

## A New Approach to Qohelet 11:1

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### ABSTRACT:

*Determination of the meaning of Qoh 11:1 has been, and continues to be, one of the many problems that we face in the interpretation of the Book of Qohelet. None of the interpretations that have been discussed can circumvent the fact that the figure presented in the MT is unrealistic and untenable. Clearly, any approach to the resolution of the textual difficulties has to be anchored in text, context, and structure. The author provides an overview of a representative sample of interpretations for Qoh 11:1. His analysis shows that the various interpretations are not solidly anchored in the text. The text per se does not exhibit a compelling preference for any particular interpretation of those that have been discussed. Moreover, each of the interpretations has a number of serious deficiencies. Facing such inadequacies it seems reasonable to reconsider the premise at the basis of the standard approaches to Qoh 11:1, namely, that Qoh 11:1 begins a new unit. The author considers Qoh 11:1 to continue the warnings against unguarded talk which Qohelet started to present in 10:20. The author suggests that the Urtext of Qoh 11:1 was לְחַשׁ חֲלָמָק עַל־פְּנֵי הַמִּים בַּי בָּרְבַּ הַיָּמִים תִּמְצָא נָגֵן, “Whisper your dream upon the water, yea, in many seas you will find it.” This can be paraphrased: whisper to your reflection upon the water your dream, and you will find what you whispered in many seas; that is, it will be heard by others in public places. No secret, once uttered, is anymore a secret. This sense for Qoh 11:1, continues and develops an idea that Qohelet began to expound in 10:20, in reaction to the many informers which were active during the Ptolemaic rule.*

Was willst du untersuchen, Wohin die Milde fliesst?

Ins Wasser wirf deine Kuchen – Wer weiss, wer sie geniesst?

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), *West-östlicher Diwan, Nikmet Nameh, Buch der Sprüche*.

### A INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times to this day Qoh 11:1 maintained a proverbial sense, which might have hindered its correct understanding. The relatively simple text led to unanimity in literal translation, and the proverbial sense preserved it. Com-

mentors differed only in their perception of the conveyed figure and its intended meaning.<sup>1</sup>

The verse, taken literally, is obviously wrong. It reads

שָׁלַח לְחַמְדָךְ עַל-פָּנֶיךָ הַמִּם כִּי-בָרֵב הַיְמִים תִּמְצָא נָנוֹ,

which has been often rendered: *Send your bread upon the face of the water: for you shall find it after many days.* How could one expect to find after many days bread thrown into the water? Why to send anything on a perilous trip, just to get it back? Why in particular send one's bread? Of what value would be the returned bread to the sender? Of what significance is the time delay? Why did not Qohelet use a more familiar figure for his notion, for instance, the desert? To whom is Qoh 11:1 addressed? How general is the audience to which his advice would be useful?

Crenshaw found the advice given in Qoh 11:1 "strange."<sup>2</sup> No wonder, when one considers Lohfink's attempt at its interpretation:

If it is purely an image, it means: you might set up something false with your possession, through which they would simply be lost – it can happen that thereupon, and directly because of it, they are preserved for you.<sup>3</sup>

Longman observed that

the translation of this verse is simple from the philological perspective, but its proverbial and metaphorical nature makes it difficult to understand. What does it mean to *send your bread upon the waters*? If one could find it after many days, what value would waterlogged bread be anyway? In spite of the uncertain interpretation, the image finds use even in twentieth-century American language, registering a kind of vague hope for a risky investment.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lavoie, J.-J. "‘Laisse aller ton pain sur la surface des Eaux’ Étude Qohélet 11,2,” in *The Language of Qohelet In Its Context* (eds. A. Berlejung and P. Van Hecke, Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 75. Lavoie says: “Qo 11,1-2 ne pose aucun problème du point de vue de la critique textuelle, mais il n’en va pas de même de sa traduction et surtout de sa signification, particulièrement pour le v. 1a.” He shows how a structural analysis allows to reject some explanations and discusses the value of some interpretations.

<sup>2</sup> Crenshaw, J. L. *Ecclesiastes, A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 178.

<sup>3</sup> Lohfink, N. *Qoheleth, A Continental Commentary* (trans. S. McEvenue, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 132.

<sup>4</sup> Longman, T. *The Book of Ecclesiastes*. NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 255.

Is this kind of thinking in line with the pragmatic advice that Qohelet seems to be giving, or with his skeptical views?

Since Qoh 11:1 taken literally makes no sense it has been generally assumed that it is a figurative expression of some useful advice. Commentators usually rendered Qoh 11:1 literally, but appended an explanation on the nature of Qohelet's advice. It has been suggested that this advice pertains to maritime commerce (import-export), agricultural practice, sexual promiscuity, or benevolence and liberality (charity).<sup>5</sup> These slants have been predicated by a commentator's understanding of Qoh 11:1 in the context of what follows. As far as we could ascertain, no one tried to understand Qoh 11:1 in the context of the preceding verse (Qoh 10:20).

The purpose of this paper is to argue that the *Urtext* of Qoh 11:1, as Qoh 10:20, deals with the need to keep secret one's innermost dreams and desires, and warns of the danger in whispering them even to one's self. It is assumed that at an early stage of textual transmission, a pious scribe might have misperceived the *Urtext* as recommending some "magical" rite for dealing with dreams, which have been taken very seriously in the ancient Near East. He deliberately changed the order of some letters, obtaining thereby a text that was perhaps in a homiletic sense very attractive to him, since it promoted strengthening the institution of alms-giving. The sense of "giving" in Qoh 11:2, might have contributed to the "betterment" of the *Urtext* in this process.

## B ANALYSIS

The Septuagint's translation of Qoh 11:1, "Send forth thy bread upon the face of the water: for you shall find it after many days" (ἀποστειλον τὸν ἄρτον σου επὶ προσωπὸν τοῦ υδατος ὅτι ἐν πληθεὶ τῶν ημερῶν ευρησεῖς), has been almost universally adopted.<sup>6</sup> Some opt for the Peshitta's rendition, "Cast your bread upon the waters; for you will find it after many days," which is only slightly different.<sup>7</sup> The Vulgate adds the explanatory "running" (*transeuntes*) to "waters," translating "Cast thy bread upon the running waters: for after a long time thou shalt find it again" (*mitte panem tuum super transeuntes aquas quia post*

<sup>5</sup> Barton, G. A. *Ecclesiastes*. ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908), 181. A somewhat different categorization of interpretations is provided by Fox (Fox, M.V. *Qohelet and his Contradictions*. JSOTSup 71 [Sheffield: Sheffield, 1989], 273). Fox has the following categories: maritime commerce; risk taking; doing charity; and, potential of unreflective and improvident deeds.

<sup>6</sup> Brenton, L. C. L. *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987). All Septuagint quotes are from this text.

<sup>7</sup> Lamsa, G. M. *The Holy Bible From the Ancient Eastern Text* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968). All Peshitta quotes are from this text.

*multa tempora invenies illum).*<sup>8</sup> It seems that the Vulgate was concerned that in the case of standing water the cast bread would stay put.

The Targum's "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 reward in the world-to-come" אושיט לחם פרנסותך לעני דאולין בספין על אפי מיא (Arōm b'tar u'dan yomim sgi'ān t'mān t'schba' a'gri'ah l'ulma' d'at'i), is rather strange.<sup>9</sup> The boats were small with little accommodation for travellers. Transportation on boats was expensive, affordable only to wealthy traders or emissaries (Isa 18:2). Poor folks moved from place to place on foot, and anyway would not have had reason to go to far away places by boat.

The essentially literal translation of most of the *Versions*, Vulgate's emphasis of "running water," and Targum's unrealistic allusion to "poor on ships," all point to the basic fact that the Version did not understand Qoh 11:1. Generations of exegetes that followed did not fare any better.

Classical Jewish commentators almost uniformly understood Qoh 11:1 as figuratively referring to the advantage of charity.<sup>10</sup> Shmuel HaNagid (993 - 1056) poetically expressed this sentiment in the verses

*Cast your bread for it's good to give  
and he whose hand is open will thrive—  
lest, in the end, the days deceive you  
and strip you of all you've denied.<sup>11</sup>*

Rashi (1040 - 1105) suggested that the verse deals with being kind and helpful to a person who is seemingly unlikely to reciprocate. The kindness is altruistic, as unprofitable as "sending bread upon the water." Yet, it too will be rewarded. Rashi finds support for this understanding in Jethro's treatment of Moses after his escape from Egypt (Exod 2:20).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Hetzenauer, M. *BIBLIA SACRA VULGATÆ. EDITIONIS SIXTI V PONT. MAX.*, Rome (1922) All Vulgate quotes are from this text.

