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WOMAN AS THE OBJECT OF QOHELET'S SEARCH

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Qohelet 7:23-29 has elicited numerous approaches to explain why there is a negative estimation of womanhood found on the lips of the wise. Below it will be argued that the text picks up the narrative of the first two chapters of Ecclesiastes and briefly continues the characterization of the life of Solomon. Part and parcel of that life was the pursuit of women. This pursuit had a negative effect on the reputation of Solomon. Some part of what it means to be wise seemed to have eluded him; therefore, the relation between "woman" and "wisdom" becomes an important hermeneutical approach to the understanding of the text. Before turning to this approach, however, a brief review of recent scholarship will be presented.

Various Approaches to Qohelet 7:23-29

Various hypotheses have been advanced to explain the passage in question. Michael V. Fox reads the text as simple misogyny.¹ Frank Zimmermann envisions a sexually frustrated sage, who speaks of his own embittered experience.² Scholars such as Sinclair Ferguson see a male perspective that can easily be transposed into the female.³ A feminine perspective might have read:

I find more bitter than death the man who is an iron fist and whose heart is arrogant and whose feet are steel boots. The woman who fears God will escape him, but the sinner he will crush. . . . I have found one woman among a thousand, but a man among all these I have not found.⁴

Kathleen Farmer claims that 7:26 invokes a certain kind of woman,

¹Michael V. Fox states: "The passage remains irreparably misogynistic," and 9:9 does "not ameliorate the sourness of the passage" (*Qoheleth and His Contradictions* [Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989], 237-238).

²Frank Zimmermann, *The Inner World of Qoheleth* (New York: KTAV, 1973), 152.

³Sinclair Ferguson, *Pundit's Folly* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 35.

⁴Duane A. Garrett, "Ecclesiastes 7:25-29 and the Feminist Hermeneutic," *Criswell Theological Review* (1988): 318.

such as can be found in Prov 7; only the sinner is taken.⁵ This reading leaves virtually all women morally flawed, since Qohelet did not find a single (upright) woman among a thousand.⁶

Further analyses border on the esoteric. Klaus Baltzer finds a military commentary in the text, as if Qohelet had written: "You have heard it was said, 'More bitter than death is the woman,' but I have searched the death-dealing אֶלֶי ("military unit"), and I found no woman there." The חֲשֹׁבוֹת of 7:29 is a machine of war, as are other elements of the text: chains, nets, and snares. The misogynistic meaning disappears and becomes a testimonial to the female gender. God made the male upright, but he has searched out machines of war.⁷

Thomas Krüger proposes that wisdom is personified; that is, the "sinner" comes under the inevitable snares and nets (discipline) of the wisdom school, but the good man escapes evil consequences.⁸ H. C. Leupold argued that the woman symbolized heathen philosophy.⁹ Perhaps she is the proverbial Dame Folly. Duane A. Garrett suggests that there is an echo of Gen 3 in these verses, with the curse of the woman, who "will try to trap" her husband.¹⁰ It appears that 7:29 seems to have the Fall in view: "God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes." Ingrid Riesener proposes that Qohelet's words are not his own, but are cited from "traditionelle Weisheit Aussagen," of the sort one encounters in the book of Proverbs, where warnings are given against the foreign woman.¹¹ Chapter 7:29 underlies the traditional negative statement with a positive judgment from Creation in this reading.

⁵Kathleen Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good? A Commentary on the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 179. Her opinion is derived from the close association she sees between Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

⁶Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 204. Longman argues from the lack of a single woman in a thousand that Qohelet had all womanhood in mind, not just a certain kind of woman.

⁷Klaus Baltzer, "Women and War in Qohelet 7:23-8:1a," *HTR* 80 (1987): 127-132.

⁸Thomas Krüger, "'Frau Weisheit' in Koh 7,26?," *Biblica* 73 (1992): 394-403. Krüger argues that the discussion is about wisdom, but that the disciplinary aspect of traditional wisdom, erotically personified, had disillusioned Qoheleth, who came to regard it as *bitterer als der Tod*.

⁹H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952), 173-177. Leupold also argues that women "never produce constructive wisdom works or systems of thought that are truly creative" (177). Commentators, perhaps, can also be misogynists.

¹⁰Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 325.

