Preparing to Teach Ecclesiastes 11 and 12

Prior to the session, I sent an exercise in English to see if you could match my modern interpretation of each verse with the verse itself. At the end of my exposition of Chapter 11, I’ll share with you what I consider the answers. Also, note that there is an Excel file for those of you who would like to substitute your Chinese interpretation for my English one. Obviously, then it could be printed for your classroom use.

Chapter 11 is a group of Proverbs which seem related to investing in one’s life and the risk management needed to do that. They seem to start out about business. Indeed, they may all be related to business, but together they seem to be about more—about the approach to which one leads one’s full life. Of course, as you will see, some ancient commentators (and some moderns) think this begins with the idea of charitable giving. Yet, I personally see the subject as broader.

***1) Send out your bread upon the surface [lit. “face”] of the waters BECAUSE in many days, you may find it.* [PJT]**

I remember as a kid thinking that this was quite confusing. Usually, if you threw (as some translations including ASV, ESV, KJV, NASB, NKJV, and RSV render it as “cast”) bread into the water, it would just get soggy and sink. There’s no way it was likely to return to you in any useful form (unless you were poetically referring to the whole cycle of nature). So, since we don’t ourselves see the return on charitable giving, even though we believe there is positive value, many ancient commentators, a few modern ones, and my own grandma saw this as referring to charity.

The Targum reading for this verse is: “Give your nourishing bread to the poor who go in ships upon the surface of the water, for after a period of many days you will find its reward in the world-to-come.” [quoted in Longman, Tremper III. *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 255.] Rabbinical scholars such as Rashi and ibn Ezra saw it this way [Alter, Robert. *The Wisdom Books: A Translation with Commentary: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), p. 384.] Early church fathers such as the Cappadocian bishop, Gregory Thaumaturgus (sometimes spelled Thaumaturgos) interpreted the verse as follows: “It is right to share bread and the things which are necessary for human life. Even if it seems at the moment to be wasted on some people, as if the bread was thrown in the water, it will be seen in the course of time that the act of kindness is not unprofitable for you.” [Jarick, John (trans*.). Gregory Thaumaturgos’ Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), p. 277.]

The NIV translates it as: “Ship your grain across the sea; after many days you may receive a return.” The confusion comes from the fact that the verb tense in Hebrew (the “piel” = “pee-ehl” has an intensive meaning) such that some thought the intensive of sending out was “throwing” or “casting” while others take it as “releasing” [Seow, Choon-Leong. *The Anchor Bible: Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1997), pp. 334-335]. Seow believes that taking this as a maritime proverb is making it overly complex and, as a result, he takes it as a picture of placing Middle Eastern flat bread (pita) literally upon the water and finding it (p. 335). Hence, he sees the verse as being about liberality and not investments, as does. He also notices that the pronoun “it” seems to suggest that one is just getting back what one sent and not an appropriate profit (Seow, p. 335). “If this proverb were meant to encourage investment in maritime trade, the rationale in verse 1b would not provide much of an incentive: one expects more than simply receiving one’s investment after some time (and waterlogged at that!). No return on the return, a zero percent yield, is no inducement.” [Brown, William P. *Ecclesiastes: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), pp. 101-102.]

Personally, I find the maritime proverb more convincing, especially as verse 2 seems to be concerned with diversification as part of the risk and verse 3 as concerned with the kind of calamities which could take place when one has invested in cargo to trade overseas. In this case, my translation and interpretation is in line with the CEB, NEB, NIV, NRSV, and many respected commentators. My professor wrote that it “likely refers to sea trade.” [Peterson, Wayne H. “Ecclesiastes” in Allen, Clifton J. (et al.), *Broadman Bible Commentary: Volume 5: Proverbs-Isaiah* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1971), p. 125.] “The most probable meaning of the saying in Qoheleth 11:1 (RSV), ‘Cast your bread upon the waters,’ is embodied in the NEB translation ‘Send your grain across the seas,’ with its reference to the risks which must be taken in maritime commerce.” [Scott, R. B. Y., *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1971), p. 18.]

James Crenshaw notes that the same Hebrew verb is found with “on the surface of the waters” in Isaiah 18:12: “who sends ambassadors on the Nile and in vessels of papyrus on the waters.” [Crenshaw, James. *The Old Testament Library: Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1987), p. 178.]. Longman objects that neither this verse nor verse 2 give any internal hints that they have charity in mind while verse 2 seems to suggest diversification to limit the risk (Longman, p. 256.).

