advantage and wealth (there is nothing new under the sun!) (10:20). Spies would present enough of a worry, but there are also those from within who might be enticed away and betray them (7:26-29). Money answers everything! These are some of the reasons why revolutionaries have to be so careful about the motives, goals and values of the people they join together with.

Still, Qoheleth can claim that wisdom is better than force, if possible (9:16). But if all else fails, or the people fail to follow wisdom, or force is the main threat against them they may be assured that wisdom is superior and can overcome force (9:17). But they will have to be extremely careful (10:8-9), and they had better have, in their wisdom, plenty of contingency plans ready to enact (11:2).

8) The counselor helps young people anticipate needs in the new government.

The failure of many revolutions is that the revolutionaries are unable to think beyond the overthrow. The task is far from complete at that point. Qoheleth alerts the counselees to the need to have people with skills appropriate to government ready to perform when needed (10:10). The act of governing men is not something that can be done haphazardly. One of the problems with the present regime is that they have not used personnel skillfully. Qoheleth, by pointing this fact out (10:5-7), urges the revolutionaries not to make the same mistake. So it is that he gets the young revolutionaries thinking beyond the excitement of the overthrow.

In concluding this discussion about counseling young people concerned about government, several things need to be pointed out. One thing is that Qoheleth models a ministry that recognizes the need to help people deal with their world. Withdrawal in face of all these problems is not the answer. The sage deals with the daily encounter with the world. That is important.

Another thing that needs to be pointed out is that in all this practical dealing with the problem of the need for change in government no appeal is made to nationalistic or ethnic sentiments. These are terribly important considerations. In all likelihood, Qoheleth speaks in the midst of conditions which led eventually to the Maccabean Revolt. The Hasmonean leadership certainly appealed to every ounce of energy that ethnic and nationalistic sentiments could provide. In doing so they followed the lead of the Chronicler and Ezra and Nehemiah before them. All these felt that the need was so great that those means, in desperation, were justified.

Qoheleth wisely does not suggest this source of energy. He remains true to Wisdom's openness and universalistic ideals. He also seems to understand that using those means are never justified for good ends. The Maccabees would have done well to have followed his lead in this matter in particular. Revolutions, though seemingly successfully energized by such emotions, more often than not self-destruct on this shoal.

Qoheleth forces his counselees to see that transformation of society is the ultimate need and goal. Political revamping is but a part of a much larger picture.

Modeling a Freedom vis-a-vis the Culture

Qoheleth was raised in a cultural milieu which placed high value on posterity (meaning both progeny and a good inheritance with which to bless and keep them going). "A good name is to be valued above all" (7:1). The closest thing to continued life after death recognized by wisdom was a name continuing on, by which one would be remembered. Much energy and even acts of largess or daring were expended in developing such a "name", such a "remembrance".

But Qoheleth flatly denies any such remembrance. He denies it for anybody — king, pauper, wiseman, fool, rich benefactor. He discards a building block that the culture had used and cultivated for hundreds of generations. No remembrance! Unthinkable! But Qoheleth insists that it is true. One should not depend on it, nor should he use it calculating in a reward schema.

Culture and its nurture were important, but not sacred. If one finds a culture building block, be it a value or a reward system, that does not jibe with reality as the sage perceives it, then Qoheleth is prepared to discard that cultural refuse. Culture is not sacred. Wisdom does not always conserve what it inherits. It evaluates freely against the standard that its God-given perception of reality yields. It does so with integrity and courage. Wisdom is not trapped by culture any more than it is trapped by ethnicity or nationalistic zeal.

Modeling Readiness to Meet God at the Center of Life

Qoheleth was prepared to find God in the mysterious, the imponderable, the irrec-
oncilable, the mysterious. That mysterious was not, as one might expect, at the periphery of life, but the actual center of life. The mysterious was found in everyday events that did not fit the order as it was understood.