¹¹Ingrid Riesener, "Frauenfeindschaft im Alten Testament? Zum Verständnis von Qoh 7,25-29," in *Jedes Ding hat seine Zeit . . .*, ed. A. Diesel (Berlin: Gruyter, 1996). See also Norbert Lohfink, *Kohelet* (Würzburg: Echter, 1980), 56.

Recently Dominic Rudman has suggested that the woman of 7:26 is not evil, but is used by God as a tool to prevent the discovery of the sum of human life. The woman *per se* is not the "archetype of wickedness," since Qohelet refers only to her inevitable role as the thwarter of discovery. Qohelet seeks to understand human motivation and actions rather than abstract truths. Therefore, as one embarks on a search for understanding, it would appear to be impossible not to be ensnared by a woman, thus ending the search.¹²

The above synopsis illustrates the hermeneutical disparity among interpreters. Below we will examine another possible approach, in which 7:23-29 is read as a synopsis of Qohelet's search of chapters 1 and 2, and as a commentary on the life of Solomon. It will be argued that Qohelet's quest was, in part, for a female companion.

The Life Story of Qohelet

In Ecclesiastes, the "frame narrator" records the reflections of Qohelet: summary of Qohelet's words (1:1-3), an evaluative epilogue (12:8-14), and a third-person reference, "says Qohelet," (7:27). The frame narrator, rather than Qohelet, is the final author of Ecclesiastes.¹³

Qohelet himself speaks the first-person language, which is reminiscent of King Solomon. He is the "son of David, king over Israel" (1:1), dedicated to the pursuit of wisdom (1:13), engaged in great building projects and the acquiring of a harem (2:4-10). He is the greatest king of Israel (2:9). Qohelet presents his case in the guise of Solomon in order to more effectively make his point.

In the first two chapters Qohelet records his story, thus setting the stage for the argument presented in the subsequent material: Qohelet claims that he was king in Jerusalem; he desired to be wise, to "seek" (דרש) and to "explore" (חור) everything that is done under the sun (1:13);¹⁴ to "test" (נסה) and "explore" (חור) mirth and pleasure (2:1-3); to know wisdom, madness, and folly. Qohelet explored his world looking for that which is good and profitable. To see what is good, he tried wine and pleasure. He also built vineyards, gardens, ponds, and houses; he acquired servants, concubines (2:8, the delights of the heart of man), gold, and

¹²Dominic Rudman, "Woman as Divine Agent in Ecclesiastes," *JBL* 116 (1997): 411-427.

¹³Since this is the case, Ecclesiastes seems somewhat distant from the historical Solomon. Although the points of argumentation in this paper do not require a postexilic date for the book, such a date is assumed below where pseudepigraphic and Rabbinic sources are used to define a postexilic understanding of Solomon.

¹⁴The only instance of דרש in Ecclesiastes.

silver. He became greater than “all who were before” him and denied himself nothing that he desired (2:10).

But Qohelet did not find what he was searching for. He excelled in wisdom only to find that it brings great sorrow. He discovered that his wisdom and his work would end existentially in his own death, thereby giving him no advantage over the fool. He concluded:

A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind (Qoh 2:24-26, NIV).

The pleasure of the moment is all a man can expect from life. If God is pleased he gives enjoyment; if not, he gives hardship (2:26). All falls under the censure of “meaningless” (הבל). After this conclusion, Qohelet examines other fields of knowledge and experience and pronounces them “meaningless” as well. But Qohelet’s “experiment” as an ongoing endeavor in the *persona* of Solomon is not mentioned again until 7:23-29.

The Summation of 7:23-29

The first two chapters are recalled in 7:23-29, where the only other uses of the words “חור” and “נסה” occur in 1:13 and 2:1-3. The search for “wisdom” and “folly” evokes 1:17 and 2:12. Chapter 7:23-29 is an evaluation and synopsis of the “experiment” of the first two chapters. Only wisdom has ultimately eluded Qohelet: He “found” (מצא) no wisdom and no חֶשְׁבֹן. (It will be argued below that חֶשְׁבֹן may be glossed “intrigue.”) But the exploration of wisdom and folly did reveal three salient facts. First, he “found” (מצא) an אִשָּׁה (“woman”), who is a snare and a trap. Second, he “found” (מצא) one man among a thousand, but no woman. Third, he “found” (מצא) that God made man upright and that they seek חֶשְׁבֹנוֹת.

