

Remember the 'Spring' of Your Youth: The Vanity of Male Power in Qohelet 12

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ABSTRACT

In patriarchal and phallic cultures the loss of power to create life as well as the implicit loss of potency are symbolized in the decaying or breaking of the phallic simulacrum representing the male genital member – often at the very 'fountain' of its power exhibition. This paper is a close reading of Qoh 11:7-12:8 (a highly contested text in critical reading). What follows is an analysis of the metaphoric references whereby an argument is construed in favour of the idea that, according to Qohelet, male power and virility are the ultimate expressions of meaningful life. Should fate strike in this realm it is also considered the worst of disasters (hebel) that may befall man. The passage centre-stages the opposition between youth and old age, and accordingly, the teacher advises the young man to celebrate his youth and carnal pleasures before the bodily deterioration of old age and impotence brings him to the brink of the grave.

A ORIENTATION

The issue at hand relates directly to the interpretation of Qohelet 11:7-12:8. Here the main problem revolves around the lack of consistent text-structural observation and text-semiotic reading. Argumentation will be provided in favour of the assumption that this particular section correlates well with the general philosophy of Qohelet in which a marked patriarchal script of male power is subsumed.

It is beyond dispute that Israelite society of biblical times was patriarchal. Israelite patriarchy does not exhibit itself in family and societal structures only, but also within their entire meaning and value system (cf. the collection of essays in Day (1989) and Børresen (1991), as well as Carol Meyers (1987) and Lerner (1986)). Patriarchy does not only inscribe social and institutional structures maintaining male hierarchy and dominance, but it inhabits the male psyche and mind in such a way that behaviour and thinking are 'patterned' in accordance with a patriarchal script. Consequently, conceptualizations of life, power, strength, virility, position, honour, etcetera, are role-modelled according to this script (cf. Ruether 1995).

Part of patriarchal script is the symbolism of the male genital member. The symbolism of the penis as phallus (a simulacrum) goes beyond the erotic and relates to fertility, creativity, virility, power, energy, and it may even relate to the very nature of male rationality, if Lacan is understood correctly (cf. Edge 2000:1-4). The phallus hence becomes a signifier of male subjectivity within a patriarchal society. The phallus may nevertheless not be isolated from the construction of patriarchal male identity (cf. Tarlin 1997:176-180).

Also, the possibility should not be ignored that the phallus could receive a status and celebration among women in rituals and ceremonies excluding male participation. Thus the Osiris ritual in Egypt was celebrated by processions of women with the simulacrum of Osiris, signifying his missing member after Seth had cut his body into fourteen pieces and his sister Isis had been able to trace only thirteen of the fourteen pieces (the missing phallus was made from clay). The phallus became a signifier of fertility and power, now carried by female devotees to the fertility goddess, Isis (cf. Rashkow 1997:73-76). In Greece a similar practice was recorded amongst women and it is still practiced today in Japan such as during the *kanamara mutsuri* festival (cf. Williams 1990). Phallic symbolism is therefore richer than its biological penis reference.

In the Old Testament rich figurative imagery exists for the phallus (cf. Wheless 1920(?):1-15 – despite the author's over-exaggeration, it remains interesting to see his treatment of implied references to phallic symbols in the Old Testament). Males are often viewed as the progenitors; their genital members were symbolic of power (1 Kings 12:10 – 'thigh' or 'loin' is an euphemism of the penis here) and control (cut off of the enemy's) and oaths are taken by grabbing of the penis (cf. the oath of the slave to Abraham in Gen 24:2-3, also 47:29, and the severing of a part of the penis by circumcision as the exclusive sign of the male conceptualized bond/covenant with Yahweh).

It is therefore to be expected that the way in which sexual power is viewed in Israel would be mapped onto conceptualizations of life-enjoyment, life-fulfilment, life creation, virility, fertility, power, and therefore according to the repertoire of male-script thinking. Old age and death must therefore naturally have been serious incursions on this symbolic rendering of the phallus.

