***Preparing to Teach Ecclesiastes 7-8***

Chapter 7 is a personal testimony framed by two collections of proverbs (1-14; 19-22)

Many [Lohfink, Miller, Seow ] think the traditional form is used so that Qoheleth can subvert the black and white answers of traditional wisdom [Miller, p. 133].

I like James Crenshaw’s idea that

7:1 – “Your reputation matters more than your aftershave, …” [Wright, p. 80.]  
 built upon pun between shem (name) and shemen (ointment) … [Peterson, p. 119]  
 as well as noting that the ointment was expensive, sexy? [Esther 2:12, Song 1:3]

7:2 – Why is house of mourning better than the house of mirth? Because in the house of mourning,  
 “…the living will learn the meaning of life.” [Peterson, *Broadman*, p. 119]

William P. Brown said it well: “The inescapable reality of death is for Qoheleth the point of departure for life (v. 2b). Death orients the self toward authentic, rather than false, living. … Death must be accepted fully, the sage contends, in order to live the good life, however minimal it may seem.” [Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 73.]

Note that the image on the slide has several constructions (roofed tombs) from AD 1st century, but the rock-cut tombs date back to Iron Age. This is an old photograph from a dig on the Mount of Olives.

7:3 – Note that the Hebrew is literally “anger” over “laughter.” That’s considered enigmatic by Longman because it contradicts what Qoheleth says about anger in 5:17 [Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 183.]. Martin Luther substituted “sorrow” for anger and several modern translations have followed suit. Although Graham Ogden suggested that the distinction here is between “empty” laughter and “substantial” joy [cited in Longman, Ecclesiastes, p. 183.], I think the idea of anger that comes from being frustrated, thwarted, vexed, and upset may be a better understanding. Since a certain amount of stress leads to creativity and too much pleasure can lead to stagnation, we can probably understand this in that way.

Building off of that, “Joy that is not born of sorrow is artificial. Such an observation is critical to Qoheleth’s larger analysis of joy, for it reveals that joy is not simply an antidote to the toilsome task of living, an opium for the toiling masses, as it were. To the contrary, like the phoenix rising from the ashes, true gladness emerges from sorrow (v. 3b). If anything, such joy, born from grief, is resilient to the harsh realities of life, much in contrast to the merriment of fools, whose perception is woefully limited.” [Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 73-74.]

7:4 Fools in the house of mirth don’t take life seriously.

7:5 Fools sing without reflection.

7:6 There is wordplay between thorns and pot  
 הַסִּירִים תַּחַת הַסִּיר = word for thorns (hah-SEE-reem) has sounds of pot (SEER). Wordplay makes an emphasis [Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 133.]

7:6 – Instead of steady, dependable charcoal or hot coals, thorns burn quickly with a crackling sound  
 and give little heat. “Thus the laughter of a fool gives little real satisfaction.” [Peterson, p. 119.]  
 pun between nettles and kettles [Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 133.]

7:7b – The shift from oppression in v. 7a to bribery in 7b is so abrupt it seems like a line is missing. Perhaps, though, the message is that the Holy Spirit prompted Qoheleth to realize that humans face differing kinds of pressure: circumstances and temptation. Consider also that Proverbs is very realistic about bribes, recognizing that they work (Proverbs 17:8 and 18:16). But Deuteronomy 16:19 warns about the effect on the receiver [Brown, p. 76.]

7:8 – “Since a true appraisal of an enterprise can only be made from the standpoint of its completion, the *end* is, he says, better than the *beginning* (cf. vv. 1-4). But the end is often slow to arrive, and a wise man must be *patient* rather than *proud* and quick to anger (vv. 8-9).” [Peterson, p. 120.]

“Finishing something patiently is better than unfulfilled pride at the start.” [Wright, *Hearing*, p. 81.]

The literal Hebrew wording is pretty interesting in the latter part of verse 8: “length of spirit is better than height of spirit.” [Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 187.]

7:10 – Some are impatient for “good old days” that never happened, but this failure to live in the present is not a wise way to live. [Peterson, p. 120.]

“The person who favors the culmination of something over the anticipation associated with the inauguration of the project refuses to take risks. The result is safe but dull. In some circumstances, what passes for patience may actually be lethargy. Therefore, it is not from wisdom (the Septuagint has “in wisdom”) that such an attitude about a venerable past is articulated.” [Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 137.]

7:11 – The big debate in this verse is whether the preposition that sounds like “eem” has its usual meaning of “with” or its occasional meaning of “as” (equivalence, equality). I agree with: “To say that wisdom is as good as money is a far cry from the exaltation of wisdom in Proverbs and even in Job 28, where jewels and precious metals do not compare with the glories of wisdom.” [Longman, Ecclesiastes, p. 190.] I don’t believe we can say that wisdom and money are comparable in anything except, as we’ll see in verse 12, protection. I agree with Wright’s assertion that: “…it is good to be wise, it’s even better if you have a good stash of inherited money too, just in case.” In other words, wisdom is great but money talks [Wright, *Hearing*, p. 83.]

Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* paraphrase captures the idea of verse twelve very well. The Hebrew would literally read: “In the shadow of wisdom [a man is] in the shadow of money.” [Rankin, O. S. “Introduction and Exegesis of Ecclesiastes” in George A. Buttrick et. al. (eds.), *The Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes: Volume 5: Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Isaiah, Jeremiah* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1956), p. 65.] Believe it or not, this is a positive perspective because both are cast as protection, what you expect from shade in the desert—a valuable, life-saving commodity.

7:13-14 – By now in our study, we should know to pay attention to rhetorical questions. At first, the question in verse 13 sounds almost blasphemous. Yet, think about the reference for the pronoun “Who.” Is that God? No, God is spelled out, and Qoheleth is saying that if there is something crooked in God’s creation, God must have, at least, allowed it. Qoheleth “…acknowledges that the world is not perfect, but he does not think anyone can straighten what God has made crooked.” [Seow, p. 251.]

Remember, though, the anyone or the “who” refers to humanity. No human can fix anything that God allowed to be crooked or made crooked for reasons we can’t comprehend. As a result, we need to make the most of both positive and negative opportunities that come our way.

Quick Summary of the Latter Chapter [as per Miller, p. 134.]

1st Unit: Need for Moderation Concerning Righteousness and Wisdom (7:15-18)

2nd Unit: Wisdom of Righteousness and Others (7:19-22)

3rd Unit: Elusiveness of Wisdom and Righteousness/ Threat of Folly and Wickedness (7:23-29)

7:18 – “sometimes you have to be a bit naughty.” [Wright, p. 86.] see p. 87 n3

If I were teaching this passage, I would explain that many interpreters believe that Qoheleth is telling us that a “moderate” amount of sin is okay. But if that is what Qoheleth means rather than avoiding being overscrupulous in keeping the law and avoiding disregarding law, what “little bit naughty” should one be? In English, I would create scrambled word puzzles out of the following list, but for Chinese, why not just provide the list of scripture references below on a paper with blanks for fill out or on the whiteboard and ask the students to discover the sins Qoheleth doesn’t consider acceptable. NOT:

Drunkenness (2:3)  
Sensuality (2:8)  
Oppression (3:16-17; 4:1)  
Irreverence (5:1-2)  
Dishonesty (5:4-6)  
Greed (5:11-12)  
Anger Issues (7:9)  
Hypocrisy (8:10)

Obviously, this list doesn’t really leave any room for even a “little” bit of sinning. So, how do we interpret this? R. N. Whybray describes two scholarly efforts to explain this enigmatic verse: “(i) Such striving after perfection is not a virtue, it is a sin; that of pride or blasphemy. (ii) Such excessive behavior is not required by God, and is to be avoided: for on the one hand is goal is beyond man’s capacity and so it can achieve nothing; and on the other hand it makes life joyless, leading to narrowness and bigotry. So, in one way or another, the striving after perfection produces misery.” [Whybray, R. N. “Qoheleth the Immoralist? (Qoh 7:16-17) in Gammie, John G. et. al. (eds.) *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (New York: Union Theological Seminary, 1978), p. 191.]

Qoholeth does not distinguish between the word used here (and in verse 20) for “righteous” and the word for “perfect.” Since Qoheleth admits that there isn’t anyone “righteous” or “perfect,” it would make sense that the “righteous” in verse 16 that Qoheleth is warning us about is the one who is “righteous” or “perfect” in his own eyes. [Whybray, p. 195.]

There is also a verb in verse 16b which is in the hithpael tense in the Hebrew. That tense refers to something you do to yourself (reflexive). So, it probably means “set yourself up to be wise” in the sense of “pretend to be wise” (or “greatly wise,” “very wise,” “overly wise”) [Whybray, p. 196.]

Seow argues that the hithpael of “be wise” doesn’t mean “pretend” anywhere else [Seow, p. 253.]

Since, in wisdom literature, wisdom and righteousness are generally associated together and Qoheleth claims wisdom as the gift of God (2:26), 16b might suggest the person who claims wisdom for themselves. “Now the person who claims or pretends to be wise is, according to traditional wisdom teaching, precisely the person who <i>lacks</i> both wisdom and righteousness.” [Whybray, p. 199.]