An Odd Thing to Find

While searching for wisdom, Qohelet found a dangerous woman. His statement about the “one man in a thousand” serves to highlight his inability to find any other woman than that which he found.¹⁵ If 7:23-29

¹⁵The section of 7:23-29 is tied together in part by a seek-and-find motif. This being the case, even if 7:28 were proverbial it would have served to reinforce Qohelet’s argument that to seek after a satisfying intrigue with a woman is a dangerous undertaking with small chance of success.

evaluates the “test” of chapters 1 and 2, then why is this new element (his encounter with a woman) introduced? Qohelet did not seem to be searching for a woman in the earlier chapters.

In 9:9-10 there is some evidence that in Qohelet's mind the search for a woman and the search for wisdom are equated. The relevancy of these verses will be presented below.

The Equation of the Woman and Wisdom

Enjoy life with the woman whom you love, all of the days of your meaningless life that he has given you under the sun, all your meaningless days. For this is your portion in life and in your laborious toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no doing nor intrigue nor knowledge nor wisdom in the grave, where you are going (9:9-10, author's translation).

Here the reader is not called upon to enjoy his wife as a facilitator of pleasure. The man is not told to “enjoy your wife,” but rather “enjoy life with the wife whom you love.” There seems to be an element of companionship and togetherness in the verse in the spirit of 4:11 (RSV): “If two lie together, they are warm; but how can one be warm alone?” The woman is not lumped together with white garments, oil, food, and drink.¹⁶ The man and the woman, whom he loves, should enjoy good things together.

חֵשֶׁבֶן and the אִשָּׁה

חֵשֶׁבֶן (“intrigue”) is set parallel to רֵעָה (“knowledge”), חָכְמָה (“wisdom”), and מַעֲשֵׂה (“doing, activity”) in 9:10. Together these should be enjoyed in life, since they do not exist in the grave. These terms are set parallel to enjoying good things with the woman one loves in 9:9. Qohelet did not say: “Enjoy life with your wife, since there is no enjoyment in the grave,” or “Enjoy life with her, since there is no marriage there.” Rather, he says: “Enjoy life with your wife,” because there is no חֵשֶׁבֶן, wisdom, doing, or knowledge in the grave. Qohelet equates enjoyment with wisdom, knowledge, and activity. Enjoy life with her now, since there will be no wisdom then. Therefore, Qohelet equates enjoying the good things of life with one's beloved with having knowledge and wisdom.

What was the object of Qohelet's search as he presented wisdom and knowledge in the first two chapters? Do “wisdom” and “knowledge” mean a philosophical understanding of how things add up? When he asks, “Where is the profit?” is this a philosophical question? He notes in 9:9-10

¹⁶Contra Krüger, who states: “. . . nennt er doch die Frau 'in einer Reihe mit guten Speisen und süßem Wein, mit frischer Wäsche und duftendem Haaröl'" ("Frau Weisheit," 394-395).

that enjoying life with one's beloved is synonymous with wisdom, knowledge, and activity. Perhaps this explains why Qohelet searched for the one, but found the other. Rudman asserts that Qohelet sought to discover what resides in the hearts of individuals, and it is this kind of knowledge that he labels חִשְׁבוֹן.¹⁷

There is an association between the אִשָּׁה ("wife") and the חִשְׁבוֹן ("intrigue") throughout Ecclesiastes. The words are found in alternate verses in 7:25-29 and are found together again in 9:9-10. The words occur only in these passages in the book. If they are intentionally linked, then חִשְׁבוֹן may denote a particular kind of knowledge, activity, or wisdom that involves personal interaction.