B APPROACH

The approach that follows is a close reading of the mentioned passage in Qohelet together with a critical treatment of the symbolism involved. The symbolism, or extended metaphoric language, is related to the experiential domain from whence the abstract symbols may have derived. It is not a defined cognitive approach, but some of the arguments may relate to this field of inquiry. The main thrust of the argument is semiotic, meaning that the relative contribution of the signs to the overall meaning of the passage is scrutinized. Care

has also been taken not to impede the figurative language use of the passage by 'naturalizing' the detail *ad absurdum*. The direct implication is that I refrain from applying genre forms such as allegory to the particular passage. This is not to say that consistency and paradigmatic contiguity escaped attention. This passage competes with the richness of a text like Song of Songs, in which it is also unwarranted to 'naturalize' every detail when, for example, the woman is compared to a garden (cf. Cant 4:12-5:1).

C THE ANALYSIS OF QOH 11:7 – 12:8

1 Structure

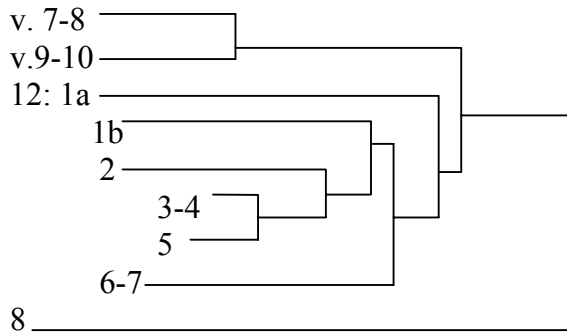
Qoh 12 stands as natural conclusion to the topic passages of the 'teacher'. Verse 12:8 echoes almost exactly 1:2, the first topic verse: everything is meaningless! The last verses of 12:9-14 consist of the recapturing of the wisdom pursuit of the teacher (cf. 12:9-11 and Coh 1) together with a conservative editorial addition (vv. 12-14) which clearly contradicts the rest of the book as is also evident from specific inserts in the rest of the book (cf. Lauha 1978:4-7 for a brief exposition of the composition of the book).¹ Qohelet contemplates of many topics² one would generally consider as important in terms of values and assumptions, but at closer analysis they appear to him to be meaningless and a worthless pursuit. Qohelet's assumption is that man is neither in a position to command events and their outcome, nor to predestine the inevitable cyclic flow of time. Best would therefore be to enjoy what is within one's ambit of joy and pleasure (*carpe diem*) with some degree of responsibility. The way in which he deals with these topics is by way of countering the normal or accepted value with its polar opposite. It is not really binary reasoning, for the synthesis cannot be construed from the maintenance of both oppositions. In this respect it differs from the binary logic of the sentence literature of Proverbs. Qohelet makes a clear choice of what appears meaningless and therefore a waste to pursue. After dealing with many aspects of the material, societal and spiritual values, he arrives in 11:7-12:8 at a masterpiece of poetic imagination on youth and old age. Most authors³ agree that vv.7-10 introduce the topic of youth and old age. This continues in 12:1-7 and is concluded in the *hābēl* (meaningless) statement. The

¹ Michael Fox (1989:23-28) rejects the idea of editorial insertions, and maintains that the so-called insertions are part of the contradictions that Qohelet is dealing with. Chapter 12 in its entirety would therefore be consistent with the rest of the book. From the interpretation maintained in this paper it is, however, accepted that conservative insertions do occur and that vv.12-14 is not reconcilable with the basic assumptions of the rest of the text.

² For a list of antithetic topics addressed in Qohelet, cf. Loader 1979:29ff. Fox (1989) dealt with these topics in terms of a more generically observable thought structure.

³ Cf., e.g., Loader 1979:107-108, Lee 2005:72 and Crenshaw 1987:34-49.