<sup>9</sup> Levine, E. *The Aramaic Version of Qohelet* (New York: Sepher-Hermon, 1978), 45.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Aboth d'Rabbi Nathan 3, bYebamot 121A, and Tosseftah Yebamot 14. It occurs also in midrashic tracts like *Yalkout Shimoni* and *Qohelet Rabba*. *Qohelet Rabba* spends a great deal of space discussing this verse indicating thereby its homiletic importance. The collocation of water and bread could not have escaped the keen insights of classical Jewish commentators. In the Torah, bread and water are symbols of hospitality and benevolence (Gen 18:4-5).

<sup>11</sup> Cole, P. (trans.) *Selected Poems of Shmuel HaNagid* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 153.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Exodus Rabba* Ch. 27. Sforno takes a similar position to that of Rashi, though he sees the reward coming from making a name for one self as being generous, and consequently liked by man and God. Metzudot paraphrases Rashi.

Rashi's approach is, however, self-contradictory. A person who can always expect reward for an act of kindness could never be altruistic. Perhaps, this logical inconsistency led Ibn Ezra (1089 - c. 1164) to consider Qoh 11:1 a warning to be generous to those who one knows as well as those who are unfamiliar to him. One would be hard pressed to anchor this perception in the actual text. Rashbam (c. 1085 - 1174) paraphrases Qoh 11:1, "Do a favor for a man from whom you never expect to benefit, because in the far future he will do a favor for you."<sup>13</sup> Rashbam's assertion regarding the outcome of the act of charity makes his interpretation even less likely than that of his grandfather Rashi.

This classical Jewish approach, which understood Qoh 11:1 in a symbolic and moralistic manner was also adopted by Grotius (1583 - 1645), who paraphrased the verse in his *Adnotationes* by "i.e., when nothing is expected to be received, God confers upon you beneficences" (*id est, ubi nulla spes sit recipiendi, Deus pro ista beneficentia in te conferet*), finding support in Luke 14:12-14. Staerk observes that Luther (1483 - 1546), in his handwritten translation notes, took a similar position.<sup>14</sup> Barton finds taking Qoh 11:1 as an exhortation to liberality the more likely sense of the verse. In favour of this explanation he points to two Arabic proverbs, "Do good, cast thy bread upon the waters, and one day thou shalt be rewarded" and "The generous man is always lucky," which might echo Qoh 11:1.<sup>15</sup>

Gordis is right in saying that the Arabic proverbs can at best indicate the existence of such traditional interpretation of Qoh 11:1, but not necessarily its true intent.<sup>16</sup> It is possible that Qoh 11:1 was adopted (adapted) as an expression of a vaguely formulated proverb that was current at some time, though originally Qohelet had something else in mind, or actually said something else. Indeed, the instruction of the Egyptian Onchsheshonqy, a near contemporary of Ecclesiastes, says, "Do a good deed and throw it in the water; when it dries up you will find it."<sup>17</sup> Ben Sira advises "Lose your money for the sake of a brother or friend, and don't let it rust under a stone" (29:10). The righteousness you store up instead of wealth will save you from all evil (Sir 29:11-13, see also Sir 3:31 and Ps 112:9).

<sup>13</sup> Japhet, S. and Salter, R. B. *The Commentary of R. Samuel Ben Meir Rashbam On Qoheleth* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1985), 119.

<sup>14</sup> Staerk, W. "Zur Exegese von Koh 10<sub>20</sub> und 11<sub>1</sub>," *ZAW* 59 (1942/43): 217.

<sup>15</sup> Barton, *Book of Ecclesiastes*, 181. This ancient interpretation of 11:1 retained its popularity to these days.

<sup>16</sup> Gordis, R. *Koheleth – The Man and his world, a study of Ecclesiastes* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 330.

<sup>17</sup> Lichtheim, M. *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1973-80), 3.174.

In more recent times, Fox was sufficiently impressed by the similar ancient proverbs to view Qoh 11:1 as being based upon (or reshaping) of such a popular proverb.<sup>18</sup> He says, “Kohelet advises, giving alms and assistance to a number of people in need (“seven” or ... “eight”). Though you do not know how your reward will come, it will.” This paraphrase merges Qoh 11:1 with 11:2.<sup>19</sup> However, it is very doubtful that 11:2 deals with alms-giving. The term **תַּלְכָּה** means in Qohelet (2:10, 21, 5:17, 18), as elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, a “substantial portion,” never alms. Moreover, the active **תַּגְאַפְתָּה** (“you will find it”) does not agree with the passive “it will come.” Finally, nothing in the verse compels us to understand the “seven” and “eight” in Qoh 11:2 as number of persons, and in particular as persons in need.

Fox is aware that the advice in Qoh 11:1 is paradoxical. He notes,

“To send forth one’s bread upon the waters” means giving it up, surrendering expectation of personal benefit from it. Yet, paradoxically, if you do this you *can* expect to benefit.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, not only is the figure used for expressing the idea unrealistic but the idea itself is paradoxical. Moreover, Fox’s contention that the ancient Egyptian proverb and the quotes from Ben Sira indicate similar notions as Qoh 11:1 is circular thinking. The texts in the quoted sources are certainly different. Only the assumed interpretations, our own inventions, are similar. The sayings in Onchsheshonqy, Ben Sira, and Qoh 11:1 have little in common textually or thematically. Moreover, Uehlinger observed that of the seven possible “parallels” between Onchsheshonqy<sup>21</sup> and Qohelet only two are convincing (22,5 //

<sup>18</sup> Fox, M. V. *Qohelet and his Contradictions*, 273. In this publication he paraphrased the section starting with Qoh 11:1: “In a world of uncertainties, prepare for all eventualities, because you cannot know in advance which will come to pass (vv. 1b, 2b, 4, 5, 6), and in any case you cannot affect the course of events (v. 3). What will be will be. Therefore, do not waste time pondering the future, but rather adapt yourself as well as you can to various possibilities. Instead of straining for wisdom, just go ahead and do what you must.”

<sup>19</sup> Gemser, B. *The Instructions of ‘Onchsheshonqy’ and Biblical Wisdom Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1959), 126. Gemser identified seven “parallels” between “Onchsheshonqy” and Qohelet. These parallels led him to the following very careful concluding remark: “These many similarities do let one ask if in Qoheleth an Egyptian background or at least some connection with Egyptian wisdom is not likely.” Fox (72) finds the parallelism between Onchsheshonqy and Qohelet saying close enough to indicate that Qohelet was using (and reshaping) a popular proverb. Fox says, “The sayings in Ancksheshonq and Ben Sira, however, support the first interpretation [alms-giving].”

<sup>20</sup> Fox, M. V. The *JPS Bible Commentary, Ecclesiastes* תְּהִלָּה. Philadelphia: JPS (2004) 72.

<sup>21</sup> Lichtheim, M. *Late Egyptian wisdom literature in the international context: a study of demotic instructions* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1983), 13-92.

Qoh 10:9 and 19,10 || Qoh 11:1). Yet, he says, these two cases “nach Lichtheim dem bereich der ‘internationalen’ Weisheit an, konnen die These einer Bekanntschaft Qohelets mit Anchscheschonqi also nicht begründen.”<sup>22</sup>

Gordis felt that the classical Jewish perception, as well as that of some modern commentators viewing Qoh 11:1 as an exhortation to liberality, is inconsistent with Qohelet’s philosophical world view. He says, “this reference to liberality is not in keeping with Koheleth’s general outlook, nor is it relevant to the realistic tone of the section in which it occurs.”<sup>23</sup> Fredericks felt that “it is not justifiable to preclude mercy being an option here on the basis of the supposition that Qohelet is uninterested in the poor or burdened; such a view fails to recognize his sympathy in 4:1, 2.”<sup>24</sup> However, the sympathy is expressed toward עשקים “the oppressed” (Deut 28:29-30, Hos 5:11, Ezek 22:29, Ps 103:6, 146:4). While the poor were easy targets of oppression (Amos 4:1, Deut 24:14, Jer 7:6), there is no evidence in the Hebrew Bible for assuming עניים = עשקים, or that Qohelet had specifically in mind here “the poor.” Qohelet uses עשיקיהם/עשקים trice in 4:1 to emphasize that he is concerned with oppression, acts that exploit power and force (כח). In 5:7 he specifically refers to the oppression of the poor (רשות), but that as being a fact of life. In Qoh 7:7 עשך is clearly unrelated to “the poor.” Nowhere does Qohelet find a need or a reason for altruistic giving.