חִשְׁבוֹן and Its Meaning in Ecclesiastes

חָשַׁב is usually glossed "devise" or "reckon." Often the verb deals with court intrigue or politics (1 Sam 18:25; 2 Sam 14:15; Esth 8:3; Neh 6:2). חָשַׁב also commonly indicates an evaluation or scrutinizing of a person (1 Sam 1:13, Job 13:24, Neh 13:13, Prov 17:28; see also, "My maids reckon me a stranger" [Job 19:15]). The word also can mean skillful and clever designing (2 Chron 2:13, 26:15). The noun מַחְשְׁבָה can be glossed "thoughts" or "devisings" (Prov 16:3). The form חִשְׁבוֹן, however, is found in Ecclesiastes in the context of discussions of wisdom and women. In 7:29 we find חִשְׁבוֹנוֹת to be the plural form of a "synonymous variant" חִשְׁבוֹן.¹⁸ It occurs once elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures in the plural form, where it is glossed "siegeworks" (2 Chron 26:15).¹⁹ If one would devise (חָשַׁב) a political or amorous strategy, that devising would be called an

¹⁷Rudman, "Woman as Divine Agent," 425.

¹⁸T. A. Perry, *Dialogues With Qohelet* (Penn State Press, 1993), 132. Perry glosses "strategy" for חִשְׁבוֹן and "stratagems" for the plural of חִשְׁבוֹן. He suggests that the terms do not refer to "totaling up his experiences," but to an aspect of wisdom that plans for the future by anticipating danger. But if this were its meaning, then humans have no access to it (8:7), and Qohelet would hardly imply that living persons might possess it (9:10). Perry also sees the plural form indicating a shift from a positive to a negative nuance; the wise begin by seeking a wise strategy, but end by devising mere trickery.

¹⁹Most commentators see little, if any, difference in meaning between the two forms distinguished only by number and vocalization. The חִשְׁבוֹן of 7:29 has been compared to the חִשְׁבוֹן of previous verses along these lines: "The word points to the futility of the attempt—of which [Qohelet's] own experiment recorded in these verses is an example—to discover by wisdom the 'sum of things'" (R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, NCBC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 128). "This is clearly self-directed irony. . . . Such cogitation, he says here, is contrary to the way man was created" (Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions*, Biblical and Literature Series 18, JSOT Supplement Series 71 [Sheffield: Omen Press, 1989], 243). There is no discernable difference in the uses of the two variants by Qohelet.

“intrigue.”²⁰ Qohelet uses the term to associate wisdom and אִשָּׁה. The connection of wisdom with the devising of amorous intrigue has examples in Scripture. Jonadab was “wise” (חכם) in devising a way for Ammon “to do” (לַעֲשׂוֹת) something to Tamar (2 Sam 13:2-3). The Queen of Sheba was attracted by Solomon’s wisdom, so she “tested” (נִסָּה) him (1 Kgs 10:1; 2 Chron 9:1). The word used to describe the queen’s testing of Solomon is that used by Qohelet to describe his own exploration of mirth and good things (2:1). Her response in part was to proclaim: “Happy are your wives!” (1 Kgs 10:8).²¹ 1 Kings 11, then, delineates Solomon’s many wives. He loved these women and they “turned his heart (הַיָּד אַחֲלִיבוּ) after other gods” (1 Kgs 11:4). In Proverbs, the youth who is enticed by the adulteress lacks “sense” (לֵב, Prov 7:7). The wise youth knows that the end of all who follow her is death, and that life is found in the embrace of one’s “loving doe, graceful deer,” whose breasts always satisfy (Prov 5:1-23). In the first nine chapters of the Proverbs of Solomon folly and wisdom are represented as women, who seek to engage the young man. In the end of the book, to possess the virtuous wife is also to possess wisdom.²²

There does seem to be a connection in sapiential tradition between wisdom and the ability to handle the venereal appetite. Since חֲשָׁבוֹן occurs only in close proximity to Qohelet’s discussions of women, it appears to be a particularly nuanced term that refers to that aspect of Qohelet’s exploration of wisdom. The חֲשָׁבוֹן, then, seems to be a term that involves a fitting and appropriate amorous relationship with a woman. It is a dangerous, yet rewarding, facet of the path of wisdom that the sage enjoys. Assuming that wisdom and women are related in Qohelet’s (and Solomon’s) story, a fresh look at 7:23-29 will be discussed below.