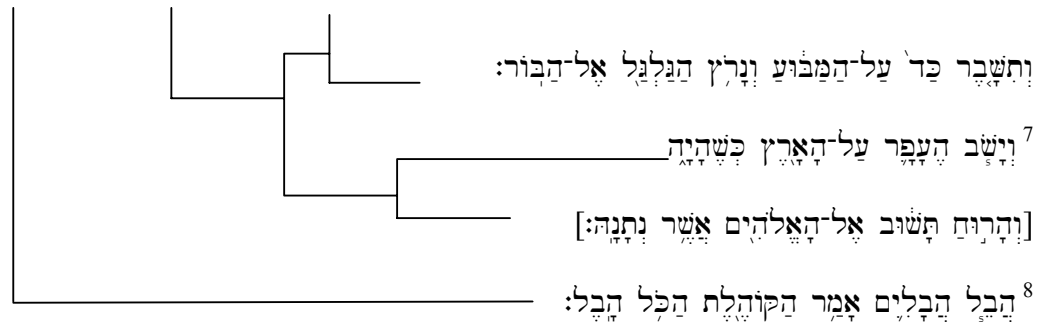
passage consists of the following arrangement (cf. the structural analysis on the next full page):



2 Discussion of content and metaphoric reference

Qoh 11:7 introduces the polar topic of youth and old age. Verse 7 and following, do not link with the preceding verse of chapter 11 in which the focus is on the uncertainties of life – the best man can do is to continue the obvious (... sow the seed) although you may not have command over the outcomes (... you do not know which will succeed ...). Verse 7 starts as an affirmation of the goodness of life (Lee 2005:72): *Sweet is light, and for the eyes it is pleasant to watch the sun*. The familiar metaphors of ‘light’ and ‘sun’ are employed in verse 7 as metaphors of the positive appreciation of life (also expressed as ‘sweet’), while the antithetical metaphors of ‘darkness’ and *hābēl* are associated with old age – the antithesis is expressed by the adversative *waw* in וַיִּזְכֹּר (v.8b). The general statements of life’s enjoyment are followed by the positive appeal (first of all by two jussives (v.8) and then by two imperatives (v.9) to the young man (in his prime – בְּקִוּיָּו) to rejoice (שִׂמְחָה) in his youth and to pursue/walk (הֵלֵךְ) in the ways of his heart and the desires of his eyes). Verse 9b explicitly refers to desires of the heart and the attractions of the eyes – it is in sharp contrast to the traditional view of the eyes and heart as organs of idolatry (Num 15:39). It is therefore quite natural that the editor would insert the conservative reprimand in 9c (‘but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgement’) – an unconventional long verse, and with no internal anticipation of or association with the rest of the lexemes in this passage. Verse 10 immediately takes recourse to the topic of verse 9 and extends it in typical Qohelet fashion: ‘Banish anxiety from your heart and guard you body from ails’. רָעָה connotes here bodily ails and not evil in the general sense of the word, cf. also 12:1. Verse 10b (‘... for youth and life’s prime’ or black hair (Fox 1987:278) are meaningless’) does not make sense as it stands, and must be an insertion by the editor to de-valuate youth. This is certainly not the intention of Qohelet in this particular instance.





12:1-8 represents one of the most discussed passages. This still has not resulted in conclusive answers. For the sake of argument in this paper the interpretation of verse 1 is crucial. The verse in the Masoretic version reads: *Remember/pay heed to your Maker(s)* (וְזָכַר אֶת-בּוֹרְאֵיךָ) *in the days of your youth*. The remembering of ‘your Makers’ at first glance seems unfamiliar, but an argument may be made in favour of a majestic plural from the verb ברא (then to be read as: your maker). The problem however is twofold: a) ברא is never used as an epithet for God in the Old Testament – even in Deutero-Isaiah, it is never an epithet; b) if ‘maker’ is the object, the dilemma is that there is no evidence that a human object can be marked by the *nota accusitivi* in conjunction with the verb זכר. In conjunction with an indirect object, זכר governs the preposition ל and, for the direct object, the *nota accusitivi* – as is quite evident from the unmarked instance in 11:8b (cf. Ps 132:2 for the unmarked prepositions together with the verb).