I also worry that Seow’s emphasis on the pronoun “it” may be too reductionist. “It” could also mean “What you’re looking for” (in this case, big profits). I’m particularly enamored with John Jarick’s paraphrase of this verse: “Invest in overseas trade, for you will be rewarded with larger profits for long voyages.” [Jarick, *Paraphrase*, p. 277) He goes on to argue: “This interpretation fits well with the context for Koheleth proceeded to offer other business advice, and with the nature of maritime trade in the ancient world, for a ship could take a very long time to complete a commercial voyage.” (p. 277)

So, hear again verse 2 and see which context you prefer. ***2) Give a portion to seven, and even to eight, BECAUSE you don’t know what catastrophe [or “evil”] may come upon the land.* [PJT]** The word which can be translated as catastrophe, evil, or trouble is defined by one author as “trouble which affects economics.” [Miller, Douglas B. *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qohelet’s Work* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002], p. 92 n. 17.]

Those who see verse 1 as charity take a view like the following: “Qoheleth is concerned with diversifying not so much one’s assets as one’s stewardship! The numerical values in themselves are not significant. The point is that a portion of one’s income should not be devoted to any one cause or recipient alone, an altruistic twist on the modern proverb, “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket.” By diversifying one’s giving, charity is shared more equitably within the larger community, and the initial giver is bound to be a recipient in this new, widening network of care.” (Brown, p. 104) Yet, a clear part of the verse is the idea of trouble or a problem. If one is giving the money away to charity, what difference does it make to the giver whether one has given to one or eight. Yet, to the investor, one ship caught in a shipwreck may not be a total disaster if one has other ships on the way. The investor has hedged her or his investments. For example, you may have seen this headline in the news during the last couple of months where Farmers Insurance has pulled out of Florida and left more than 100,000 customers in the lurch. Insurance companies used to leverage high-risk areas by also insuring low-risk areas as a hedge. It made sense until, with climate change, many of those low-risk areas are becoming medium to high risk.

I also can’t resist pointing out the mathematical symbolism is x, x+1. In this case, verse 2 is telling us that investing in seven (a complete number in itself) could be even better if you stretched it to eight. It may remind you of the number heightening strategy in other biblical passages. For example, in the first two chapters of Amos, the prophet uses the technique to demonstrate just how complete each nation’s rebellions have been. In verses like Proverbs 30:18 (and even v. 21), the technique is used to express the complete inability to comprehend. And in Micah 5:5, the prophet speaks of 7 shepherds and 8 princes in parallel to indicate that more than enough leaders will be raised up to counter the enemies. This is a rhetorical technique to either emphasize the second number or simply indicate that the sum is greater than its parts. Longman believes the latter is the case here (p. 256).

But you say, “I’m not an entrepreneur; what do these two proverbs say to me?” First, they would suggest, whether you think they are about charitable giving or investing, that it is not good to be stingy. Whatever resources you have (skills, talents, influence, time, strength, compassion, or money), don’t be afraid to put them out there in the world—even if there is risk. Second, because life is risky, diversify your portfolio of life. Don’t just be interested in one thing. Don’t be like I’ve been too much of my life, too highly invested in one friend such that I missed out on others. And as a word of caution, don’t invest so much time and effort in one person that you feel totally devastated if that person disappoints you. So, you can see that this can apply not only to generosity or investing, but to the way you serve in the church, the way you do your job, and even how you socialize.

***3) If the clouds are full, rain will pour out upon the land [or “earth”]; if a tree falls to the south or if to the north, the place the tree has fallen, there it is.* [PJT]**

My wife is so biblical that she has a saying close to the end of this verse, “It is what it is.” When she uses it, she’s saying that there’s no more we can do about it, so we might as well figure out how to deal with the consequences. In this case, I believe the wise man is continuing his theme where one can’t know what is going to happen so that one needs to be prepared. The rain pouring out could be a good thing in a desert land like Israel, but the suggestion that the clouds are full and that the rain is pouring out might reflect flooding conditions. And you don’t always know where a tree is going to fall, as this car owner in the picture discovered. In Hebrew, the idea of north and south is a figure of speech for anywhere (Seow, p. 336). For me, the idea is that we can’t be certain the unexpected won’t happen to us.