Qohelet Tested One Woman after Another

All this I tested with wisdom. I said, “I will be wise!”—but it was far from me. Whatever wisdom may be, it is far off and very deep, who can find it? I turned my heart to know and to explore and to seek wisdom and an intrigue, and to know wickedness and folly and the foolishness of madness. And I found more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets and whose hands are chains. He who is pleasing to God escapes her, but she will capture the sinner. Look, this I have found [says Qohelet!], testing one woman after another to find an intrigue,

²⁰See Rudman, *Woman as Divine Agent*, 426. “The חֲשָׁבוֹן of the MT has the general idea of ‘intrigues.’”

²¹Following the Old Greek.

²²See Thomas McCreesh, “Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31:10-31,” *Revue Biblique* 92 (1985): 25-46.

which my passion still pursues, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I have found, but a woman in all these I have not found. Except—Look, this I have found: God made mankind upright, but they have sought many an intrigue (7:23-28, author's translation).

In Ecclesiastes, נפש always occurs with the meaning "appetite."²³ It is very rare in the Hebrew Scriptures to have נפש as subject with בקש as verb.²⁴ The only examples of a נפש "seeking" (בקש) something are in Lam 1:11,19, where the people seek food to fill their נפש, and in Cant 3:1-3 and 5:6, where the girl seeks him "whom my soul loves."²⁵ נפש can be understood in 7:28 to indicate sexual desire, glossed "passion" above.

In 7:23-29 the same parallels are being drawn as in 9:9-10. An "intrigue" is again parallel with "wisdom" (and in antithetical relation to "folly" and "madness"). Again, one's relations with a woman are intertwined with wisdom: "I searched for wisdom and an intrigue" (7:25), but "I found a woman more bitter than death" (7:26). One might paraphrase it with the words of 9:10: "More bitter than the grave." "I found this [says Qohelet!] one to one to find an intrigue" (7:27); "I found one man, but no woman" (7:28)—"I found that men go after intrigues" (7:29). Perhaps the "one to one" that Qohelet was searching for were people, not facts. אהה is feminine and may indicate "one woman after another."²⁶ Qohelet tested one woman after another to find an intrigue, but could find only a woman worse than death.

In 9:9-10 Qohelet claims that there is no intrigue in the grave, so one should enjoy pleasures with one's beloved now; he commends intrigue, wisdom, knowledge, and activity, which may be found in a companion, especially a woman. But in 7:23-29, he complains that what he discovered was the opposite; the women he explored made his life more bitter than death.

Women in Ecclesiastes

If Qohelet's search was for a companion, why does he elsewhere show little interest in love? He does acknowledge that there is a time for it (3:8). In 4:8-12 he claims that the horror of life is mitigated somewhat if one is not alone (4:8-12). But the word אשה is found nowhere in his search, except in his account of how women (שרה, "woman," probably

²³See 2:24; 4:8; 6:2-3; 6:7; 6:9; and 7:28.

²⁴A soul "seeks" (רש) in Deut 4:29.

²⁵See Riesener, "Frauenfeindschaft im Alten Testament?," 201.

²⁶The language of "one" to depict "one person" is found also in each verse of 4:8-12. See also Isa 27:12, לְאֶחָד אֶחָד "one by one." For instance, In 1 Kgs 3:25, Solomon says, "Divide the living child in two, and give half to one [לְאֶחָד] and half to one [לְאֶחָד]."

related to שָׁד, "breast") were to him objects of pleasure (2:8). Although chapters 1 and 2 do not seem to allude to a search for companionship, 7:23-29 reads into it the aspect of a חֶשְׁבֹן. Later in his positive statement about a wife (9:9), Qohelet claims the grave and "meaninglessness" is the end of any חֶשְׁבֹן. He comments on love, hate, and jealousy (a word closely associated with marriage) immediately before he comments about this wife (9:6, 9). Love, hate, and jealousy²⁷ seem to be related to "madness" (9:3)—a rare word in Ecclesiastes that seems to be a synonym for "folly," and an antonym for "wisdom" (7:25). But in 9:3-6 "madness" seems to have relational connotations. If all along his search was for a companion, why has he not been more specific about it? The following is a speculative attempt to answer this question.

Woman as the Instrument of הַבֵּל

Qohelet speaks as Solomon. In 7:23-29 his "test" of aspects of life recalls the first chapters; in the middle verse of this sequence the editor interjected "says Qohelet," reminding the reader that the text recounts Qohelet's experiences—the statements concerning the woman and the intrigue are Qohelet's (i.e., Solomon's) idiosyncratic judgments.

