

## **When It All Falls Apart: A Survey of the Interpretational Maze concerning the “Final Poem” of the Book of Qohelet (Qoh 12:1-7)**

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### *ABSTRACT*

*For many centuries, readers of the Book of Qohelet have been puzzled by the words of this ancient wisdom teacher. Particularly the masterly finale of the book, conventionally called the “final poem” (Qoh 12:1-7), has given rise to a divergence of interpretations. Beginning with the early Jewish rabbi’s, several attempts have been made to connect each of the respective images with particular parts of the old man’s deteriorating body. In the end, however, this reading of the poem as an “allegory of old age” proved incapable of solving all the ambiguities. Therefore, ancient and modern commentators alike have proposed alternative interpretations, but they have equally met with the poem’s resistance to being encapsulated in a single explanation. The present contribution intends to provide a critical survey of the major lines of development in the interpretation of this pericope, pointing out the inconsistencies, textual difficulties, and conjectural elements in each of them. After having discussed each of them, it will make a plea to appreciate the poem as a remarkable piece of poetry that will always remain open to multiple interpretations.*

### **A INTRODUCTION**

To say that the book of Qohelet is surrounded by enigmas would be stating the obvious. Particularly the grand finale of the book, the masterpiece commonly known as the “final poem” (Qoh 12:1-7), has given rise to so many interpreta-

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tions that it has been called “the most controversial portion of the book.”<sup>1</sup> The present study will present the most influential understandings of this poem, and discuss some recent proposals which attempt to illuminate its complex imagery as well. As a starting point, Michael V. Fox’s still invaluable study on *Aging and Death in Qohelet 12* will be discussed in the first section, after which various readings of the poem will be singled out in the following paragraphs. However, to leave no doubt about the verses or parts of verses which are referred to in the course of this contribution, I will begin here with my own rather literal translation of the poem:<sup>2</sup>

- 1a And remember your Creator (בּוֹרְאֵיךָ) in the days of your youth,  
 1b before the days of unpleasantness come  
 and the years arrive of which you will say  
 “There is no pleasure for me in them;”  
 2a before the sun grows dark, as well as the light and the moon and  
 the stars,  
 2b and the clouds return after the rain;  
 3a in the day when the watchers of the house tremble,  
 and the men of strength bend themselves,  
 3b and the grinding-maids cease because they are few,  
 and those who look through the windows grow dark,  
 4a and the doors in the street are closed,  
 as the sound of the mill fades,  
 4b and one rises (וַיִּקְוֶה) at the sound of the bird,  
 and all the daughters of song are bowed down (וַיִּשְׁחוּ),  
 5a also from up high they fear,  
 and the terrors on the road,  
 5b and the almond blossoms (וַיִּגְאֹץ)  
 and the locust (הַהֶקֶב) drags himself along (וַיִּסְתַּבֵּל),  
 and the caper-berry bursts (וַתִּפָּר),

<sup>1</sup> So Choon-Leong Seow, “Qohelet’s Eschatological Poem,” *JBL* 118 (1999): 209. Jerome already observed the plethora of interpretations in his commentary where he began his exposition of Qoh 12,1 by noting that *in hoc capitulo diuersa omnium explanatio fuit et tot sententiae paene quot homines*. See Marc Adriaen, ed., *S. Hieronymi Presbyteri Commentarius in Ecclesiasten* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1959): 349.

<sup>2</sup> Though every effort has been made to restrict the number of interpretational elements in this translation, at some points I had to take a position concerning the textual difficulties of the poem’s Hebrew. For the sake of clarity, every doubtful translation has been accompanied by its Hebrew counterpart between brackets. Some alternative translations will shortly be referred to below. An extensive discussion of all the textual problems in the final poem can be found *sub loco* in Antoon Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words: A Study of the Language of Qoheleth. Part I: Grammar* (Leuven: Peeters - Departement Oosterse Studies, 1992), and *Part II: Vocabulary* (Leuven - Paris - Dudley, MA: Peeters - Departement Oosterse Studies, 2004).