Indeed, Qohelet considers it a fundamental evil to give one’s diligently acquired assets to someone who has not contributed to their acquisition (Qoh 2:21). When Qohelet compares the two opposite types of man he mentions צדיק vs. רשע נשבע טוב; אינו זבח טמא vs. טהור; רשות and, שבועה. He does not have נודב vs. אינו נודב. In his eyes man’s “goodness” was determined by his being righteous, ritually clean, bringing sacrifices, and not swearing. Perhaps, being righteous included giving alms, but it did not apparently have enough weight to be mentioned separately, as say swearing. If in 11:1-2 Qohelet recommends giving charity then one might have expected him to be more specific regarding the expected reward, in particular in light of his observations regarding the respective fates of the righteous vs. the wicked (Qoh

<sup>22</sup> Uehlinger, C. “Qohelet im Horizont mesopotamischer, levantinischer und ägyptischer Weisheitsliteratur der persischen und hellenistischen zeit,” in *Das Buch Kohelet: Studien zu Struktur, Geschichte, Rezeption und Theologie* (ed. Kaiser, O.; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1997), 225. Cf. Loretz, O. *Qohelet und der alte Orient: Untersuchungen zu Stil und theologischer Thematik des Buches Qohelet* (Freiburg: Herder, 1964), 86-88; and Michel, D. *Qohelet* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988), 53.

<sup>23</sup> Gordis, *Man and his World*, 294.

<sup>24</sup> Fredericks, D. F. “Life’s Storms and Structural Unity in Qoheleth 11:1-12:8,” *JSOT* 52 (1991) 99, note 1.

7:15, 8:14). Qohelet 11:2, which has been assumed by some as referring to multiple and continuous giving, is too enigmatic and neutral to provide any useful insight. Thus, one could doubt that Qohelet would address the virtue of alms-giving directly.<sup>25</sup>

Most modern commentators regard Qoh 11:1 advice on maritime export-import commerce, a view that goes back to Luther.<sup>26</sup> For instance, Jastrow says that Qoh 11:1-2 is

A bit of shrewd advice to take risks in business by trusting one's goods on ships that will after many days return with a profit, but do not commit all your possessions to *one* venture. Send your goods out in many ships. "Bread" does not refer specifically to corn trade, but is used for 'goods' in general.<sup>27</sup>

Gordis, following the general trend, says that Qohelet advises "Send your goods overseas," where the profits are likely to be large, while the next verse urges diversifying one's undertakings to reduce the attendant risks. In Gordis' view "This is, by all odds, the most likely view of the passage."<sup>28</sup> While popular, the "advice on maritime trading" interpretation raises the following difficulties:

- (i) The term "bread" (םַחְלָה) never means in the Hebrew Bible "goods," or "merchandise." The term מַחְלָה is used by Qohelet in 9:11 and 10:19. In the first instance it means "bread" or "food," and in the second instance it probably means "banquet."
- (ii) The verse does not have even a hint of a future profit. At most it suggests that what was sent would be recovered (וְנִמְצָא תִּמְצָא = "you will find it").
- (iii) The verse does not have even a hint of ships, over sea shipment, or import.
- (iv) The connection between v. 1 and v. 2 has been taken as the strongest argument in favour of the "advice on maritime trading" interpretation. However, v. 2 deals with uncertainties on land, and does not mention the

<sup>25</sup> Barton, *Book of Ecclesiastes*, 193. Barton notes that Siegfried does not believe 11:1 is Qohelet's. In Barton's view "The appropriateness of the whole passage [11:1-12:8], with the exception of 11:9b and 12:1a to Qohelet's thought, is too evident to need demonstration."

<sup>26</sup> Staerk, *Zur Exegese von Koh 10* 20 und 11 1, 216.

<sup>27</sup> Jastrow, M. *A Gentle Cynic, Being a Translation of the Book of Koheleth, Commonly Known as Ecclesiastes, Stripped of Later Additions, also its Origin, Growth, and Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1919), 216 note 162.

<sup>28</sup> Gordis, *Man and his World*, 330.

sea or waters at all. It is difficult to see how instability on land could be linked with the advantage of maritime export-import business.

(v) The Hebrew Bible mentions only a joint venture of Solomon and Hiram in maritime trade from Eilat (1 Kgs 9:26-28, 10:22, 2 Chr 9:21) and that of Jehoshaphat and Ahaziah (1 Kgs 22:48, 2 Chr 20:36), both royal enterprises. Judea in antiquity was largely an agricultural country.<sup>29</sup> Its physical geography, coastal weather conditions, geopolitical reality, and perhaps insularity, were not conducive to maritime trade. Its coast did not have natural bays suitable for harbours (except Acco and Jaffa), the maritime plane suffered from excessive precipitation and flooding,<sup>30</sup> two major international trade roads (Way of the Sea and King's road) usually controlled by others bracketed the country on the west and east side, and unlike Phoenicia, it did not have the materials for shipbuilding or tend to establish colonies along the Mediterranean coast. Josephus observed: "ours is not a maritime country. ... Our cities are built inland, remote from the sea" (*Anti Apion*, 1.60).

Though a considerable volume of international trade was constantly passing along the major trade roads, Judeans were only marginally involved in it. The great merchants were normally foreigners with well established contacts and capital. In the Graeco-Roman period several of the existing cities (Ashkelon, Jaffa, Dor, Caesarea, Acco) along the coast were subject to strong waves of colonization that transformed them into maritime commerce ports. However, objective considerations as well as anti-hellenistic sentiments made exploitation of these opportunities an unrealistic prospect for most Judeans.<sup>31</sup> Serious interest in

<sup>29</sup> The Israelites were familiar with the structure of boats and ships, and seafaring from their experience in the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean. The Bible contains various terms connected with sea vessels and sea transportation (1 Kgs 10:22, Isa 18:2, 33:21, 23, Ezek 27:5-7, 27, 29, Jon 1:5, 13, Prov 23:34). Psalm 107:23-32 presents a realistic description of a storm overtaking a ship and the subsequent calm. However, only when the Jews became dispersed throughout the Greek and Roman world did they become interested in international and maritime commerce.

<sup>30</sup> Faust, A. and Ashkenazy, Y. "Excess in precipitation as a cause for settlement decline along the Israeli coastal plain during the third millennium BC," *Quaternary Research* 68/1 (2007): 37-44. The authors show that humid conditions resulted in the abandonment of settlements along the Israeli coastal plain. Specifically, increased precipitation intensified the already existing drainage problems and resulted in flooding, which led to the transformation of arable land into marshes and to the spread of diseases, gradually causing settlement decline and abandonment.

<sup>31</sup> Kashatan, N. "Seafaring and Jews in Graeco-Roman Palestine: Realistic and Symbolic Dimensions," in *Seafaring and Jews* (ed. N. Kashatan; New York: Routledge, 2001), 19. Kashtan notes that "The sources lack precise information on the demo-

Mediterranean commerce began to develop in Judea only after Simeon the Hasmonean (1 Macc 14:5) captured the coastal cities.

The only literary evidence available from biblical times to the time of Herod, about Judeans that had ships and maintained a fleet, pertains to Solomon, Jehoshaphat (and Ahaziah), the Maccabees, and Herod.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps, a few rich people were also involved during the Ptolemaic period in maritime export-import.<sup>33</sup> It is, however, unlikely that Qohelet, who formulated general rules of life, would address the interest of such a select group.

- (vi) De Jong argued “that Qohelet developed his thoughts in view of the ambitious spirit of a specific group, namely that of the Jewish aristocratic circles influenced by the Hellenistic culture.”<sup>34</sup> Qohelet has a negative opinion of individuals full of ambition, reminding them of human limitations in line with a well-known idea of Israel’s religious history and especially the wisdom tradition (Prov 16:18-19, Ps 90:10, 127:1-2, Job 7:1-3). If de Jong is correct, then urging investment in maritime trade would be contrary to Qohelet’s basic precepts.
- (vii) Qohelet invests in property (2:4-7) and liquid assets (2:8), finds advantage in cultivated land (5:8), but says nothing about trading. We do not find in the “catalogue of times” *למכור ועת לknوت תע*, “a time to sell and a time to buy.”

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graphic map of Palestine and give only a few details on the size of Jewish communities in coastal cities.” There is scant evidence of Jewish operators or owners of shops.

<sup>32</sup> Kashatan, *Seafaring and Jews*, 23-24. Outside of Judea, for centuries and well into the common era, Alexandria had its own society of Jewish *navicularii* (“shipowners”), as well as seamen of all professions. Philo reports that during the anti-Jewish riots of 39 C. E., cargoes of Jewish ships were carried off and burned.