A 7:25 I searched for an *intrigue*

B 7:26 I found a *woman* more bitter than death

C 7:27 I tried to find an *intrigue* ("says Qohelet!")

B 7:28 I found no *woman*

A 7:29 Men search for *intrigues*

Although Qohelet (in the guise of Solomon) enjoyed pleasurable women in great numbers, there is no hint in chapters 1 and 2 of a particular woman who was a companion in the sense of 9:9-10 or 4:8-12. 1 Kings 3 records the first and noteworthy marriage of Solomon with the daughter of Pharaoh. Solomon also loved other "foreign" women (1 Kgs 11:1-11), who seduced him to idolatry. 2 Chronicles ignores this part of Solomon's history, regarding the king as faultless. The Chronicler seems to have influenced later Rabbinic evaluations of Solomon. R. Joseph suggested that the daughter of Pharaoh was converted by Solomon. R. Papa argued that Solomon did not actually marry foreign women (*Yeb.* 76); Solomon failed only to control his wives (*Shab.* 56). However, the 1 Kings record did mar the king's reputation. Even in the Rabbinic justifications, the women are censored as having been a poor influence. The Targum to Ecclesiastes relates how his marriages to these women

²⁷The use of the word נָפַח in 4:3 and 9:6 (and nowhere else) demonstrates the affinity between these sections. 4:1-12 is the most extensive section on the subject of companionship.

angered God, who drove the king from his throne.²⁸ The *Testament of Solomon* (first-to-third century A.D.) portrays Solomon as out of his senses with love for the “Shummanite,” finally serving Jebusite gods for her.²⁹ R. Hiyya b. Ammi used Solomon’s marriage with Pharaoh’s daughter to illustrate the loss of restraint (*Ber.* 8). Therefore, from before the postexilic period a very stable tradition can be demonstrated of Solomon the wise king, who was seduced to idolatry by his passion for women. It is reasonable to anticipate that this regard for Solomon also characterizes the book of Ecclesiastes.

Qohelet’s perennial complaint is that all of life is “meaningless” or “absurd” (הבל). Isaiah and Jeremiah dismissed idols as הָבֵל (Isa 57:13; Jer 10:3,15; 51:18). It is not hard to imagine the Jewish mind connecting Solomon’s idolatry with Qohelet’s ascription of his own works and wisdom as הָבֵל. The idol-worshipping daughter of Pharaoh was the instrument of Solomon’s הָבֵל, of his life cursed with meaninglessness.

Companionship and Wisdom

Companionship is an important theme in Ecclesiastes. Chapter 4 emphasizes leaving an inheritance to one’s sons, having a brother to help one, and so forth. But love for a woman in marriage is not made explicit (e.g., 4:11). It seems to be consciously avoided. Perhaps what is not explicit earlier in the book is made explicit in the summation of Qohelet’s quest in 7:23-29 and in 9:9-10, where Qohelet speaks of something elusive to himself (9:9-10), yet important to understand his search (7:25-29). So important, in fact, that finding a beloved woman is an “intrigue” and “wisdom,” the opposite of “madness” and “folly,” the best summation of life under the sun.

In the first nine chapters of Proverbs, folly and wisdom are represented as women, who seek to engage the young man; and in the end of the book, to possess the virtuous wife (Prov 31) is also to possess wisdom. In Ecclesiastes, to enjoy life with one’s beloved is to test and explore wisdom, the very thing Qohelet sought but did not find. Solomon was a lover of women, but his women became snares into a life of meaninglessness and idolatry for him.³⁰

²⁸P. S. Knobel, “Targum Qoheleth: A Linguistic and Exegetical Inquiry” (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale, 1976), 28.

²⁹D. C. Duling, “Testament of Solomon,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. John H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 986-987.

³⁰In Prov 31:30, the book ends with a tension between the woman who “fears Yahweh,” and qualities which are הָבֵל.