- 5c for (יָי) man is going to his eternal house,  
and the mourners go about in the street;
- 6a before the silver cord is snapped (קָרָקַרְקָה),  
and the golden bowl is crushed (וְהַכֶּלֶחַ),
- 6b and the jar is shattered at the well,  
and the wheel (וְהַגִּלְגָּל) is crushed at the pit,
- 7a and the dust returns to the ground, as it was,
- 7b and the breath returns to God, who gave it.

## B DIFFERENT READINGS OF THE POEM

### 1 Michael V. Fox's Three Levels of Meaning

In a seminal article, Fox has explored the interplay of three dimensions of meaning in Qohelet's final poem, in order to provide an alternative to its traditional and then still dominant reading as an "allegory of old age" (see *infra*). He contends that, although allegorical decoding can have some validity in the explication of individual images, "the poem as a whole is not an allegory. And it is certainly not *only* that."<sup>3</sup>

In his opinion, the poem should be treated as it stands, and the surface imagery ought not to be ignored in favour of revealing a hidden meaning. Fox holds that, on the literal level, which considers the images as perceptible phenomena for those present at the scene depicted, the poem portrays the death and funeral procession of an individual. At the same time, however, he points out that, on the symbolic level, some of the images may be read as suggesting a large-scale cosmic cataclysm. Though this eschatological symbolism is reminiscent of the prophetic announcements of universal upheaval, Qohelet has transformed it into a depiction of the individual's death, whose demise, from Qohelet's point of view, amounts to the total undoing of his personal world.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, even though the term "allegory" is mistakenly applied to the poem,<sup>5</sup> its traditional understanding as a threnody on geriatric complaints repre-

<sup>3</sup> Michael V. Fox, "Aging and Death in Qohelet 12," *JSOT* 42 (1988): 57.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Fox, "Aging and Death," 66-67: "Qohelet is shaping symbolism in a way contrary to its usual direction of signification. Symbolism usually views the general through the particular. [...] Qohelet views the particular through the general, the small writ large. He audaciously invokes images of general disaster to symbolize every death; more precisely – the death of you, the reader, to whom Qohelet is speaking."

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Fox, "Aging and Death," 67-68: "Qoh 12.1-8 lacks the degree of internal consistency necessary to give meaning and cogency to an allegory, especially one lacking an explanatory introduction or conclusion or other interpretive guides, such as a narrative context." See likewise the critical remark in Daniel Buzy, "Le portrait de la vieillesse (Ecclésiaste, xii, 1-7)," *RB* 41 (1932): 340: "Une allégorie est une suite de métaphores coordonnées, qui possèdent toutes une signification propre. [...] Dans *le portrait de la vieillesse*, nous n'avons plus de métaphores coordonnées, mais

sents a legitimate figurative interpretation, which decodes the succession of figures as a series of interrelated realities from an entirely distinct domain in the external world.<sup>6</sup>

Although Fox's distinction between these three levels of meaning well illustrates the complexity of the poem's imagery, it turns out to be disadvantageous for classifying the poem's various interpretations because – as Fox himself already indicates<sup>7</sup> – the three meaning-types are not mutually exclusive and almost every reading combines at least two of them. For this reason, albeit without denying Fox's valuable contribution, the present investigation will not follow the lead of his tripartite division. Rather, it will present the interpretations of the final poem according to the logic and consistency aimed at by their proponents. Taking into account – but not entirely adopting – the five interpretations mentioned by Leanza,<sup>8</sup> the following readings of the poem will be reviewed (some of which Fox mentions, while others are of a more recent date): the physiological reading (section 2), the pathological reading (section 3), the parabolic reading (section 4), the seasonal reading (section 5), the meteorological reading (section 6), the eschatological reading (section 7) and the alternative allegorical reading proposed by Fox in his later monograph on the book of Qohelet (section 8).

## 2 The Degeneration of the Decrepit Body

Beginning with its earliest attested interpretations in Targum Onqelos, the Midrash (both *Qohelet Rabbah* and *Leviticus Rabbah* 18) and the Babylonian Talmud (*Shabbat* 151a-153a) – many elements of which Jerome introduced into Christian exegesis, as well as the “historical allegory” he drew from his Jewish sources – Qohelet's final poem has traditionally been understood as a veiled description of the physical and emotional ailments from which the aged

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seulement des groupes de propositions – au sens propre ou métaphorique – juxtaposées, parallèles et convergentes.”