Since, when we get to chapter 8, the one who fears God is the opposite of the one who is evil, it makes the most sense to suggest that the this or that in verse 18 means “Don’t sin in either way.” (p. 200)

Rankin (p. 66) doesn’t think “this or that” in v. 18 refers back to the just and wicked person in v. 15. It may refer to the two ways. Yes, but the strength of those persons as an antecedent is that it demonstrates why Qoheleth is expressing what he is.

Ecclesiastes 7:20 is only verse quoted directly in NT (Romans 3:10) [Wright, p. 88.]

“The impossibility of super-righteousness among mortals is precisely what Quohelet is addressing. The issue is not hypocrisy, but presumptuousness.” [Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 269.]

7:26 – Q refers to “the woman” as though the reader is supposed to know who she is. The best solution is to look at the context where Q is talking about “folly.” Hence, the woman becomes Dame Folly (see Proverbs 2:16-19; 5:20; 6:24-35) [Brown, Ecclesiastes, p. 83; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 270-271.]

Is 7:27 a distancing of the editor or final author from the dangerous sayings of the Teacher above? [Wright, p. 93.]

“In 7:27-28, Qoheleth co-opts a bookkeeping metaphor to express his frustration and inability to find answers to his searching questions…” [Ceresko, Anthony R., *Introduction to Old Testament Wisdom: A Spirituality for Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), p. 95.

7:28 means “It is hardly complimentary to men and insulting to women to say, I found 0.1 percent of men and 0.0 percent of women able to help my search. His point is: <i>nobody</i> could help me find the answers I wanted.” [Wright, p. 94.]

Notice the reversal in 7:29 over what has been said [Wright, p. 94.] Titanic T-shirt [p. 95]

Kidner quotation [Wright, p. 96.]

8:1-9 “These verses teach how the wise courtier will serve a despotic king. He recognizes that the king must be obeyed, but exercises his wisdom to choose the time and way to carry out the King’s commands in such a way that his government service will not conflict too greatly with his conscience.” [Peterson, p. 121.]

8:1 – Remember that rhetorical questions in Bible and especially wisdom literature serve as VERY positive assertions (Crenshaw, James L., *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), p. 135

Seow takes these questions as warnings, “lest you…” (p. 254)

The idea that even the wise can’t know actually frames this chapter, see vv. 1, 7, 17. [Miller, *Symbol*, p. 136.]

“Since God’s works cannot be altered, and none can discover what the Creator is doing now or intends to do in the future, the nerve of life atrophies. The temptation is to throw up one’s hands in despair, rather than to tackle life’s enigmas with confidence. In such unhappy circumstances, the perfectly natural reaction is to reject the possibility of knowing the meaning of anything (8:1).” [Crenshaw*, Wisdom*, p. 136.]

If one thinks in the light of Proverbs 16:15 where the light of the king’s face is a sign of favor [Seow, Ecclesiastes, p. 278] or problem of a “downcast face” in the royal presence, the transition from v. 1 to v. 2 doesn’t seem as abrupt as many take it.

8:2-3 This reference to the “Oath of God” could be: “a) an oath made before God and affirming fidelity to the king, or b) an oath sworn by God himself, promising support to the king (cf. “king by divine grace”), or c) an oath made to the divine king, i.e., to the king as a divine person or deity.” [Rankin, *Ecclesiastes,* p. 69.] It isn’t easy to pin down because this is the only place this idea of “sacred oath” appears with this wording in the Hebrew Bible [Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 279.].

8:3 Translations really vary about the “evil things” [deeds, words, actions] to be found in v. 3. Longman translates it as “Don’t persist in a harmful in an “evil matter.” The Common English Bible says, “Do not persist in a harmful situation.” This would fit well with how Longman treats the idea as advice to “Leave the king’s presence when he is angry.” [Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 212.] The Holman Christian Standard Bible reads, “don’t persist in a bad cause.” The English Standard Version has: “Don’t take your stand in an evil cause.”

For me, this idea of not continuing in an evil cause seems very consistent with the ancient world. Court intrigues took place all the time. For example, look at Psalm 64:5-6 [CEB]:JBL 98:3

Ps 64:5-6 reads: “**5**They encourage themselves with evil words.  
    They plan on laying traps in secret.  
        “Who will be able to see them?” they ask.  
**6**        “Let someone try to expose our crimes!  
        We’ve devised a perfect plot!  
        It’s deep within the human mind and heart.” [CEB]

It sounds a lot like the quotation from a treaty with the Assyrian king, Esarhaddon, quote in Nahum Waldman’s 1979 article on this phrase: “You swear that you will neither listen to nor conceal any improper, unsuitable, or unseemly words concerning the kingship.” [Waldman, Nahum, “The DABAR RA of Ecclesiastes 8:3” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98:3 (September, 1979), pp. 407-408. Citing parallel literature to this treaty, Waldman convincingly argues that “good words” or “good things” refers to supporting the king while “unseemly words” or “bad things” refers to insurrection or an actual coup [Waldman, DABAR RA, p. 407.]