The only other alternative is to read בְּאֵרְךָ (your pit) or בּוֹרְךָ (your well) (cf. Crenshaw 1987:184-185). The association between בור (well) in this instance and in 12:6, is too obvious to be ignored. The repetition of the verb זכר and בְּחַיֶּיךָ (here the abstract nomen), earlier associated with the enjoyment of life (cf. vv 8-9), renders it possible to read the word בור as a metaphor for a young woman or wife. In a similar fashion the word is used in Prov 5:15 (cf. also Cant 4:12, 15) as reference to the wife (Prov 23:27 employs it similarly with reference to an unchaste woman). We will see later that the same word must have a similar metaphoric connotation in 12:6.⁴ In this passage, the associative levels of paradigmatic contiguity are such that one cannot regard it other than an instance of deliberate selection. The line may accordingly be translated: *Take heed of your wife (well) in the days of your prime...*

⁴ It is not altogether impossible that Qohelet is using the root בור as semantic pun, referring both to ‘creator’ as well as ‘well’. Lee (2005:25-26) has already cautioned awareness of Qohelet’s exploitation of the multivalence of lexemes. This is part of his strategy of indirection (misleading?) and obscuring imagery, which Lee refers to as ‘subversive logic’.

It is also an absurd instruction to remember ‘your maker’ in your youth, which would then imply that it is not a serious occupation in old age! This instruction also does not relate well with the three **לֹא אֶשֶׁר לִיא** temporal phrases (v.1b, 2, 6) as we shall see. The signified can therefore only be the ‘wife’ while you are young. The advice to embrace the pleasant enjoyment of your wife in the prime of vitality, is then juxtaposed with the inevitable bodily degeneration in old age – and this to Qohelet is the serious paradox of life. It is structured in three cadence repetitions of temporal phrases (**לֹא אֶשֶׁר לִיא**) – vv. 1b, 2 and 6. And exactly here, the most pertinent patriarchal script forces itself onto the scene: old age redefines and deconstructs the power of the phallus. Verses 6-7 accordingly is the crescendo of this passage, but simultaneously also the cataclysmic horror of bodily degeneration when the phallic symbol of power collapses at its ‘well’.

The first **לֹא אֶשֶׁר לִיא** phrase creates a general awareness of the cumbersome years of old age and the sickening body. The expression **יָמַי הָרָעָה** certainly refers to ailments of the body, equivalent to the use of **רָעָה** together with flesh in 11:10 and not referring to evil. It already alludes to the fact that old age will impede the carnal joy of young vigour. This terminative occasion of old age signals the end of the enjoyment of life, so strongly recommended to the young man in 11:9. It implies that it would therefore be a pity not to take heed of your wife while you are still able to do so.

The second **לֹא אֶשֶׁר לִיא** phrase (v. 2) echoes the ‘darkness’ metaphor of old age, introduced in 11:8b as the antithesis of light and the sun, metaphors of life (cf. the opening lines of 11:7). The cosmic domain from whence the expressions in this instance are derived may be a threatening storm, but the real impact of the verse revolves around the metaphoric reference to the ‘clouded’ nature of old age. The temporal continuation in verse 3 does not relate to the storm any longer but to the ‘darkness’ of old age.

This may be an apt moment to reflect on the reality domain subsumed in these and the following verses. Fox argued strongly that a more natural context should be construed in terms of the most obvious literal reading of these verses. He then suggested that the verses should be read in a context of a communal mourning (Fox 1989:285-288).⁵ The scenes portrayed are then related to a house or community in mourning – therefore the silence, the cessation of work, and the horror of death. He nevertheless admits to symbolic dimensions which would include allusions to the aging body (‘the infirmities of aging’ – Fox 1989:295), but he fails at the same time to make it relevant to the problematic

⁵ Spangenberg (1993:169-172) also warns against an allegorical reading of the passage, which to him seems to be a dated mode of understanding. He, nevertheless, interprets the section, except for 12:6-7, in a way similar to what the so-called allegorical scheme promotes.