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Fox, “Aging and Death,” 68: “The contours of a figurative meaning are more defined than the symbolic, the signifier ([...]) and the signified ([...]) being kept in two distinct domains. A figurative reading calls for a decoding or a translation between these two domains.”

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Fox, “Aging and Death,” 59: “These meaning-types are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the figurative and the symbolic require a literal base line from which both types of the extended meaning may proceed.”

<sup>8</sup> Referring to the Italian commentary by Lorenzo Di Fonzo, *Ecclesiaste* (Roma - Torino: Marietti, 1967); Sandro Leanza, “Eccl 12,1-7: L'Interpretazione escatologica dei Padri e degli esegeti medievali,” *Augustinianum* 18 (1978): 192, notes the following interpretations: (1) *interpretazione allegorico-fisiologica*, (2) *interpretazione letterale parabolica*, (3) *interpretazione parabolica-metereologica*, (4) *interpretazione apocalittico-escatologica* and (5) *interpretazione allegorico-spirituale*.

suffer.<sup>9</sup> Although some interpreters restrict the portrayal of the bodily deterioration to certain verses – mostly verses 3a-4b – the “maximalist” position seeks to connect each and every image with a phenomenon thought of as typical for the frail, aging body. Strangely, even though many ancient and modern commentators concur in reading the poem as an “allegory of old age,” there is such a great contrariety of opinion concerning the allegory’s details, that agreement has only been reached with respect to the “allegorical” meaning of the grinding-maids and of those looking through the windows in verse 3b. For instance, the darkening of the sun in verse 2 has been interpreted by the “allegorists” as referring to both the face and the forehead which are wrinkled and no longer bright, to the enjoyment of life which is fading away or to the weakening of the spirit.<sup>10</sup> The light, too, has been connected to the forehead, as well as to the nose – sometimes as *pars pro toto* for the countenance – and to the eyes, losing their keenness. The moon growing dim has been explained as the darkening of the soul and of the inner life of the aged, as the shortness of breath, or, again, as the nose and the forehead.<sup>11</sup> The hollow cheeks have been suggested, too, for the moon, but they are also brought up in connection to the stars, which are particularly compared to the cheekbones, and then to the pupils, the apples of the eyes, the eyeballs, the teeth and the bowels. Franz Delitzsch, who fiercely

<sup>9</sup> A most useful synoptical overview of the interpretation in these ancient sources has been included in Matthew Kraus, “Christians, Jews, and Pagans in Dialogue. Jerome on Ecclesiastes 12:1-7,” *HUCA* 70-71 (1999-2000): 224-31. He also elaborates on the two allegorizations of the poem in Jerome’s commentary; for a presentation of the “historical allegory,” see p. 220-223.

<sup>10</sup> For the following summary of the physiological interpretation of the poem, I rely on George A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908), 187-192; Abraham Cohen, *The Five Megilloth: Hebrew Text & English Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (London: Soncino, <sup>8</sup>1968), 299-302; Franz Delitzsch, *Hoheslied und Koheleth* (Leipzig: Dörffling und Franke, 1875), 388-409; Christian D. Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs and Coheleth, Commonly Called the Book of Ecclesiastes: Translated from the Original Hebrew, with a Commentary, Historical and Critical* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1861, repr. 1970), 458-467; Robert Gordis, *Koheleth - The Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes* (New York: Schocken Books,<sup>3</sup> 1968), 341-348; Sara Japhet & Robert B. Salters, *The Commentary of R. Samuel Ben Meir Rashbam on Qohelet* (Jerusalem: Magnes; Leiden: Brill, 1985), 206-210; Kraus, “Christian, Jews and Pagans,” 224-231; Ludwig Levy, *Das Buch Qoheleth: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Sadduzäismus, kritisch untersucht, übersetzt und erklärt* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrich, 1912), 132-138; Emmanuel Podechard, *L’Ecclésiaste* (Paris: Gabalda, 1912), 456-469; Charles Taylor, *The Dirge of Coheleth in Ecclesiastes XII, Discussed and Literally Interpreted* (London - Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1874), 57-63.