I’ll share this because you may take it as colorful. Some people note that the word for tree that is used here could also be translated as “divining rod” as it is in Hosea 4:12. Then, it could mean that no one could predict where the rod would land and hence, one’s fortune (Crenshaw, p. 179). But since Hosea 4:12 is speaking disapprovingly of the use of divining rod and we don’t follow the I Ching, horoscopes, palm readers, and the like, this may be a colorful idea but it seems unlikely that it would be what Qoheleth meant.

On the other hand, the Cappadocian Father I mentioned earlier, Gregory Thaumaturgus, used this verse more positively, seeing Qoheleth as giving “advice to the farmers to get on with their work and not wait for conditions to be perfect.” (Jarick, p. 279) For me, that makes sense if one doesn’t see the rains as being torrential, but it doesn’t make sense regarding the falling tree. My former professor may be closer to the bottom line when he wrote regarding verse 3: “Perhaps Koheleth means that the ‘disaster’ spoken about in v. 2 will inevitably come and one must prepare for it. Nevertheless, one must not be overly cautious (11:4).” (Peterson, p. 125)

Okay, let’s look at verse 4: ***4) One watching the wind doesn’t sow [the seed] and the one looking at the clouds doesn’t harvest.* [PJT]** Just because certain natural events are beyond human control doesn’t give human beings the right to give up on what they can do. Note that the Hebrew participle I translated as “One watching” could also be “One guarding.” I didn’t use it because it sounded ridiculous, as if one was trying to control the wind. Yet, Qoheleth might have meant that people trying to control what they can’t control don’t get done what they could possibly accomplish if they didn’t focus on the wrong thing. “The previous verse illustrated the truth that some things are beyond human control. The present verse gives two more illustrations from nature, while implicitly warning against the paralysis that often develops from this realization.” (Longman, p. 257). Despite the photograph of the farmer or rancher on the slide, this verse isn’t merely to chide those in agriculture. It applies to all of us who are waiting for conditions to be just right before we commit to accomplish things in our lives, in the church or elsewhere.

It seems like verse 5 changes direction on us. There is a possible connection in that verse 4 uses the Hebrew word רוח for “wind” and verse 5 uses רוח for “spirit” or “breath.” ***5) Just as you don’t know what the way of the spirit [“breath” or “life-breath”] as the bones fill the womb so you do not know the accomplishments of God Who accomplishes everything. [PJT]*** I take this illustration as a unity with the idea of the “life-breath” or the “spirit” of life entering into the unborn baby. The wise man is saying that just as human beings can’t understand the miracle of birth and the beginning of life, so we cannot understand all that God does. Interestingly, the idea that human beings can’t know how the breath or spirit of life enters the embryo fits precisely with the interpretation of the Targum for this passage (Jarick, p. 281). Once again, just because we don’t or can’t understand these things doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t be doing what we can do.

Some translations adapt the Hebrew text so that it reads easier than my awkward translation above. Here’s one: “5) In the same way that you do not know what is the way of the wind or how the bones are formed in the mother’s womb, so you do not know the work of God, who does all things.” (Longman, p. 254). The NIV also translates this verse as representing two illustrations of what we cannot know, and that is Brown’s interpretation (p. 104) and Christopher J. H. Wright’s approach [Wright, Christopher J. H., *Hearing the Message of Ecclesiastes: Questioning Faith in a Baffling World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan House Publishing, 2023), p.122.] However, whether we take this as the human life illustration as a unity as I do, as well as Alter (pp. 384-385), Crenshaw (p. 178), and Seow (pp. 328, 337), or as two illustrations, it reminds us that we have to allow some mystery and deference to God because we just don’t have the whole picture.

“Nevertheless, the strong foundational perspective of verse 5 (the conviction that even what *we* cannot understand can still be the work of *God*) means we can turn life’s unpredictabilities not into paralysis, but into opportunities (v. 6).” (Wright, p. 123) ***6) In the morning, sow your seed and for the evening don’t take back your hand BECAUSE you don’t know whether this one or that one will be advantageous or if the two of them will be just as good.* [PJT]**

I like the following idea: “Koheleth further encouraged a full day’s work by noting that we do not know whether the earlier sowing or the later sowing will be successful or whether both will turn out equally well.” (Jarick, p. 283) By full day’s work though, I don’t believe it means that the sower is supposed to be working from morning till night. That would make no sense with the phrase this one or that one (Crenshaw, p. 181). Rather, it is TWO different times. I think it means that one shouldn’t miss any opportunities because you don’t know which ones will pay off. Seow calls them “permissive times” as he would observe that one may accomplish the task whenever the opportunity arises (p. 346).