<sup>33</sup> Michel, D. *Qohelet*. Erträge der Forschung 258 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988), 112-115. I assume what is generally accepted that Qohelet wrote his book in Judea during the Ptolemaic period.

<sup>34</sup> De Jong, S. “Qohelet and the Ambitious Spirit of the Ptolemaic Period,” *JSOT* 61 (1994) 90. De Jong notes that “The Ptolemaic period was a prosperous one for Egypt and its dominions. In this relatively peaceful time the efficient administrative organization and technical innovations provided for an economic boom. Ambitious immigrants especially Greeks went to the Ptolemaic Kingdom to become rich. The administrative system, the army, commerce, the lease system connected with taxation and other monopolies offered opportunities to anyone with a business mentality to make a fortune. ... The spirit that blew through the Ptolemaic Empire was one of superiority and optimism. A strong creative urge and a competitive mentality characterized the Ptolemaic aristocrats. ... The same spirit had reached the Ptolemaic dominion of Judaea. In the third century, alongside the ruling priestly class, a new elite appeared that was open to Hellenistic thoughts and customs.”

(viii) The term **נִאָשְׁרָת** is awkward in the “advice on maritime trading” interpretation. If the “it” in **נִאָשְׁרָת** refers to the ships on which the goods were sent, we might have expected **נִאָשְׁרָת** instead of **נִאָשְׁרָת**. The ship either returns from the voyage or not, but it is not “found.” Qohelet uses the root **אָשָׁר** many times (14), always in the sense “find.”

(ix) The hazardous nature of transportation along the coastal waters (ship-wrecks, pirates) makes the surety of the imperfect **נִאָשְׁרָת** reckless.<sup>35</sup> The imperfect **נִאָשְׁרָת** could also have a modal aspect (*may find*) rather than represent the future tense.<sup>36</sup> Still, the “iffy” nature of this proposition casts a doubt on the solidity of the entire enterprise.

(x) Qohelet 11:1 is too neutral to be considered as supporting any particular business model.

(xi) We have little evidence about the specific products that were transported along maritime and inland routes in the Hellenistic period. An official report of a Ptolemaic agent written in 259 B.C.E. (Zenon, *Papyrus Cairo* [mid-third century B.C.E.], 59004, 12; 59008, 17; 5969, 11) indicates that grain held a central position in the maritime trade along the eastern Mediterranean shores.<sup>37</sup> Judea might have exported in Qohelet’s time olive oil (Hos 12:1, Isa 57:9), perfumes (in particular, *Balsamum*), wine (2 Chr 2:10, 15, Ezra 3:7), and sweet dried fruits (dates, figs, raisin, carob fruit). Reference to grain coming from Acco occurs in one of Herondas’ dialogues (first half of 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.E.) conducted on the Ionian island Cos.<sup>38</sup> Grain was in great demand in Phoenicia both for consumption in the great cities of Tyre and Sidon and for export (1 Kgs

<sup>35</sup> Parker, A. J. *Ancient shipwrecks of the Mediterranean and the Roman Provinces* (Oxford: Tempus, 1992), 6. The number of known shipwrecks in the Mediterranean is considerable. For instance, Parker puts the number of wrecks recorded by the Greek Department of Underwater Antiquities at 1000. The wrecks discovered are only a small part of the far larger total number of ships that were wrecked in the Mediterranean in antiquity. Many ships completely disintegrated upon impact on the rocks and those that have been discovered were in shallow coastal waters and were found by diving. Many literary sources on the extensive piracy in the Mediterranean during the Ptolemaic period can be found in De Souza, P. *Piracy in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 33-41.

<sup>36</sup> Murphy, R. E. *Ecclesiastes*. WBC (Dallas: Word, 1992), 106.

<sup>37</sup> Kashtan, N. “AKKO-Ptolemais: A maritime metropolis in Hellenistic and early roman times, 332 BCE-70 CE, as seen through literary sources,” in *Mediterranean Cities: Historical Perspective* (eds. I. Malkin and R. L. Hohlfelder, New York: Routledge, 1988), 45.

<sup>38</sup> Herondas, *Pornoboskos*, 2.16-17. It is not clear in this case whether the grain came from the Acco hinterland, or Acco was only the port from which it was last shipped, but the origin of the grain was Egypt.

5:25, Ezra 3:7, Ezek 27:17, etc.). Judea probably occasionally sold surplus grain to Phoenicia and shipped it by land. However, Prov 11:26 strongly suggests that people tended to hold on to grain, and shortages resulted as a result of that. It is doubtful that the land produced enough grain to be able to export grain products overseas in international trade.<sup>39</sup> Qohelet could not have encouraged export of grain (Cf. NEB, NET).

Zimmermann finds support for the “advice on maritime trading” interpretation in the Aramaic origin of the book. He says,

The Hebrew reads the familiar “Cast thy bread upon the waters,” which nevertheless is a most incongruous bit of advice. Moses Mendelsohn, Morris Jastrow and others see a suggestion for shrewd business venture, as indeed the sequence bears out. The Aramaic substrate supplies the key which had the word *peristak* [פְּרִסְתָּקְ], which the translator read as “bread,” but as the context demands should have been read as “sail,” “ship.”<sup>40</sup>

He translates Qoh 11:1 by “Set sail your ship upon the sea for you will retrieve it with the passage of time.” However, Ezek 27:7 demonstrates that had Zimmermann been correct then Qohelet could have had used מִפְרִשָּׁךְ, an easy use of an almost identical Hebrew term, rather than take לְחַם, which gives an unrealistic figure. Moreover, the Aramaic פרס means “to split, to break,” not “bread.” The assumed Aramaic/Hebrew translator would not have rendered פְּרִסְתָּקְ for לְחַם.<sup>41</sup>

Some early Jewish exegesis considered the plain meaning of Qoh 11:1 to be related to agricultural practices. For instance, Sa‘adiah (882 - 942) says that our verse deals with land that is watered by rain, and Qohelet advises to plant it when it is sufficiently wet, not in the dry season הַפְּשָׁת בְּעִנִּינִי עִירּוֹד (אַדְמָוֹת הַבָּעֵל … בְּקַבָּעֵךְ עַת לֹזְרוּת הַתְּכוּן שִׁיהְאָ כְּשַׁתְּרוּתָה הָאַדְמָה לֹא בָּזְמָן הַיּוֹבֵשׁ). A similar opinion is held by the 11<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> century exegete R. Joseph Qara and 14<sup>th</sup> century Ritva (*Lekach Tov*). Zer Kavod adopts this view.<sup>42</sup> Recently, Kruger observed: “It is conceded that Qoh 11, 1-6 may be interpreted in terms

<sup>39</sup> The only time Israelites are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible as trading in grain is in the difficult Ezek 27:17. However, the grain itself (חַטִּי מַנִּיתָה) seems to be from Amon. Cf. Moshkowitz, Y. Z. *ספר יחזקאל* (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1985), 214; and Feliks, J. *Plant World of the Bible* (Ramat-Gan: Massada, 1968), 142. Feliks notes that in the time of the Talmud, when most of the society was agricultural, people grew wheat in sufficient quantity for their own consumption.

<sup>40</sup> Zimmermann, F. *The Inner World of Qohelet* (New York: KTAV, 1973), 159.

<sup>41</sup> Jastrow, M. *A Dictionary of the Targumim, The Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New-York: Traditional Press, 1903), 1232-33.

<sup>42</sup> Zer-Kavod, M. In *חַמְשָׁ מְגִילּוֹת* Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook (1973) 67.

of advice given to a farmer (practicing husbandry).<sup>43</sup> However, agricultural practices in any locality have been usually worked out over generations, and are based on accumulated experience that cannot be rivalled by the generalities of an urbanite philosopher. It is hard to believe that the urbanite Qohelet would have anything to add to them.