<sup>11</sup> In particular, the light is compared to the nose and the moon to the forehead in *Qohelet Rabbah*, while *Leviticus Rabbah* connects the light to the forehead and the moon to the nose. See Kraus, “Christians, Jews and Pagans,” 225.

defends the overall allegorical framework of the poem, supposes Qohelet's acquaintance with the Babylonian-Assyrian pantheon consisting of the sun, moon and five planets, deeming it probable that the alleged five stars refer to the senses.<sup>12</sup> In his opinion, the clouds in the next part of the verse are then pointing to the lingering illnesses successively attacking the old man and confusing his thoughts, while others think of his watered and blurry eyes, filled with tears, his permanent snuffling, his suffering from catarrh, or his disordered mental condition.

As the women gazing through the lattices have almost exclusively been linked to the eyes, looking as it were "through" the eyelids,<sup>13</sup> and the grinding-maids whose number has dwindled to the teeth falling out, the images in verse 3 have met with less difference of opinion among the interpreters who read the poem anatomically. Yet, the quaking keepers of the house have been understood as referring to the shaking of the hands and arms of the elderly, to their unsteady legs or to their knees knocking together, or to the ribs and back enclosing the softer belly. The writhing men of power are also connected to the arms, back, legs, knees and ribs of the aged, as well as to the brittleness of the bones and the weakening of the spinal column.

Notwithstanding the virtual agreement with respect to the preceding images, again a plethora of explanations has been offered for the closing of the doors. As דלתים undeniably represents the dual form of דלת, interpreters have sought for pairs of similarly fashioned organs, particularly among the orifices, which make up the bodily openings to the outer world. Hence the ears, the eyes, the lips and the jaws have been suggested, but also the pores of the body and the organs of excretion, the closing of which would refer to incontinency (!) and constipation. Jerome, following Targum Onqelos, disregards the function of the door as the entrance to the house and considers the closing of the doors as a literal reference to the weak steps of the elderly, who can no longer walk steadily and are hence impeded from going out on the street. In the fading of the sound of the mill, Jerome then recognises the feebleness of the voice. Usually, however, the sound of the mill is linked to the grinding-maids in the previous verse and is hence understood as toothlessness and the indistinct pronunciation of the old man, his diminished appetite and thus idle stomach, or the awkward sound he produces when chewing his food without molars. Yet, some prefer to take this detail literally as the most familiar sound of an active household in the Ancient Near East, which is barely heard anymore in the old man's dwelling.

<sup>12</sup> See Delitzsch, *Koheleth*, 390.

<sup>13</sup> However, the two rabbinical treatises dwelling on the final poem make mention of an alternative explanation of this part of the verse as the lungs which bring forth the voice. See Kraus, "Christians, Jews and Pagans," 227.



Such a literal reading is also advanced, but with more conviction, with respect to the remainder of the verse. Many interpreters assume that the rising at the sound of the bird portrays the insomnia of the elderly, whose sleep is so light that even a bird chirping can disturb it – which, according to the Targumic and Midrashic tradition, makes them afraid of robbers. Others, translating the verb *וַיִּקְרַח* impersonally as “it rises *to* the sound of a bird,” explain this phrase as an allusion to the shrillness of the old man’s voice, which was clear as a bell in the vigour of his life, but has now turned treble and resembles the high-pitched sound of a sparrow. The “daughters of song” have also been associated with the old man’s vocal capacities, particularly with his inability to utter songs and the trembling of his lips. Furthermore, it is also suggested that they refer to the upcoming deafness, making it impossible for the aged to distinguish sounds from songs and to appreciate the joyous ditties of their youth. However, an incongruity results from such an explanation, for if the old man’s ears have become so impenetrable that he is oblivious to the sounds around him, he would not be awakened by a bird chirping.<sup>14</sup>