There’s one other possible misunderstanding I would like to clear up. Because verse 5 had mentioned the formation of a human in the womb, many of the ancient Jewish interpreters considered the word for “seed” to be the equivalent of “sperm” (Crenshaw, p. 180.) Indeed, there are many times that it does mean that, as in “seed of Abraham.” However, you used your hand to spread seed in the field since they didn’t have automated farming equipment. So, withholding your hand would have been refusing to throw out the seed into the field. It makes much more sense to take this literally.

Then, the wise man surprises us again. So often, Qoheleth has been negative. Yet, in verse 7 he speaks of light and the sun. Remember that the Ancient Near East’s conception of death was in a dark shadowy underworld called Sheol. Remember also that the word for “darkness,” the opposite of light, is often used for death and, indeed, it is used so in Ecclesiastes 11:8, right after this verse (Miller, p. 17). Also, how does the book use the “sun” throughout the text? Most of the time, it is about “under the sun” which is about our life here on earth. So, it seems very clear that the references to light and sun in v. 7 are about life. Of course, some think that “sun” could simply represent “pleasantness” here (Peterson, p. 126). I still think verse 7 serves as an introduction to the alternative in verse 8.

***8) BECAUSE if a person lives many years, the person should rejoice in all of them, BUT should remember the days of darkness because they are many, all that comes is a wisp [breath].* [PJT]**

This contrast between the light and sweetness of living and the long period in the grave reminds me of an observation made by a fictional character in a historical novel I was reading from between WWI and WWII. A person was amazed at how well this old woman was doing and she replied: **“Growing old is not for most people. It’s too trying. One daren’t eat this or do that, or even bend over to smell the garden flowers, for fear one’s back won’t straighten up. …Well, it’s most certainly better than the alternative.”
[Todd, Charles. *A Fearsome Doubt* (New York: Bantam Books, 2002), p. 54.]**

***9) Rejoice, young person, in your youthfulness and let your will be positive [or “heart” be merry] in the days of your vitality [same root as “young person”]. So, walk in the way of your will and the vision of your eyes, but know that upon all these things, God will bring you to judgment.* [PJT]** “Life is to be lived with joy and by following what our heart desires (v. 9a).” (Wright, p. 125) Unfortunately, many people forget that the word for “heart” also means the “will,” what you determine to do and that “sight” can also refer to your moral vision as well as to what is aesthetically pleasing and delights you.

Is Qoheleth “…speaking with a forked tongue in this verse, in one breath calling on young people to gratify their desires and in the next breath calling out that God will judge them for doing so…” as Jarick admits it seems to appear (p. 285)? Did a later editor add the portion about God’s judgment as Scott believes? (Scott, p. 172) I agree with my former professor who observed that Qoheleth couldn’t have been advocating irresponsible hedonism because of Ecclesiastes 2:1-11. Rather, he is just reminding the young person that he is to be responsible and moral in enjoying life (Peterson, p, 126). Or as William P. Brown words it: “Accompanying the joy that Qoheleth commends is the sure knowledge that God will judge one’s conduct (Eccl. 11:9b). But this theme of judgment is designed not to *temper* Qoheleth’s command to enjoy life but to *underscore* and *direct* it.” (p. 105)

***10) So, remove frustration from your determination [lit. heart] and send away pain from your physical body [lit. flesh] BECAUSE youthfulness and youthful looks [lit. “black hair”] are a wisp. [PJT]***

The word I translated as youthful looks may literally be “black hair,” referring to the fact that we start to gray as we age—something we try to cover up in our society. But, it could also be translated as the “dawn,” suggesting the “dawn of life” (Miller, p. 17). Both are interesting translations because neither lasts very long—breath, wisp, emptiness, vanity.