Not long ago Mikam discussed Qoh 11:1, capitalizing on the assumption that the verse is thematically connected to what follows. In v. 4 are mentioned ideal conditions for sowing and reaping, which cannot always be achieved, and in v. 6 the ideal time for sowing during the day is discussed. He renders: “Plant your crops close to water (opposite to the water) for in most of the days of the year you would have produce.”<sup>44</sup> Mikam can claim (though he does not) support for his approach from the Targum, which translates verse 2: “Give a good portion of seed to your field in Tishrei and do not refrain from sowing also in Marcheshwan for you do not know what evil will be upon the earth whether the earlier or the later crops will thrive.”<sup>45</sup> Despite the Targum’s understanding of verse 2 this interpretation makes no sense for the following reasons:

- (i) Verses 2-3, and 5 do not have a clear agricultural content.
- (ii) The term **שלח** means “send,” not “throw” or “cast,” meanings that are not attested for the *Piel* of **שלח**. The sense “send” is entirely inappropriate for the description of sowing.
- (iii) The term **שלח** is never associated with planting or sowing. Indeed, Qohelet uses for sowing **עַר** in 11:4, 6, and for planting trees **עַט** in 2:4, 5, 3:2, and 12:11. For instance, Isaiah describing agricultural practices (28:25) does not mention **שלח**.
- (iv) The term **לחם** designates “bread”, “food,” or “a meal.” It refers to a product of the earth (Isa 30:23, Job 28:5, Ps 104:14), not the seeds that have been sown. Isa 28:28 is not clear enough to be of use. Thus, **לחם** cannot be taken as a metonymy of product, standing for the grain and wheat from which bread is produced.
- (v) The term **לְחֵם** is used by Qohelet in 9:11 and 10:19. In the first instance it means “bread” or “food,” and in the second instance it probably means “banquet.”

<sup>43</sup> Kruger, H. A. J. “Old Age Frailty versus Cosmic Deterioration” in *Qohelet In The Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors, Leuven: University Press, 1998), 405.

<sup>44</sup> Mikam (Mahler), M. “**בִּיאָרִי כְּתוּבִים**” in *Sepher Tur-Sinai* (eds. M. Haran, and B-Z Luria, Jerusalem: Kiryat Sepher, 1960), 114-115.

<sup>45</sup> Knobel, P. S. *The Targum of Qohelet* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991), 50. Counting from Nisan, which according to the Hebrew Bible is the first month of the year, Tishrei and Marcheshwan are the seventh and eight month, respectively.

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- (vi) The Bible attests to the advantage that trees have when planted close to sources of water, but not seeds.
- (vii) Agricultural produce is usually seasonal. It is impossible to have continuous production.
- (viii) The term נָאַמְתָּה refers to נָמָתְלָה. Thus, what is sown must be the same as what is produced, which means that the verse deals with single season crops, which are not always beneficially affected by the nearby presence of bodies of water.
- (ix) The advice cannot have general validity. Most farmers would not have much of a choice where to plant.

Various interpretations have been suggested, which have not acquired any significant foothold in scholarship. For instance, it has been suggested (*Ta'alumot Hochmah*) that Qohelet warns the leaders not to desist from their exhortations though they see that their words have no effect, they are as sending bread upon the water. Someone would heed and would be influenced. Graetz took “bread” as equivalent to “seed,” but interpreted it as the “seed” of human life, and so found in the verse a maxim bordering on the licentious.<sup>46</sup> Similarly Perry felt that the allusion of the metaphor might be “Release, direct your sexual energies to procreation!”<sup>47</sup> Podechard found Qoh 11:1 in agreement with the teachings of 3:11, 8:17, and 9:11, where Qohelet states that the future is uncertain.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, Hertzberg interpreted the passage as underscoring the uncertainty of life. Even an unwise action can have a good ending, so that one never knows how a particular event will turn out. He renders Qoh 11:1-2 “Cast your bread upon the waters (a total loss), yet you may find it; carefully divide and husband your possessions, yet evil may come and destroy them.”<sup>49</sup> Lavoie suggested to consider the two verses 11:1-2 as being antithetical: an insane gesture (v. 1A) can have a positive result (v. 1b), while a prudent gesture (v. 2A) does not guarantee success (v. 2b).<sup>50</sup> Tur-Sinai understood

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<sup>46</sup> Graetz, H. *Kohelet* (Leipzig: C.F. Winter’sche Verlagshandlung, 1871), 128-129.

<sup>47</sup> Perry, T. A. *Dialogues with Kohelet: The Book of Ecclesiastes* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 161.

<sup>48</sup> Podechard, E. *L’Ecclésiaste* (Paris: Lecoffre, 1912), 198.

<sup>49</sup> Hertzberg, H. W. *Der Prediger (Qohelet) übersetzt und erklärt von H.W. Hertzberg* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1932), 200.

<sup>50</sup> Lavoie, Étude Qohélet 11,2, 88. He says: “À mon avis, c’est une interprétation sensiblement différente qu’il convient de donner à ces deux versets: un geste insensé (v. 1a) peut avoir un résultat positif (v. 1b), tandis qu’un geste prudent (v. 2a) ne garantit aucunement le succès (v. 2b). Les deux versets forment ainsi une antithèse et les deux conseils perdent du même coup leur force persuasive. Comme Pr 26,4-5, les v. 1-2 forment une sorte d’antilogie. Toutefois, contrairement à Pr 26,4-5, l’objectif de Qohelet n’est pas d’inviter au discernement, mais plutôt de faire prendre conscience

Qoh 11:1 as referring to fishing. The bread is the bait spread out over the water, which lures the fish from the depth of the sea (ברב = בלב).<sup>51</sup> Ibn Ezra mentions, but dismisses, an opinion that the verse refers to feeding fish in a pond. Levy suggested that the verse means: “Send your capital—out of Alexandria.”<sup>52</sup>

Some saw in Qoh 11:1 an allusion to Egyptian planting practices on the banks of the Nile. As the Nile overflows its banks the weeds perish and the soil disintegrates. Rice-seed cast into the water sink and take root. When the water recedes they are found growing in healthy vigor. It is hard to see of what relevance would be this Egyptian practice to an Israelite farmer. Homan argued that in light of the ancient Near East procedures for beer production, which involved placing bread in water, Qoh 11:1 should be understood as a recommendation for making beer and its consumption in perilous times.<sup>53</sup> Stoute found in “bread” and “waters” allusion to Jesus and Gentiles.<sup>54</sup> Such interpretations can hardly pass simple sanity checks.

My analysis shows that the various interpretations are not solidly anchored in the text. The text *per se* does not exhibit a compelling preference for a particular interpretation. Moreover, each of the interpretations has a number of serious deficiencies. Facing such inadequacies it seems reasonable to reconsider the premise at the basis of the standard approaches to Qoh 11:1.

I have already noted that since early times the exegesis on Qoh 11:1 was predicated by the explicit, or implicit, assumption that the verse is thematically linked with the text that follows. In particular, it has been assumed that Qoh 11:2 speaks of the advantage in diversification. That may be the case. However, it does not follow that Qoh 11:2 advocates any specific area for diversification. It is easy to perceive Qoh 11:2 as a stand alone idea claiming: “Diversification is desirable.” The verses that follow Qoh 11:2 seem to be dealing with various natural events that cannot be controlled or understood. Thus, there is no cohesive thematic body that follows Qoh 11:1 with which this verse could be linked. Is there another alternative? Could it be that Qoh 11:1 is linked with the verse that precedes it? In the following section we present such an option.

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avec ironie que les enchaînements de cause et d’effet, aussi inéluctables puissent-ils être (v. 3), sont imprévisibles (voir déjà Qo 7,15; 8,14 et 9,11-12). Aucun résultat n’est certain et l’être humain reste totalement ignorant.”

<sup>51</sup> Tur-Sinai, N. H. *הלשון והספר*, II (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1960), 407-408.

<sup>52</sup> Levy, L. *Das Buch Qoheleth. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Sadduzäismus kritisch untersucht* (Leipzig: Hinrich’s, 1912), *ad loc.*

<sup>53</sup> Homan, M. M. “Beer Production by Throwing Bread into Water: A New Interpretation of Qoh. XI 1-2,” *VT* 52,2 (2002): 275-278.

<sup>54</sup> Stoute, P. P. “Bread upon the waters,” *BibSac* 107 (1950): 223-224.

## C SOLUTION

I suggest that the *Urtext* of Qoh 11:1 was

לְחַשׁ חֲלֵמָךְ עַל־פְּנֵי הַמְּמִימִים בַּיּוֹם הַמִּצְאָנוּ

“Whisper your dream upon the water, in many seas you will find it.” This can be paraphrased: whisper your dream to your reflection upon the water, something which only you know, and you will find that it can be heard in many public places.<sup>55</sup> No secret, even if uttered only to one’s self, is anymore a secret.