verse 6. Fox rejects a consequent allegorical reading of the entire passage. Although in disagreement with Fox’s distinction between literal, symbolic and figurative functioning of language (Fox 1989: 285), I do admit to a natural domain from which the imagery is gauged in order to create metaphorical abstract references. For the purposes of this article, I shall focus mainly on the metaphorical content of the imagery. Although the figure of allegory may be too contentious to apply here, I shall nevertheless maintain the presence of a fairly consistent metaphoric reference throughout the passage. In a masterful and exuberant way, Qohelet exploited the imagery of the deteriorating body fairly consistently as an antithesis to the joy of life during the prime years of vibrant vitality. Despite the complexity of the imagery and even deliberate misleading or indirection of the imagery, the associative levels of this passage create enough continuity and coherence to establish focal integrity. Qohelet directs the perspective towards the inevitable deterioration of the body in old age. This is not done in a manner so as to underscore death as eventual outcome, but, importantly, to emphasize the collapse of phallic power – so much part of the enjoyment of life of the youth. It is an experience of anomie, when the essence of male power falls apart and signals the end of everything.

Qohelet extends the second ‘before’ phrase with a time marker: ‘on that day’ (12:3). This may only indicate the ‘darkening’ days of old age (11:8 and 12:1-2) – ‘day(s)’ is mentioned only in the context of youth and old age. The bodily deterioration is then portrayed in terms of the limbs (the arms that tremble and the legs that stoop – 3a); teeth that cease to grind because they are few (3b); eyes that dim (3c); ears that close to the noise (4a); sleeplessness sets in (4b); fear for heights and dangers on the road (5a) take over, while the hair turns white, and one drags oneself like a grasshopper – then even the caper berry (aphrodisiac) fails (5b). It is important to note the inclusion here: The second ‘before’-phrase is a temporal phrase still following the advice to take heed of your wife, while you are young (12:1). Immediately, before the causal phrase (5c) starts, the emphasis in the final position of 5b is on the loss of virility. This is reserved for the climactic final position, preceding the causal phrase which alludes to death and mourning (5c).

The third **עַר אֲשֶׁר לֹא** phrase introduces the most intriguing line (v. 6) and many scholars fail to attempt an interpretation thereof. Many, however, see in the disintegration of the equipment used to draw water a symbol of the end of life, and in terms of Loader (1979:110 also 1986:133-134, cf. also Spangenberg 1993:171), the deterioration of the water of life.

The text reads:

Before the silver string snaps and the golden bowl shatters,
And the jar/pithos breaks at the spring, and the wheel collapses at
the well.

The experiential domain of the drawing of water is noticeable here. But the question remains why this domain is activated, for it does not relate to a possible communal mourning scene (if Fox is to be considered) of the preceding section, nor does it apparently hint at bodily decay. One might argue that the body is metaphorically portrayed as a vessel or container in the Old Testament, and that this could be the metaphorical source for this passage. Then at least the breaking of the jar would make sense as a reference to death.

However, there are descriptive terms that do not really make sense in this context when the body-is-a-vessel metaphor is viewed as the solution. Why should there be reference to a 'silver string' and a 'golden bowl', items certainly not in use during the drawing of water? These descriptions appear nowhere else in the Bible. Without falling prey to a search for an interpretation to every detail in allegorical sense, one may argue at least with the clues provided by the text itself. For the text portrays quite a few associative allusions as well as de-automatisations of the obvious and realistic readings.

Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that the 'before' construct is still a continuation of the instruction of 12:1, to take care of 'your well' (wife). In verse 6 בור reappears in the focal position at the end of the verse, and conspicuously echoes 12:1. Here it also alludes to the collapse of virility at the end of 5b (see above). If the degeneration of the body is consistently the focus in the 'before' phrases, then something more definite is implied, for the topic of dying is explicitly mentioned in verse 7, similar in fashion to that employed in verse 5c. This therefore implies a close look at the specific terms and the objects mentioned here.

Wells in this context were relatively shallow and a bucket or jar was lowered by rope. From as early as the ninth century this was done on a rail or pulley (cf. Oleson 1992: 891-892). In the Hellenistic period the jars or *pithoi* had handles for the rope to allow the lowering into the well. It is possible that the metaphorical mapping was related to the shape and the attributes of the objects mentioned. In this regard it already has been established that the well or pit was a metaphor for a wife, and here specifically with reference to the sexual female body part. The shape of the jar (כַּד) had a phallic shape and therefore lends itself easily to such metaphorical application. Also, it is not inconceivable for the well and the jar to have sexual overtones. But whether one should relate the wheel (הַגִּלְגָּל), or lifting device which collapses at the 'well' with impotency, stands to be argued. Nevertheless, it would not be an impossible deduction to make. The 'silver string' is a deliberate de-automatisation of the rope used in the action of drawing water. It defers the meaning relative to the natural domain and can only have had a figurative meaning. The same applies to 'golden bowl'. The description 'golden bowl' (בִּלְתָּה הַזָּהָב) only occurs here – elsewhere גִּלְהָה refers to globe-shaped pillar capitals (cf. 1 Kings 7:41-42, 2