In this case, Qoheleth would be warning his readers/hearers not to be even casually involved with insurrectionists or coup plotting. Although we don’t live in a royal court, the same kinds of dynamics take place in office politics. It’s wise not to even listen to the carping, complaining, and eventual plotting. Yes, this would even be true of church dissension.

The final line of verse 3 tells us that our plotting may not matter because the king does what he pleases. Interestingly enough, that phrase about doing what one pleases is only used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible for God [Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 280.]. In fact, that reference is found in Job 9:12 where it is saying that no one can countermand God. So, joining the plotters is not just like fighting City Hall with its power; it’s like fighting a lower-level version of God with powers beyond your own.

8:4 So, as we move forward into verse 4, we discover Qoheleth’s advice for damage control. What if you’re ordered to do something bad? Some interpreters would put it like this: “When, out of the fear of God, you conform to the situation into which God has brought you, *pecca fortiter* [literally, “sin is strong”]; you may be immoral, but conform and be safe.” [Macdonald, D. B. *Hebrew Literary Genius* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1933), p. 211, quoted in Rankin, *Ecclesiaste*s, p. 70.] Maybe it would be less offensive to observe: “Obedience before the one who is “stronger” (see Eccl. 6:10) is a mark of prudence.” [Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 87.] This agrees with Paul’s admonition to obey secular authorities in Romans 13:1.

However, I cannot help but think that this means doing what you absolutely have to do to obey rather than going “full out” to try to accomplish something with which your inner conviction has told you is wrong. In such a case, one should probably be somewhat passive aggressive in only accomplishing what you absolutely must. As seen in v. 5’s “right time and right way,” there is a proper protocol even though a person may be miserable while suffering under the restraints of the superior.

Speaking of things that cannot be restrained.

8:8-9 powers that cannot be restrained – list – usually the last is the most significant, hence *ruach* translated as wind rather than spirit, the day (possibly time) of death, de-escalation of war, and disentanglement from wickedness.

8:10 has many interpretations because the text is difficult. All recognize that the issue is that the delay of justice encouraged the wicked to continue (even increase) their iniquity. [Peterson, p. 122.]

It could be wicked men who worship, come in, go out to do their own thing and boast of it away from the Holy Place [Rankin*, Ecclesiastes*, p. 71.]

Miller (pp. 137-138)

1) the wicked entered the holy place and boasted that they acted righteously

2) the wicked were buried and everyone praised them

3) the wicked were buried and their wickedness forgotten

4) the wicked were buried and those who were righteous were forgotten

“In both 7:15–18 and 8:10–13, Qoheleth makes the case that indulgence in wickedness increases the likelihood of an untimely demise.”

P. Brown, William. Ecclesiastes: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (p. 89). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

8:11 – Lit. “the heart of human beings is full within them to do evil.” [Seow, p. 287.]

“Happily, Qoheleth thought that God was generous beyond comprehension. The only problem was that the gifts seemed to follow no identifiable pattern, so that an element of arbitrariness prevailed.” [Crenshaw, *Wisdom*, p. 136.]

8:14 “The tension here is that Qohelet seems both to lament the reversal of appropriate rewards, and to express confidence that such will not always be the case. …note, first, that v. 12 likewise acknowledges the slowness of justice (the ‘sinner’ prolongs days), and second, that texts more commonly attributed to the primary author of Ecclesiastes also affirm the certainty of God’s judgment.” For example, 5:6 [Miller, *Symbol*, p. 140.]

Seems best to view 8:10-15 as a *zwar-aber* construction [Like paradox, introducing conflicting ideas because both have some truth, but not having a solution] [Miller, *Symbol*, p. 140 n170.]

7:15 Costa Rican – *Buen Provecho* = wish for good eating, but “provecho” comes from *aprovechar* that means to use something wisely or take advantage of what has been provided to you.

8:16-17 – Q’s personal frustration?

Q “…defiantly challenges sages who claim success in finding wisdom (Ecclesiastes 8:16-17).” [Crenshaw, *Wisdom*, p. 61.]

“Deprivation of sleep is a motif found in the ancient Near East for religious fervor; people who describe their total dedication to certain tasks speak of their efforts day and night and how they deprive themselves of sleep.” [Seow, p. 289.]

But what I truly believe is important about these chapters is the way Qoheleth’s faith and frustration are placed side-by-side. He is as honest as can be about the wrongs or apparent mismatches that he sees in life, but his faith is still visible as a vital underpinning.