As the laborer has some benefit that the rich does not have (5:12), and as riches do not satisfy (5:10), so also the man with one wife may have an advantage over the man with a palace filled with “breasts.” Qohelet claimed that his “reward” was to enjoy his labor of building and searching while he was doing it (2:10). Could it have been said that Qohelet also enjoyed his work with a companion? Given the known history of Solomon, it would have been inappropriate to include the aspect of how “Solomon” also gained satisfaction with his own beloved (which is perhaps celebrated in the Song of Songs), since she was to him an instrument of meaninglessness. She instead became an obstacle to the fear of God—the very thing the epilogue presents as the sum of human life.³¹ Knowing how Pharaoh’s daughter reduced Solomon to idolatry, Qohelet could not have said: “I found pleasure and delight with my beloved as I searched for what is good.” This would have undermined his thesis. In other words, Solomon’s search in chaps. 1 and 2 for something which profits might have explicitly included his search for a woman to be a companion; the “second” to Solomon’s “being alone” (4:10-11), except that in his case the very thing that is the essence of a wise life reduced him to הבל.

Conclusion

The frame narrator introduces Qohelet’s words as a commentary upon, or as a notable companion piece for, the known life history of King Solomon. The king was certainly wise, but his amatory fascinations led him to worship vain idols. Traditional sagacity renders a wise life as that which is able to control the venerable appetite. In fact, the blessed life of a sage with a virtuous woman is the culmination of a life of wisdom (Prov 31). The desire to know this aspect of wisdom led Solomon to futility and folly. His downfall, however, is not explored in chapters 1 and 2, but is reserved for later in the book.

Qohelet is presented in the *persona* of Solomon to argue that no human endeavor yields satisfaction. The only enjoyment one may reasonably expect out of life is to enjoy the actual doing of the creative labor. Although the contented life of a sage with his wife is touched upon in Ecclesiastes, it does not seem to be a factor in the portrayal of Solomon’s experiences until 7:23-29. A dimension of his story is explored that was all but absent in the first two chapters—Solomon’s desire for such a relationship. The component of wisdom that Solomon pursued—the amorous intrigue—is given its own terminology, the חֶשְׁבוֹן.

³¹To indicate the sum of the matter, the editor did not use חֶשְׁבוֹן, but כִּירוֹת כָּל־הָאָדָם.

The word depicts a judicious relation with a woman. While Solomon continued his landscaping and construction activities of 1:12-2:26, we know from 7:23-29 that he also sought a satisfying intrigue. In the king's case, however, the intrigues that his passion pursued led quickly to his own reduction to הָבֵל. Traditional wisdom argues that the pursuit of a woman can be dangerous. However, this is not at issue in 1:12-2:26. The futility of trying to find lasting significance in any human interest is highlighted. The dangerous and ensnaring aspect of this is postponed until Solomon's story is revisited in 7:23-29.

In 7:23-29 Qohelet speaks again of Solomon's pursuit of wisdom. But this time the pursuit takes the form not of architectural projects, but of seeking after an intrigue. A sage can successfully embrace a wife in love and find blessing and honor; the historic Solomon failed at this test of wisdom. His failure was worse than any disappointment of 1:12-2:26, since it reduced him to futile idolatry. In 7:23-29 we see Qohelet, speaking as Solomon, lamenting over the fact that he had become so ensnared.

The frame narrator called the reader's attention to the fact that 7:23-29 reflects Qohelet's (Solomon's) particular experience. Love is an important part of sagacity and thus is mentioned elsewhere (9:9-10). The composition is designed such that Solomon's personal failure does not discredit the astute observations of human life (cf. 1:12-2:26). In addition the pursuit of love is an extremely important aspect of wisdom, worthy of its own separate treatment. For these reasons the recounting of the downfall of the king is reserved until 7:23-29. Thus one may read 7:23-29 as a recounting of how Qohelet (Solomon) was ensnared by a dangerous aspect of wisdom. This is told in a way so as not to denigrate or discourage the wise man from seeking his own intrigue. To enjoy good things with one's wife is part of the enjoyable aspect of life that Qohelet commends. But 7:23-29 also warns the reader to take care when pursuing such an intrigue, so that the temptations that ensnared Solomon may be avoided. In combination with 1:12-2:26 and 9:9-10, Qohelet may be paraphrased: "Do not seek to find with the wife that you love more than the moment-by-moment enjoyment of loving. To try to get more than this out of your intrigue can lead to the worst הָבֵל of all."