Chapter 12

In verse 1, the noun used for Creator is foundational. It is the Hebrew verb, ברא – pronounced bah-RAH –the second word in the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 1:1) where it says: “In a beginning, God [used in the plural], He created [used in the singular] the heavens and the earth.” [PJT]. It is significant because only God creates by means of ברא. The noun form of this verb in Ecclesiastes 12:1 seems to be in the plural form in agreement with Genesis 1:1 [We usually understand it as the plural of majesty (Seow, p.351, though he states it as unnecessary to assume this), as if God is too much to be labeled as one individual. Christians see this as an early hint of the Trinity. Yet this plural form is always used with a singular verb so that we know that for all of the ways we see God as persons, He is ONE!] It is the verb used of God when God is speaking everything into existence.

But it is not the only way that God creates. God accomplishes [or “does”]. The verb is עשה and is the word used for God’s accomplishment of earth and the heavens in Genesis 2:4. Note the reversal from Genesis 1:1. Genesis 1:1 is cosmic with the heavens mentioned first. Genesis 2:4b is geocentric with the earth first. We might say that God is the cosmic Creator in Genesis 1 and God is the interested, invested, earth-focused Creator in Genesis 2:4 to the end. Notice that this is the word for God’s accomplishments at the conclusion of Ecclesiastes 11:5 when we are to consider not only God’s actions in creation, but also in God’s intervening in history.

But there is one more way that God creates. In Genesis 2:7 we read: “So, Yahweh God sculpted [or “formed”] humanity [lit. “the Adam”] of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils [“nose”] the breath of living and humanity [lit. “the Adam”] became a living personality.” [PJT] The operative verb is יצר, to form or fashion—often used for craftsmen. Since the verse describes God as crafting humanity from the ground, I translated it as “sculpting.”

The point is that only God can create in the cosmic sense and part of our orientation to life and realization of how we are to relate to life is simply remembering with awe that God is the only one who can do this. Some commentators think this verse is abrupt and doesn’t fit Qoheleth’s message, but it’s what he has been saying all along: we can’t understand everything about God and God’s activities, but it is better for us if we align ourselves with God and God’s plan. “In other words it appears that Qoheleth has finally decided that life has to be lived within the *truth and tension* of Genesis 1-3…” (Wright, p. 129).

And some might try to suggest that devotion, reverence, and awe toward our Creator would only apply to youth in this verse as though youth is the time for relationship with God and old age is not (Longman, p. 267). I prefer to seeing it as an encouragement to build the proper foundation of a relationship with God while you are in the prime of life because it’s too late (in terms of practical benefit) when you are old a weak (Peterson, p. 126). “ Some may think that Qoheleth is speaking with a forked tongue in Ecclesiastes 11:9 where he says to celebrate youth and then closes with the negation that judgment is coming, but I am convinced that he is encouraging us, as human beings, to get the habits and attitudes right while we’re young so that the struggle, the tension, won’t be as difficult. We live in a struggle between the goodness of life and our dislocation from that goodness by the corruption of sin. However, “If we get the foundations of faith right from the start by remembering our Creator, in the fullest sense of trusting and obeying him, then it’s a struggle we can live with, neither denying that the struggle is there nor pretending that we have all the answers.” (Wright, p. 129)

As for verses 2-7, there are more possible approaches to these verses than the allegory I have chosen to emphasize. Some scholars see it as literally describing the demise of a household. Later, if I have time, I’ll share how Seow sees it as an eschatological allegory. Even some of the church fathers such as Gregory Thaumaturgus saw this as judgment in the end times. I chose in favor of the Targum’s allegory for a person aging because it is relevant to all of us and consistent with the emphasis on youth’s vigor, old age’s diminishing returns, and death’s inevitability. I’m not convinced of the eschatological approach because I don’t see Qoheleth being interested in eschatology in the rest of the book.

My professor called it “An Allegory of Old Age” (Peterson, p. 126). So, I want to take the time to line out the symbols as they are often introduced in the Targum, the Aramaic translation (with some paraphrase and interpretation) of Ecclesiastes. The Targum interprets the sun no longer shining as the brightness of one’s face (Jarick, p. 290), the glow of youth, the vigor and energy of life. In a similar vein, the moon is pictured as the individual’s cheeks (Jarick, p. 290), reflecting the radiance of a person’s energy in youth and beginning to sag and show signs of aging as one ages (even as the moon changes shapes. Following this, the stars become the pupils of the eyes (Jarick, p. 290) which (particularly in the days before cataract surgery) would lose sparkle and intensity as the individual ages. That clouds were understood as eyelids and tears as rain can be seen in this quotation from the Targum: “your eyelids drip tears like clouds after rain.” [cited in Longman, p. 269] It seems suggestive of one closing one’s eyelids after crying.