As Qoheleth perceives it, many were trying to create or secure their own *shalom*, their own joy. But this results in just the opposite. Man creates his own disorder by not accepting the joy in God's ordering as sufficient, while he searches for his own. As the writer in Genesis 2-3 points out, rather than trusting God's ordering, man tries to create his own disordering as well as the disordering of the culture created by the systemic disorders and the disorders created by other men (over him). Men overreach in commercialist desire for profit. Men overstep the limits which are a part of life.

Man needs to come back to the point of trust in the order, eating and drinking and finding joy there in the midst of life and ordinary human experience.

Modeling the Securing of Creaturely Joys in a Life Style of Relaxed Acceptance

Since God is found at the center of ordinary life, the joys of life are secured within one's human lifestyle. One does not strain to secure his own future, scrambling madly over all others who might get in his way, nor does one strain for obedience. Rather, one simply relaxes in an accepting mode as he maximizes life and lives with abandon, trusting the good ordering, the positive orientation of life.

In this style of life one has a proper sense of human accomplishment and personal potential. For instance, one does not anticipate that he can set up some political system that will be perfect for all time and generations to come. He does what is right for now. He does not know, nor does he need to know, what comes after him in the world (6:12).

This basically simple lifestyle is more clearly perceived in the Gilgamesh Epic and Amenemope, Qoheleth feels, than it is in the lives of those caught up in the commercialist society around Qoheleth that is supposed to be informed by Yahwism. This outside literature would encourage living with more abandon in light of the fact that the gods come tomorrow (Gilgamesh) or that the gods already approve (Amenemope). This, thought Qoheleth, is closer to truth than is the lifestyle that evidences one trying to scramble around securing his own future and that of his posterity.

Besides, the securing of one's own future puts him at odds with the community of mankind. Such a person sought a personalized, individualized *shalom* apart from the community and almost always at the expense of others. But one's *shalom* is built within community *shalom*, a fact that oppressors and tyrants tragically failed to recognize.

Community *shalom* cannot countenance embracing some people with excess (*ythrwn*) and others with want. Therefore, abundance, not excess, is to be sought. Qoheleth's examples have people tyrannizing to hurt, amassing wealth to hurt. These people are not living with abandon. They are living with the intent to store up for themselves treasures on which they can rely for pleasure, joy and life in the future. They will inhibit life, (or others) now for wealth (theirs) in the future.

One must in the accepting lifestyle maintain a sense of humor, as Qoheleth does. This will help him see his own puny efforts realistically. It will keep him from a self-righteous evaluation that says he deserves much better than he has received, and therewith helping himself to more of the "better" he wants.

This lifestyle is not one of life-mastering. Life mastery leads simply to frustration and a sense of life's emptiness (*hbl*). That is the tragic conclusion of the experiments run on the premise of the house that Solomon built — the commercialist exploitation of wisdom. The one whose joy accepting life style concentrates on the joys therein contained accepts also

the ironic incongruities (*hbl*) in life and does not let them drain his passion for life. Rather he keeps moving among those incongruities and beyond them to whatever else mixes with the joy. His is a life of balance that holds nothing up in idolatrous fanaticism — not wisdom, not pleasure, not a good name, not accomplishments, nor obedience, nor anything. Whether *hbl* is emptiness or irony depends on one's life-set.

Modeling a Life Style that Prioritizes Human Relationships

There are two pillars to the priority of human relationships set up by Qoheleth. One is justice. The other is anti-materialism. These have been called out for description and elaboration because of the situation at hand. Of course, they are closely related.

Qoheleth is almost obsessed with the totally foolish materialist-commercialist sell-out by the people around him. The real stimulus for his writing is the need to counteract that sellout. He has a tremendous pastoral concern for the whole community of man which, as he sees it, is hurtling down the path to self-destruction on the speeding legs of consumerist values.