Chron 4:12-13). The bowl had a globe shape and might allude to the testicles in this context. As for the ‘silver rope’, it only makes sense if the structure of the text is viewed as a partial chiasmus:

וְתִרְצֵן גִּלְתָּ הַזֹּהָב [וְיִרְחֹק] תִּבֵּל הַכֶּסֶף

X

וְנִרְצֵן הַגִּלְגָּל וְתִשָּׁבֵר כֶּדֶר

Then the golden string is an association with the wheel (railing apparatus) and the golden bowl with the jar (the vessels for water fetching). The snapping of the rope and the shattering of the wheel together with the breaking of the bowl and the jar, allude to the collapse of virility and potency. It happens ironically and disastrously at the ‘well’ – the embodied site of male power in terms of the phallic script. No wonder the seventh verse heightens the finality of death beyond the dimensions described in verse 5c: *Then dust returns to the earth as it was*. This is the ultimate disaster. It renders everything else meaningless (v. 8).

D CONCLUSION

Although one should be careful not to get carried away by the power of allusion and explain everything in an allegorical manner, this precaution should not limit an exploration of the fantastic imagery of the passage in Qoh 11:7-21:8. A well-designed structure of the passage is complemented by a progressive and cohesive arrangement of the topic of old age and youth (excluded here are the secondary additions of vv. 9c, 10b and 12:7b).

The focus of the passage is on the calamity that strikes in old age. Consequently the pleasure and the enjoyment of life in youth should be appreciated. This enjoyment of life entails the embracing of one’s wife/wives. In terms of the male script this youthful enjoyment is the most pertinent demonstration of male power and virility. Old age is the horrible reminder that the days will come when the failure of this power signals the final end. And the worst of ironies will be that at the very ‘well’ of pleasure, the symbols of male power will shatter. The cataclysmic end to the alleged male power is in fact the cessation of being – when dust returns to the earth as it was. This renders everything, according to the philosophy of Qohelet, meaningless. This is a philosophy based on the assumption that the seat of power revolves within the ambits of phallic symbolism. When the phallus fails at the ‘well’, life is stifled and all that has meaning in life, comes to an end!

Translation 11:7-12:8

Chapter 11

- 7 Sweet is light and good for the eyes is to see the sun.
8 However many the days a man may live, let he enjoy all of them,
and remember the days of darkness will be many: All that is to come is vanity.
9 Rejoice young man in your prime, let your heart give you pleasure in your youth!
Pursue the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes!
[But know that in all these, God will bring you to justice.]
10 Remove worry from your heart and protect your body from ails!
[for youth and young-looking is vanity.]

Chapter 12

- 1 Take heed of your wife (well) in the days of your prime!
before the days of vexation (evil) come of which you will say:
there's no pleasure for me in them.
2 *Before* the sun turns dark, as well as the light and moon,
and the clouds return after the rain.
3 On that day the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop;
And the grinding ones cease for they are few;
And those who look through the window dim;
4 And the two doors to the street close,
the sound of grinding is muted,
And he rises by the sound of the bird,
while the song notes are stilled.
5 Also, they are afraid of an uphill and dangers on the road,
While the almond blooms, and the locust drags himself,
(then) even the caper berry fails:
For man goes to his eternal home and mourners assemble in the street:
6 *Before* the silver rope snaps, and the golden bowl shatters,
the jar breaks at the well and the wheel shatters at the pit.
7 Then dust returns to the earth as it was,
[And the spirit returns to God who gave it.]
8 Absurdity of absurdity, says Qohelet, meaningless altogether!

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