Of course, even if one sees this as representing old age, it doesn’t require the individual meanings suggested in the Targum. It could be as simple as the following: “The image suggests both an approaching storm and failing sight during old age.” (Crenshaw, p. 185). As for the image of the clouds seeming to follow the rain illogically rather than preceding it as one would expect, “This seeming reversal of the order of nature is an indication of the personal catastrophe of aging: everything goes dark, and in this ultimate storm, the clouds continue to blanket the sky even after the rain—perhaps because (verse 3) the sense of sight is dimmed.” (Alter, p. 387)

When we get to verse 3, the metaphor shifts from the heavens to that of a house (Peterson, p. 127). Those following the aging allegory almost always see the “keepers of the house” (who would literally be the servants or slaves of a household) as either the weak, shaking arms of an aging body (Peterson, p. 127), the hands (Crenshaw, p. 186), or the wobbling knees suggested in the Targum (Jarick, p. 291). The valiant or mighty men would be the strong and prestigious members of a household, but they are described as bent or tottering, suggesting legs, knees, or backs (Crenshaw, pp. 185-186, Jarick, p. 291, Peterson, p. 127).

Longman prefers to see these images as specifically referring to members of a household, so he sees the grinders as being the women who historically needed to grind the grain to get flour (p. 270). Yet, even he wonders why their numbers would diminish such that their work decreased. Along with the Targum, I prefer to see these as teeth (Crenshaw, p. 186, Jarick, p. 291, Peterson, p. 127) which become fewer and fewer, as well as being ground down and becoming less efficient.

The women looking out the windows, much like those curious neighbors or “Karens” who are always pulling back the curtains to look, are now dimmed. This would almost surely be a reference to the eyes (Jarick, p. 291, Peterson, p. 127) and reflects the reality that even as older women wouldn’t come to the windows as much (due to lack of energy or curiosity), our eyes don’t reflect the same energy as we age as they did when we were younger. [Note: I know that there are exceptions. I have known some older men and women who were still so intellectually curious and bright-eyed that you would swear they were considerably younger than their chronological years.]

In verse 4, the metaphor seems to shift again. This time it may shift from the household and house to that of commerce and society. As Crenshaw noted in his commentary, the double-door would not have been common for a family house but represented something bigger (p. 186). I would perceive this as reflecting a warehouse or enclosed market area where commerce was taking place. The closed door might indicate that the individual was no longer able to engage in trade (or even one’s day-to-day job). Of course, ibn Ezra saw the double-doors as corresponding to the lips (though there are better images for the lips), but Longman suggests this might be the ears, closed due to not being able to hear as well in old age (p. 271). He argues well that this might account for the diminishing sound of the grinders later in the passage.

In terms of commerce, the sound of the grinders being low might suggest that one must shut down one’s day-to-day business and one’s earning power is diminished. Sticking with the individual’s aging, the low sound may correspond with the voice becoming weaker (Peterson, p. 127). Then, the sound of one bird fills the vacuum from the silenced grinders and, as we shall see the daughters of song/songstresses. “One possible understanding is that in the silence that falls as the maids cease their labor or grinding, the sound of a solitary bird—not a cheerful songbird—stands out, and the songstresses on their part fall silent and are bowed low.” (Alter, p. 388) In that sense, the lone bird sound might be a faint memory, more melancholy than joyful. My opinion is that the bird sound represents the rising tone in elderly voices (Crenshaw, pp. 186-187) or suggests the light sleep of easily awakened elders (Jarick, p. 293, Peterson, p. 127).

But the songstresses or “daughters of song” are more interesting to me. Though the Targum treated them as lips (Jarick, p. 293) and Peterson treated their lack of sound as indication of being hard of hearing (p. 127, Longman, p. 271), That’s true, but I also draw from Crenshaw’s observation that these were probably dancing/singing women for festive occasions (p. 187). The significance of their diminished position would be that the individual had a lack of energy. It could even mean that the absence of celebration was a preparation of mourning for the individual’s death.