The profit motive, he exposes, makes people treat both things and people as mere commodities. People can therefore correctly related to neither things nor people. They lose the sense of the preciousness of life. Although things are at the same time divested of their divinity (a necessary thing), they are also completely drained of meaning (an unnecessary and intolerable extreme). Oesterley's description of the background of Proverbs, in this regard, is perhaps even more accurate for the book of Ecclesiastes: "The taste for trade and commerce tended constantly to increase; the opportunities for amassing wealth by this means was a great allurements and attracted many away from agriculture with its hard toil and much slower process of earning money. This involved a great influx into the cities; and the Wisdom Writers, like the prophets before them, realized the dangers and evil influences of town life." (Oesterly, 1929:246)

So there is an agrarian/urban tension at play here, but Qoheleth resists the urge to simplistically say that society should return to agrarian ideals and patterns. "Ask not why were former days better, it is not in wisdom you ask this" (7:10). Still, one can sense that agrarian ideals seem to be in fact closer to the acceptance ideals of Qoheleth than are those of the urban (or agrarian) commercialists. Perhaps it is the proximity of the people in an urban setting that makes displays of wealth so effective in developing desire that really is the fulcrum of the problem. That and the devaluation of work as it was perceived in the two different communities and their life styles created disordering tensions.

When things no longer have value and are meaningless, people also are looked upon as commodities, and they lose worth as persons and vice-versa. But in the commercialist-controlled atmosphere this is the twin result. Ironically, when so much value is placed on acquisition, then there is acquisition-stimulated inflation, and both things and people lose intrinsic value in the system. A person is considered to be worth what he can acquire. Things

and people decrease in value. It is a vicious circle (or spiral, as the newly popular analogy has it). Qoheleth calls for a mighty halt to be placed on this spiral. But the debauched rulers are a cause and stimulus to this very devaluation. "Money answers everything!"

In stark contrast to the concurrent society, the dominant theme in creation theology, on which Qoheleth relied, is relationship between God and man and nature. It is a harmonious, caring relationship. That which is the enemy of the *shalom* of creation is chaos — which threatens to invade the order. It is man who can and does introduce chaos, bringing the disorder of folly, fragmentation and meaninglessness. Men cause this fragmentation to obscure the vision of harmonious order, and men separate the elements of the ordering from the wholeness that God intended. (Birch and Rasmussen, 1978:103)

Qoheleth accepts the teaching of retribution as a motivation in educating young Jahwists in the art of steering through life, but he does not accept retribution as a doctrine by which to judge others or as a key to life-mastery that can be used to manipulate the order for one's benefit. Certainly, Qoheleth felt that retribution thinking could not be used in such a way as to promote the attitude that God would directly and personally take care of wrongs by some kind of dramatic, personal intervention. Qoheleth mentions no examples of this kind of action on God's part. In contrast, he mentions many examples of cases where retributive justice just never occurred. This implies that the power that should have been creative toward better communion in the community, as God had intended it to be used in the creative ordering, was not being used correctly.

But, Qoheleth's analysis is even more devastating than this. Not only is the power not being used in its intended creative sense, it is really being used destructively, for a breakdown in the created ordering. Power, he says, is on the side of the oppressors. That is a symptom of systemic injustice in a society where one is supposed to understand that authority is meant to protect the widow, the orphan and the powerless. The meaning that is supposed to be found in perceiving the right ordering is obscured by fragmentation that is being caused and supported by the wrong use of power. While the whole community is designed to be in *shalom*, those powerful ones seeking their own profit and advantage destroy the possibility of *shalom* for any, "and there is no one to comfort them."

So Qoheleth models the primacy of human relationships particularly in articulating the odious results of the rampant commercialist-materialism and the injustices and oppressions which come, in this case, largely as offshoots of the same.

Modeling the Clarification of Values for mature Decisions-making: Living the Joy in Life

Qoheleth treats life as being very important — a gift to be enjoyed. One's portion was to be accepted and rejoiced in. The basic lifestyle, one might call it the simple life-style, was

meant to yield him pleasure. Therefore, one cannot just let life happen, but he must live it decisively. The gifts of life, joy, and wisdom blended into a whole that, although marked with incongruities, yielded one his goodly portion. But this life-style demanded specific values.