Telling the dream was considered in Babylon part and parcel of the process for mitigating its effects (Jer 23:27). Oppenheim says, “the telling of the dream-content removes the influence it has upon the person who experienced it.”<sup>56</sup> Also, dreams reflected one’s thinking, hopes, and aspirations while awake. Ben Sira (34:3) says: “The vision of dreams is the resemblance of one thing to another, even as the likeness of a face to a face” *זה לְעַמֶּת זוֹ מְرָאָה* (*חֲלֹמוֹת נִגְדָּן* *פְּנֵים דְּמוּת* *פְּנֵים*); namely, the dream is like a mirror that mirrors what is in front of us. In a later period, the sages said (*bBerachot* 55b): “man is shown [in a dream] only what he deliberates in his heart” *אֵין מַרְאֵין לְאָדָם אֶלָּא* *מַהְרָהָרִי לְבָוֹ*). It is easy to conceive that ambitious individuals in Qohelet’s audience had hopes, schemes, and designs about which they dreamed, but could not share their dreams with anyone. Yet, the dream had to be told.<sup>57</sup> Qohelet warns them against speaking to themselves, or to their image reflected from a water surface (*נִגְדָּן* *פְּנֵים דְּמוּת* *פְּנֵים*?), as they would naturally tend to do. The only other time that the term “dream(s)” is used by Qohelet is in unit 4:17-5:6, where it occurs in vv. 5:2 and 5:6. There too it seems to warn against revealing one’s innermost hopes and aspirations.<sup>58</sup>

The verse offers good practical advice for the Ptolemaic period. De Jong observes that

<sup>55</sup> Gordis, R. “The Asseverative Kaph in Hebrew and Ugaritic,” *JAOS* 63 (1943): 176-178. Gordis notes that Biblical Hebrew uses the proclitic *Kaph* as well as the vocable *ki* for asseverative purposes, the former generally at the end, the latter either at the beginning or the end of the clause. The former is used before substantives, the latter to modify verbs or an entire clause.

<sup>56</sup> Oppenheim, A. L. *The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East, with a Translation of an Assyrian Dream-Book* (Philadelphia: Transactions of the American Philological Society, 1956), 219.

<sup>57</sup> We find in *bBerachot* 55b that R. Yochanan said: “If one sees a dream and is troubled by it, let him proceed report it in the presence of three men, and thus dispel its evil consequences.”

<sup>58</sup> Pinker, A. “Intrusion of Ptolemaic Reality on Cultic Practices in Qohelet 4:17 and the Unit to which it belongs,” *JHS* (2009) Vol. 9, Art. 21. Online: [http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article\\_123.pdf](http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article_123.pdf)

The spirit that blew through the Ptolemaic Empire was one of superiority and optimism. A strong creative urge and a competitive mentality characterized the Ptolemaic aristocrats. ... The same spirit had reached the Ptolemaic dominion of Judea. In the third century, alongside of the ruling priestly class, a new elite appeared that was open to Hellenistic thoughts and customs.<sup>59</sup>

In his view, it is to this audience, imbued with ambitions for power, competitiveness, and material success, that many of Qohelet's warnings are directed.<sup>60</sup> Naturally, in this environment information regarding such ambitions, dreams, and wishes was at a premium, fostering a stratum of informers, spies, sleuths, et cetera. Rostovtzeff points out that Qoh 10:20 relates to the ubiquity of spies and informers in Ptolemaic Judea.<sup>61</sup> Pastor notes that spying and informing was a lucrative occupation in those days:

In this connection it is appropriate to recall that the *Rainer Papyrus* provides rewards for informers, who received a third of the value of the property confiscated to the crown. The informers are encouraged to report people who did not honestly declare the size of their herds, or those who keep slaves illegally.<sup>62</sup>

The suggested understanding of Qoh 11:1 contextually fits the preceding verse (Qoh 10:20): “Don’t revile a king even among your intimates. Don’t revile a rich man even in your bedchamber; for a bird of the air may carry the utterance, and a winged creature may report thy word.” The images in the two verses successively constrict the audience with which an intimacy is shared: intimates (חֶدְרִי), wife (בָּמְדֻעַּךְ), and lastly one’s self reflection (עַל-פִּנִּי) (הַקְּפִים).<sup>63</sup> There is also a natural transition from חֶדְרִי מִשְׁכְּבָךְ to חֶלְמָךְ to חֶדְרִי מִשְׁכְּבָךְ.

<sup>59</sup> De Jong, S. “Qohelet and the Ambitious Spirit of the Ptolemaic Period,” *JSOT* 61 (1994): 90.

<sup>60</sup> Tcherikover, V. *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 142. Tcherikover says: “The crafty and resourceful tax-collector, the powerful and unscrupulous business man, was the spiritual father of the Jewish Hellenizing movement, and throughout the entire brief period of the flourishing of Hellenism in Jerusalem, lust for profit and pursuit of power were among the most pronounced marks of the new movement.”

<sup>61</sup> Rostovtzeff, M. I. *The Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World* (I-III) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), 350.

<sup>62</sup> Pastor, J. *Land and Economy in Ancient Palestine* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 36.

<sup>63</sup> Ginsberg, H. L. *Studies in Koheleth* (New York: JTS, 1950), 33. Ginsberg suggested that “The place of our בָּמְדֻעַּךְ was originally occupied by ‘in thy lying place’ (וְ ‘in thy sleeping-chambers’); certainly in the Aramaic, and perhaps even in the Hebrew. (The form *marb’ā* is elsewhere – i. e. in Syriac – used of a place for cattle to lie in, but that is hardly a fatal objection.) Somewhere along the line, through

Each of the three verses Qoh 10:20-11:2 consists of two/one don't/do colons/colon followed by a בַּ, which heads two/one colons/colon. Qohelet 11:1-2 contains verbs mostly in the imperative mood, and Qoh 10:20 contains the grammatically equivalent jussive “do not curse.”<sup>64</sup> While Qoh 11:2 has the same basic structure as the preceding two verses, recommendation and a בַּ reason, it is clearly not a secret-keeping verse. Ogden is right in his observation that

To determine the specific meaning of these two verses [Qoh 11:1-2] has been one of the many problems associated with the interpretation of Qoheleth. Whatever the final resolution of that problem, it should be observed that the parallel structure is deliberate and that this structural principle must be followed in any search for meaning. ... Attention to the structure of the two opening sentences assists in determining their meaning and clarifies the theme of the unit.<sup>65</sup>

I applied this advice to Qoh 10:20-11:2.

How then does Qoh 11:2 thematically integrate into the Qoh 10:20-11:2 subunit? The two key words in Qoh 11:2 are חַלֵּק<sup>66</sup> and רָעָה.<sup>67</sup> We have already noted that חַלֵּק refers to a substantial portion or share. He repeatedly mentions that man should bear or enjoy the portion given to him by God through toil (2:10, 3:22, 5:17-6:3, 9:9). The notion of sharing this portion with others for safety sakes or to minimize risk would be alien to Qohelet.<sup>68</sup> It is not clear whether Qohelet has in mind political, economic, or personal upheaval and misfortune in his use of עַל הָאָרֶץ רָעָה. Kruger notes the possibility that in Qoh 11:2 רָעָה can refer to natural disaster as in 12:1b, where the reader is warned

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crowded writing and/or haplography (בַּ and רַ being similar in appearance), the בַּ was lost.” Our approach obviates this explanation.

<sup>64</sup> Fredericks, Life’s Storms, 98.

<sup>65</sup> Ogden, G. S. “Qoheleth 11:1,” *VT* 33,2 (1983): 224. Ogden considers Qoh 11:1-2 as speaking about distributing or giving, and Qoh 10:20 as belonging to the preceding unit.

<sup>66</sup> Fox, *JPS Commentary*, xix. Fox considers חַלֵּק a keyword in Qohelet. In his view the noun refers to something that is received or possessed irrespective of its duration or adequacy. In Qohelet חַלֵּק is sometimes wealth, but more often the pleasure derived from wealth. It could even be unpleasant experience. Obviously, this notion of חַלֵּק is incongruous with the concept of “alms.”

<sup>67</sup> Zimmermann, F. “Aramaic provenance of Qohelet,” *JQR* (1945): 32. Zimmermann suggests that in מה יהיה רעה the masculine verb and the feminine noun are the consequence of a momentary lapse by the translator from Aramaic in to Hebrew. This translator confounded the determinate masculine form of בִּשְׁאָל with the same feminine form, rendering רעה instead of הָרָעָה.