For the first part of verse 5, the “allegorical” interpretation tends once more towards a literal understanding of the phenomena described – which exemplifies the above observation that Fox’s three levels of meaning are by no means mutually exclusive and even, in some cases, overlap – and links them to the fear of the elderly of going outside. Their weakened sight and constrained breathing prevent them from ascending high places, so that they literally make mountains out of molehills. Likewise, they consider even the slightest hindrance on the road as a “terror,” because they can no longer trust their weak limbs. Alternatively, this part of the verse is explained metaphorically as the fear of remembering things long past or the fear of God “up high,” or as the terror of death’s approach, which old people feel in all its gravity.

In order to make sense of the subsequent images of the almond, the locust and the caper-berry, advocates of the physiological reading have ventured the wildest suggestions. A majority sees the almond as portraying the old man’s whitening hair, as the almond’s pink blossoms turn white when they fall. Other explanations, some of them parsing *וַיִּשְׁחַח* as a form of *וַיִּשְׁחַח*, “to despise,”<sup>15</sup> include the increasing of the haunch bones or the coccyx, caused by the leanness of the buttocks, the spurning of the glans penis and pudenda, the survival of the upper bone of the spinal cord – in the rabbinic tradition considered to be the imperishable part of the frame out of which the resurrection body germinates –

<sup>14</sup> Thus Charles H. H. Wright, *The Book of Koheleth, Commonly Called Ecclesiastes. Considered in Relation to Modern Criticism, and to the Doctrines of Modern Pessimism, with a Critical and Grammatical Commentary and a Revised Translation. The Donnellan Lectures for 1880-1* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1883), 248.

<sup>15</sup> Suffice it to refer in this regard to Schoors, *The Preacher I*, 41-42.

or, on a more literal plane, the inability of the aged to reach and to crack the nuts of the almond tree and their loss of appetite for this delicacy. As the noun  $\text{שֶׁקֶד}$  is made up of the same consonants as the verb “to be vigilant” – cf. the play of words in Jer 1:11-12 – it is further contended that, here again, Qohelet hints at the insomnia of the elderly, but this suggestion is entirely built on the image of the almond and disregards the verb  $\text{וַיִּנְאֵץ}$ .

For the interpretation of the locust, whose verb’s meaning is also uncertain,<sup>16</sup> the following proposals have been made: the old man’s unsteady and halting gait, the swelling of his ankles, legs, and feet, the stiffening of the back part of his pelvis and his thighbones, his scraggy and crumpling figure, the diminishing of his rump, the loss of elasticity in his hips, his crunching joints, his laboured breathing, his gaining weight, his protruding shoulders, hips and back, his inability to bear even the smallest weight, the dropsy and swelling from which his stomach suffers, preventing him from digesting the locust, the drooping of his buttocks, and the impotency of his member, which he drags along like a dead weight. An erotic connotation has been suspected for the caper, too, because it was not only used as a condiment but also renowned in antiquity for its aphrodisiac effect.<sup>17</sup> Reading the clause  $\text{וּתְפֵר הָאֲבִינָה}$  as “the caper-berry fails” or “the caper-berry is made ineffectual,”<sup>18</sup> the propagandists of the anatomical interpretation consider it as a (literal) reference to the decay of the male organ and the loss of sexual desire, which can no longer be resuscitated by the caper, or to the old man’s failing appetite, for which the caper has likewise become pointless. An alternative interpretation, whether or not in the context of understanding the poem as “allegory of old age,” reads this image metaphorically in the light of the next part of the verse: the old man, who is on the verge of death and is soon to be carried to his “eternal home” – commonly understood here as the grave<sup>19</sup> – is like the overripe caper-berry which has already burst open and is about to fall on the ground.

<sup>16</sup> Schoors, *The Preacher II*, 405.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, George F. Moore, “The Caper-Plant and Its Edible Products. With Reference to Eccles. xii. 5,” *JBL* 10 (1891): 55-64. However, *pace* John E. Todd, “The Caper-Berry (Eccles. xii. 5),” *JBL* 6 (1886): 13-26, who raises the objections that there is no evidence that the caper was anciently supposed to excite appetite or lust or that it was eaten at all.