Gregory Thaumaturgus, of course, saw the entire allegory from the perspective of the end times. He saw the trembling of the keepers of the house as equal to the Sixth Seal in Revelation (Jarick, p. 291) and interpreted the “daughters of song” as fallen women (Jarick, p. 293). This is significant because he saw the next idea of fearing the heights as representing punishment coming from above (Jarick, p. 294). The almond blossoms yet to come represented the blooming of judgment, the locust portended a swarm of locusts descending on sinners, and lawbreakers cast aside like a black and contemptible caper-plant (Jarick, p. 294). I simply see the fear of heights and the balancing issues faced by the elderly and the diminishing desire to venture out in public (Longman, p. 272). As I’ve noted before, I don’t see Qoheleth being big on eschatology.

The next three images may relate to three things that happen in Israel’s spring: 1) almond trees blossom with vivid white blossoms; 2) locusts gorge themselves on those blossoms till they can barely move, and 3) caper-berries become so ripe that they burst. (Crenshaw, p. 187) In turn, these would suggest the whitening of hair, the difficulty for the elderly in walking, and, since the caper-berry was considered an aphrodisiac, the lack of sexual desire (Crenshaw, p. 187, Longman, p. 272, Peterson, p. 127). John Jarick sees the three images together as representing the loss of sexual virility, perhaps following those who note that locust could mean “locust tree” and refer to the limbs being overburdened so that they no longer remain upright (p. 295). Regardless, the verses clearly suggest the onset of infirmities leading to the next segment or the metaphors of death.

The silver cord or chain is valuable, as is the golden bowl. It seems best to interpret these as a valuable cord of silver soft enough to snap and a golden, olive-oil burning lamp that crashes to the floor and shatters. Neither is useful any longer and the “owner” has lost something valuable. Peterson points out that the cord and bowl provide light, a symbol Qoheleth has used earlier in the book, and the latter two vessels provide for water, a necessity of life (p. 127). Breaking the light and life means that the individual who has been aging has now died.

Finally, in verse 7, the wise man takes us full circle back to Genesis. The reference of returning to dust cannot help but remind us of Genesis 3:19 after the sin of humankind (The Adam): ***19) By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust and to dust you shall return.* [RSV]**

So, having explained what happens to the individual, we read an epilogue that assures us that Qoheleth was dependable. These are the verses (beginning in verse 9) where we get the name, Qoheleth, as “The Caller,” “The Preacher,” “The Teacher,” “The Curator,” etc. And verse 9 tells us that the wise man did three important things in preparing his material for the people. These are all in the pi’el tense in the Hebrew, the intensive or strong form of the verb. He pondered. Intensively, he really chewed on these observations and considered them from all angles. He searched out. Intensively, he diligently researched every datum he could find. He set in order many proverbs. Intensively, he carefully arranged and rearranged ideas to challenge his hearers and readers.

And why did he do this? He did it so that they would be challenged. He compares his words, teachings, and proverbs to goads, those sharp wooden sticks primitives use to prod stubborn oxen into action, and nails driven into inanimate objects to hold materials together. Gregory of Thaumaturgus wrote: “I know that the mind is roused and spurred by the instruction of wise people just as much as the body is by an ox-goad being applied or a nail being driven in.” (Jarick, p. 303) Yet, the church father goes on to write: “Having just referred to the ignorance and incorrigibility of the people, he is not at all confident of the ability of the average ear to make the right sense of the proverbial sayings. Thus he notes that a ‘noble’ (γενναἷος) person is necessary, in order that the people might be able to understand.” (Jarick, p. 303) In most English translations, that is the Shepherd. This wise man knew that the average person wasn’t going to sift through all that he had gone through in his life, so he was determined to bear witness in an organized fashion so that people could understand. Is that any different than we need to be in our witness?

And finally, in the closing verse, the Wise Man comes back to what we have been saying about the message all along. “Nothing escapes God’s notice. What may be ‘hidden’—whether because of human secret sin or because it is simply inscrutable to us—will not be hidden for God. There is no cosmic carpet where the dust of history will be swept with impunity. In the end, the Judge of all the earth will do what is right (Genesis 18:25) *and will put all things right, too*.” (Wright, p. 137)