<sup>68</sup> Tsukimoto, A. “The background of Qoh 11:1-6 and Qohelet’s agnosticism,” *Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute* 19 (1993): 42.

that days of רעה are on their way.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, in Qoh 12:1 use of רעה is followed by עבִים (12:2) as it is in Qoh 11:2 (11:2 and 3). Thus, the similar vocabulary might suggest that Qohelet has in mind personal problems, recommending here diversification of investments, which would provide in old age, when one would become incapacitated. In that case Qoh 11:2 would be linked with what follows. However, the qualifying על הארץ seems to indicate that the misfortune is of a more general nature, affecting the whole land. Moreover, the similar stylistic structure of the verses in Qoh 10:20-11:2 strongly urges to view them as a single unit.<sup>70</sup>

Perhaps, it is best to understand Qoh 11:2 as a recommendation for giving “bakhshish” (“bribe”) to officials and persons of influence.<sup>71</sup> A bribe would naturally be of greater value than alms, thus more aptly represented by חlek. Bribing officials was an accepted practice in the Ancient Near East.<sup>72</sup> In that case the unit Qoh 10:20-11:2 recommends “keeping one’s mouth” with respect to the “powerful” and bribing them instead. This would appear to be a pragmatic and useful advice against the vagaries of political change, which Qohelet might have offered to people who were restless or dissatisfied (the young?), or aspiring for a career in the Ptolemaic administration. The suggested emendation preserves the consonantal base of the MT. It involves only a couple of metatheses and revocalizations, a phenomenon that frequently occurs in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>73</sup>

Though the verb להשׁ occurs in the Hebrew Bible only in the *Piel* and *Hithpael* it does not mean that the *Qal* is impossible. Certainly not all the possible grammatical forms of Hebrew verbs occur in the Hebrew Bible. A wider

<sup>69</sup> Kruger, Old Age Frailty, 405

<sup>70</sup> Staerk, „Zur Exegese von Koh 10 20 und 11 1,“ note 5, 217. Staerk raises the possibility that Qoh 11 is a collection of stand alone verses. He says, “Aber es ist auch möglich, daß der Verf. In dem Abschnitt Kap. 11 nur einzelne Klugheitsregeln zusammengestellt hat, die lose durch die Logik von Ursache und Wirkung verbunden sind.”

<sup>71</sup> The verb II חlek means “be smooth, slippery” and the noun III חlek connotes “smoothness, seductiveness,” notions that agree with the purpose of a bribe, which is to smooth or “oil” the achievement of a desired outcome.

<sup>72</sup> Bienkowski, P. “Administration,” in *Dictionary of the Near East* (eds. P. Bienkowski and A. R. Millard, University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 4. Bienkowski says: “Payment (‘bribes’) for services or for legal decisions in one’s favor were routine, accepted and not regarded as immoral or as abuse of office.”

<sup>73</sup> Tur-Sinai, *הלשון והספר*, 106-149. Most of the metathesis cases in the Ketib-Qere system involve only one transposition (ab → ba). There are, however, cases of more than one transposition: 2Sam 14:30 והציתוה (K) but (Q); Isa 10:10 ולשיטו (K) but (Q); Neh 12:14 למלוכו (K) but (Q); Ex 40:3 הכפרת but in other places ולשומי; Gen 23:5 תשאר but אביהו הביא in the Septuagint; Jud 21:17 ירשת but תשאר in the Septuagint; 1Sam 13:20 מחרשתו but in the Septuagint, et cetera.

range of tenses can be found in the Talmud.<sup>74</sup> The noun שְׁחִילָה, derived from the same root as the verb שְׁחַלֵּת, occurs in Qoh 10:11 in the sense of “spell.” There are many references in the Talmud to whispering an incantation. We find “he who whispers over a wound ...” (*bSanhedrin* 90a); “you may whisper [a charm] over bites of serpents and scorpions on the Sabbath (*bSanhedrin* 101a); in “you may cure by whispering [a charm] on a sore eye” (*ySabb* 14:14), etc. שְׁחִילָה takes as direct object the substance of what is to be whispered in *bYoma* 82b, *yBerachot* 1:5, *bEruvin* 53b, etc.

The noun חֲלֹם, “dream,” occurs in Qoh 5:2 (הַחֲלֹום) and 6 (הַחֲלֹמוֹת); that is, in both *defective* and *plene* forms.<sup>75</sup> It seems from the context there that Qohelet has in mind dreams related to man’s relation vis-à-vis הָאֱלֹהִים, since in both instances this term occurs. Whether we understand הָאֱלֹהִים as referring to God or Ruler such dreams were very dangerous in the society in which Qohelet lived.<sup>76</sup> No wonder Qohelet repeatedly warned about voicing derogatory or blasphemous opinions against those in power or God. Buttler observes that in Mesopotamia the common belief was that a dream incorporated a message from the deity. Not only was it very important to learn its meaning, but leaving it uninterpreted made the dreamer ritually impure. To fully absolve the dreamer of the impurity, he had to go through a ritual, which involved “transferring” the dream to a clump of mud and then throwing it into the water where it dissolved and disappeared, while prayers were recited.<sup>77</sup> Akkadian literature attests to a professional identified as šā’il(t)u, “he who asks questions of the gods.” According to Bar, “These were the ones who asked the gods questions and only they had the capability to understand the gods’ answers. The šā’ilu asked questions while following the movement of oil in water in a vessel called *mākaltu*, and on this basis interpreted the dream.”<sup>78</sup> In the *Greek Magical Papyri* (PGM 4.154-285) a suppliant is directed to contact the god through bowl divination:

You will observe through bowl divination on whatever day or night  
you want, in whatever place you want, beholding the god in the  
water and hearing a voice from the god which speaks in verses in  
answer to whatever you want.

<sup>74</sup> Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 704

<sup>75</sup> Postfixed uses of חֲלֹם are defective, except of בְּחֲלֹמִי, which occurs in the plene and defective forms.

<sup>76</sup> The Bible repeatedly attests to the significance of dreams. Royal courts had diviners, who specialized in the interpretation of dreams, for the purpose of which existed *Dream Books*. See also Oppenheim, A. L. *The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East, with a Translation of an Assyrian Dream-Book*. Excerpts from such books may have found their way into the Talmud (*bBerachot* 56a-57a).

<sup>77</sup> Buttler, S. *Mesopotamian Conceptions of dreams and Dream Rituals* Munster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1998), 180-181, 191.

<sup>78</sup> Bar, S. *A Letter that has not been read: Dreams in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Hebrew Union College Press, 2001), 85.

It is not clear to what extant these ancient customs, beliefs, and rituals persisted in the Near East culture.<sup>79</sup> Lecanomancy may be alluded to in the Talmudic passage (*bSanhedrin* 101a) “One whispers a charm over oil in the vessel and one does not whisper a charm over oil in the hand.” It resurfaces in *ספר הרזים*, and a Genizah fragment (T-S K 1.80) of late antiquity. It is notable that the treatment of dreams in the Talmud bears similarities to some dream books. We would like to point to the role of water and whispering in these rituals.

Michel considers Qoh 11:1-2 as examples of deictic *כִּי* in an argumentative application. In his view the context does not support the position that the verse deals with venturesome maritime trade or with charity, but rather with something apparently senseless, unsuccessful in itself, as Hertzberg understands Qoh 11:1. If this is correct, then the two *כִּי* cannot, in any case, even begin to provide a reason; a translation through “then” would be senseless and so would be taking the *כִּי* as adversatives.<sup>80</sup> Hertzberg, after a lengthy discussion interprets *כִּי* as “though.”<sup>81</sup> BDB notes that there are cases in which *כִּי*, standing alone, has the intensive force, introducing a statement with emphasis, *yea, surely, certainly*, as in Qoh 4:16, 7:7, and 20. I opt to understand the particle *כִּי* as “yea.”<sup>82</sup> Also, I understand *הַיָּמִים* “the seas,” though usually it is rendered in Qoh 11:1 “the days, time.”<sup>83</sup> The notion of the abundance of waters, as in a sea, conveniently alludes to the transition from the private (*הַיָּמִים*) to the public (*הַיָּמִים*). A secret whispered in private over some water, soon finds its way to the public domain of the many waters of the sea.

If my assumption regarding the *Urtext* of Qoh 11:1 is correct, how could possibly the corruption have occurred? I cannot entertain the possibility that it was generated by a multi-step process of scribal errors, since any conceivable single step would lack meaning. Perhaps, a pious scribe, who was sensitized by the tenor of magic<sup>84</sup> and divination in the text that follows, became suspicious

<sup>79</sup> Taylor, R. M. *The Moral Mirror of Roman Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 106. Taylor notes that “Lecanomancy, as well as the closely related disciplines of catapromancy and hydromancy (divination in water), are well attested in Greco-Roman antiquity.” These disciplines apparently originated in Babylon and reached the Greco-Roman world via Egypt. It has been suggested that Joseph engaged in lecanomancy (Gen 44:5).

<sup>80</sup> Michel, D. *Untersuchungen zur Eigenart des Buches Qohelet*. (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1989), 207.

<sup>81</sup> Hertzberg, *Der Prediger (Qohelet)*, 200.

<sup>82</sup> Brown, F., Driver, S., and Briggs, C. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001), 472b. See additional examples there.