Qoheleth did not fly in the teeth of reality. He evaluated the realities coolly and soberly and with accuracy. That was his training. He saw in society around him tremendous distortions of the created order. Power was being wrongly used. But he saw through these distortions and their contradictory signals, and he struggled with them all without blaspheming the creator.

He was made aware that one must not absolutize any one doctrine or truth, and he maintained his basic trust in the order. One must eat, drink and find joy in his toil. This stand brought him into conflict with those who did absolutize the "doctrine of retribution." This teaching had become distorted in his time primarily because of the commercialist atmosphere which wanted everything to yield a profit. The commercialists' values distorted their understanding of reality and their relationships within the order. While this atmosphere dominated, the response to oppressive measures that squeezed poor, powerless people and bloated the wealth of others was simply to say "men are that way." "It will even out later," was the only hopeful thing said from that perspective.

Qoheleth denies that "men are that way." He says, "Behold, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many devices." Life is a human enterprise, and therefore problems in life are human problems. It is those who lean back and accept disorder who are "making the crooked straight," by treating the straight as crooked. It is those who retain human values that are caught in the incongruity of accepting joy while observing oppression.

When men operate on human values, as Qoheleth and the sages clarify them, then they can be challenged to live life with abandon, to the full, following their hearts' desires. Are the parameters of *shalom* reduced by Qoheleth? In the view of his opponents, yes. But Qoheleth is convinced his values are honest and right.

His stance, then, is not that of an elitist. He emphasizes the commonality of all the living ones in creation. It may sound morbid that death is the great leveler, but it made his point firmly and clearly. He did so from a broadly based pastoral concern. There was no one to comfort, except on this basis. He helped his counselees, who dealt with a starkly tragic situation, come to an understanding in which decisions could correctly be made. He brought them to an accurate assessment of the current realities and urged them to decide how their lives could properly fit into the ordering (which was currently manifested primarily in disordering). Whatever they were to do was to remain based and designed on human values. Death, in all its dimensions, ended life. One cannot tolerate death-producing systems or acts

or situations whatever their origin. Life cannot be properly assessed except in the light of death.

So Qoheleth counteracts the attitude toward injustices and oppression that the commercialists held. They did not recognize injustice or oppression for what they were. They happily invoked the cause-effect nexus as a doctrinal explanation of the current social ills. Everybody gets his due, they taught. If one is suffering now, then he must seriously heed the counsel to be diligent, work harder and search out why he is failing. Qoheleth drove those who express this attitude back to creation theology and the egalitarian ideals where he eats and drinks and accepts the joys of his portion, finding joy in his toil.

From the standpoint of the well-supplied oppressors, (who felt they were just enjoying their due rewards, not seeing themselves as oppressors), this stand of Qoheleth's meant they had to reassess their values. From the standpoint of the oppressed it simply meant a further buildup of their level of frustration as they reflected on the fact that since the just ordering was designed so that one could eat, drink and find joy in his toil, somehow that was (unjustly) being denied to them. It was confirmed to the poor that the cause of their suffering was not necessarily of their own making. And the young counselees were left to make their own mature decision. If they insisted on searching *h'lm* they would be left with nothing. But if they would search out *h't* the results could be momentous. And there was no need to resort to the enthusiasm engendered by nationalistic or ethnic sentiments, which themselves can be most dehumanizing. They simply needed to en flesh the human values of God's good ordering.

Which values would be theirs, commercialist or human? What course would their lives take? The decision was theirs, in those times that were so out of joint and grinding on in their ceaseless round. He who has ears to hear let him hear.

References

Gasper, J. W. (1974). *Social Ideas in the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America. p. 20.

Oesterly, W. O. E. (1929). *The Book of Proverbs*. London: Westminster Commentaries. p. 246.

Birch, B. C. and Rasmussen, L.L. (1976). *The Predicament of the Prosperous*. Philadelphia: Westminster. p. 103.