<sup>83</sup> Perry, *Dialogues with Kohelet*, 161. Perry has “the abundance of waters” for *הַיָּמִים*.

<sup>84</sup> Cathcart, K. J. “Numbers 24:17 in ancient translations and interpretations,” in *Interpretation of the Bible: the International Symposium in Slovenia* (ed. J. Krašovec, Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 512-513. Aramaic and Phoenician

when he came across **לְחַשׁ חַלְמָךְ עַל־פָּנֵי הַמִּים בַּיּוֹבָב הַמִּצְאָנוּ**.<sup>85</sup> He might have mistakenly thought that Qohelet recommends engaging in divination, or using some improper magic “spell-casting” with regards to dreams, or following something akin to the practices in “dream temples.”<sup>86</sup>

It is well known that no objects of the natural world attracted the devotion of the primitive people so much as rivers and springs. For instance, the Greeks worshipped rivers, streams, wells, springs, and other bodies of water for their divination properties. Individual rivers had their own priests, and performed many sacrifices and rituals to the river gods. Because rivers travelled underground, they were believed to be gates to the underworld and to have divine power. Many of the spells in the *Greek Magical Papyri* used water as an important component of magical practice.<sup>87</sup> Young women often looked into a well seeking the face of their future husbands; others looked with the hope of identifying a thief.<sup>88</sup>

Bodies of water were believed to send dream oracles. Devereux notes,

all dream temples were located at major water sources. The patient would bathe in and drink the waters, then incubate a dream in special cells known as *abatons* .... Patients would be aided in recalling and interpreting their dreams by temple assistants called *therapeutes*, .... Ideally, the dream would reveal instructions from the god

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uses of the sequence seven/eight occur in incantations (cf. *KTU* 1.123 and *KTU* 1.19 I).

<sup>85</sup> Tsukimoto, The background of Qoh 11:1-6, 43. Tsukimoto suggests that in 11:1-6 Qohelet points to various acts of divination and rejects them as waste of time. The flow of logic in this section is: “Qohelet first refers to sayings which exhort one to be prudent against unexpected events in the future (vv. 1-2) and to divination which attempts to predict the future by means of observing natural or artificial signs (v. 3). He then makes critical remarks about them from a practical as well as a theoretical point of view (vv. 4-5). Finally he draws his own conclusion: What human beings, who cannot know what will occur in advance, have to do is nothing but concentrate on present tasks without worrying about the future (v. 6).”

<sup>86</sup> It is possible that the pious scribe was uncomfortable with what he felt was an allusion to Gen 1:2 via the spiritual nature of the dream and textual **עַל־פָּנֵי הַמִּים**.

<sup>87</sup> Betz, H. D. (ed.), *The Greek magical papyri in translation, including the Demotic spells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). This a collection of magical spells and formulas, hymns, and rituals from Greco-Roman Egypt, dates from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E to the 5<sup>th</sup> century C. E.

<sup>88</sup> Halliday, W. R. *Greek divination; a study of its methods and principles* (London: Macmillan, 1913) 116, 153.

how the illness was to be dealt with, or, in some traditions, the “Temple Sleep” was considered healing in its own right.<sup>89</sup>

Switching a couple of letters, the pious scribe obtained an innocuous text, which could have been homiletically interpreted as recommending altruistic charity.<sup>90</sup> He might have even seen in Qoh 11:2 support for his change, as some commentators did. The prevailing religious sentiment, which put a premium on alms-giving, perhaps, also helped in solidifying this change and propagating it.

The unit Qoh 10:20-11:2 thus consists of the verses

*Don’t curse a king even among your intimates,*

גַם בִּמְדֹעַ מֶלֶךְ אֲלֵתְקָלֶל

*Don’t curse a rich man even in your bedroom;*

וּבְחֶדְרֵי מִשְׁבֵּבֶךְ אֲלֵתְקָלֶל עַשֵּׂיר

*For a bird of the sky may carry the utterance,*

בַּי עֹזֶף הַשָּׁמַיִם יוֹלִיךְ אֶת־הַקּוֹל

*And a winged creature may report the word.*

וּבְעַל בְּנֵפִים יָגִיד דָּבָר

*Whisper your dream upon the water,*

לְחַשׁ חַלְמָךְ עַל־פְּנֵי הַמְּפִים

*Yea, in many seas you will find it.*

בַּי בָּרְבֵּן הַיָּמִים תִּמְצָאָנוּ

*Give portions to seven or eight,*

תָּזַחַלְקֵנְךְ לְשָׁבֵעָה וְגַם לְשָׁמֹונָה

*For you cannot know what<sup>91</sup> upheaval may occur on earth.*

בַּי לֹא תִּדְעַ מַה־יִהְיֶה רָעָה עַל־הָאָרֶץ

<sup>89</sup> Devereux, P. *Earth Memory: Sacred Sites—Doorways into Earth’s Mysteries* (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1992), 255-256. It is notable that the three terms “House of God,” “listen,” and “dream” occur in Qoh 4:17-5:6. Whybray felt that in Qoh 4:17 “Some degree of communication between God and man is thus presupposed” (cf. Whybray, R. N. *Ecclesiastes*. Old Testament Guides (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 77.

<sup>90</sup> Jastrow, *Cynic*, 229. Jastrow detected in many instances in Qohelet the hand of a pious commentator.

<sup>91</sup> Montgomery, J. A. “Notes on Ecclesiastes,” *JBL* 43,3/4 (1924): 244. Montgomery suggests that we should understand here מַה= “whether,” as in Cant 8:4, where it corresponds to מִן in the identical phrase 2:7 and 3:5.

## D CONCLUSION

Determination of the meaning of Qoh 11:1-2 has been, and continues to be, one of the many problems that we face in the interpretation of the *Book of Qohelet*. Lavoie concludes his paper on Qoh 11:1-2 with a section titled “Pour ne pas conclure ... .”<sup>92</sup> None of the interpretations that have been discussed can circumvent the fact that the figure presented in the MT is unrealistic and untenable. Clearly, any approach to the resolution of the textual difficulties has to be anchored in text, context, and structure.

The suggested minor emendation of Qoh 11:1, which preserves the consonantal base, provides the meaningful text

*Whisper your dream over water*

לְחַשׁ חֲלָמָךְ עַל־פְּנֵי הַמִּים

*Yea, in most of the waters you  
will find it!*

כִּי בָּרָב הַיָּמִים תִּמְצָאנוּ

The interpretation draws on the quite common practice of people talking to their own images, often sharing their innermost sentiments. These days we might warn people not to talk to the mirror because of the possibility of secret listening devices. In Qohelet’s time the handy mirror was the water surface of a jar, well, et cetera. Then too a secret uttered was a secret revealed. Thus, the image conveyed by the suggested reading closely corresponds to the interpretation.

Moreover, the suggested interpretation is contextually but a continuation and development of an idea that Qohelet began to expound in 10:20. People should not share grave secrets with friends, wives, or even selves. The pragmatic and cautious Qohelet gives a typically sound advice. He follows up this advice with an added precaution of bribing more than a few who could be helpful when the political or economic situation changes for the worse.

<sup>92</sup> Lavoie, *Étude Qohélet 11,2*, 88-89. He says: “Cette interprétation, qui voit dans le fait de laisser aller son pain sur la surface des eaux une action inutile et déraisonnable, ne suppose-t-elle pas un aveu d’ignorance quant à la signification ancienne de ce geste? C’est bien possible et ce ne serait pas là la seule ignorance dont souffrent les exégètes! En effet, comme l’indique l’emploi du verbe ‘connaître’ qui est précédée de la négation (Qo 4,13.17; 6,5; 8,5.7; 9,5.12; 10,14; 11,2.5(2x).6) ou d’une interrogation rhétorique dont la réponse est négative (2,19; 3,21; 6,8.12; 8,1.17), l’être humain n’est-t-il pas pour Qohelet fondamentalement un ignorant? Les êtres humains sont certes des ignorants, mais des ignorants à l’imagination fertile comme l’illustre les nombreuses interprétations de ce passage.”

Finally, the verses Qoh 10:20 - 11:2 are linked thematically and stylistically. Verses 10:20 - 11:1 depict a close inner linkage via an increasing constriction of audience, but culminate with verse 11:2 that expands the audience. Stylistically the unit Qoh 10:20 - 11:2 is marked by the key word 'בָּ', which clearly identifies it in the text.<sup>93</sup>

We can summarize Qohelet's advice in the unit 10:20 - 11:2 thus: Keep your thoughts to yourself, bribe as much as you can. This was very good advice in the Near East of that time, and still is in most of it today.

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<sup>93</sup> *Contra Ogden*, Qohelet 11:1, 222.

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