<sup>18</sup> On the grammatical form and meaning of this clause, see Schoors, *The Preacher II*, 412-413.

<sup>19</sup> So, for example, Ernst Jenni, “Das Wort  $\text{עוֹלָם}$  im Alten Testament,” *ZAW* 64 (1952): 211, and Schoors, *The Preacher II*, 290-291. See furthermore Jean-Jacques Lavoie, “Etude de l’expression  $\text{בֵּית עוֹלָמוֹ}$  dans Qo 12,5 à la lumière des textes du Proche-Orient ancien,” in *‘Où demeures-tu?’ (Jn 1,38). La maison depuis le monde biblique* (eds. Jean-Claude Petit, André Charron and André. Myre, Québec: Fides, 1994); and Avi Hurvitz, “ $\text{בֵּית-עוֹלָם}$  and  $\text{בֵּית-קְבֻרוֹת}$ : Two Funerary Terms in Biblical Literature and their Linguistic Background,” *Maarav* 8 (1992): 59-68.



At this point, the final poem takes a decisive change of course, as it is now for the first and only time explicitly said that someone has died. The “allegory of old age” reaches its tragic climax in the literal description of the old man’s death, the man over whom the mourners raise their dirges. Nonetheless, the rabbinical tradition does not think of actual mourners, but understands them as a euphemism for the maggots crawling over the body.<sup>20</sup> In the same vein, the objects mentioned in verse 6 are interpreted as metaphors for the dissolution of the body,<sup>21</sup> and thus as the logical continuation of the allegory in the previous verses. The snapping of the silver cord is connected to the bursting of the spinal column and the marrow,<sup>22</sup> the crushing of the golden bowl to the cracking of the skull and the cerebral membrane, the shattering of the jar to the collapse of the stomach and the gall, and the smashing of the wheel into the pit to the heart ceasing to pump blood, to the lungs shuddering their last rattle, or to the rotting of the intestines of the belly. Finally, this process of bodily decomposition comes to an end in verse 7, when nothing but dust is left and the principle of life returns to God.

### 3 The Actual Experience of the Aged

As has already been indicated above, the traditional physiological reading has encountered considerable opposition in contemporary biblical scholarship, mainly because its interpretation was inconsistent. An alternative interpretation, rather close to the physiological reading but explicitly rejecting its alleged allegorical significance, has been proposed by Daniel Buzy, who is still convinced that the poem is concerned with old age and holds that it ought to be read in a literal fashion whenever this yields satisfactory sense.<sup>23</sup> In his opinion, the valiant guards of the house tremble because they have themselves become old and powerless, and the men once known for their strength are bending when experiencing the tremors of old age. The women who used to grind the corn have likewise grown too feeble to perform their laborious and tiresome duty, and their mistresses can no longer gaze through the lattices because they suffer from failing eyesight. In a similar vein, the closing of the doors signifies the loss of social contacts due to their growing weakness, and the fading of the

<sup>20</sup> The Targum, however, paraphrases the final part of verse 5 as “the angels who exact judgment go about like scribes in the streets” (translation Kraus, “Christians, Jews and Pagans,” 230).

<sup>21</sup> Jerome, however, departs from his Jewish sources by interpreting all four objects as general metaphors for death; Kraus, “Christians, Jews and Pagans,” 206.

<sup>22</sup> Be it noted that an alternative allegorical interpretation, which does not consider 12:5c a turning point in the poem, regards the snapping of the silver cord as the urine of the old man, which used to flow during his youth in a strong torrent resembling a silver thread, but now merely empties by drops. Furthermore, the Babylonian Talmud thinks of the penis, and Targum Onqelos of the tongue that has become dumb.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Buzy, “Portrait,” 333: “Le sens littéral propre doit être retenu chaque fois qu’il nous donne un sens satisfaisant aussi bien dans l’ensemble que dans le détail.”

mill's sound their loss of energy. Buzy contends, nevertheless, that for the other verses – with the exception of 5a literally describing the fear of the aged – a metaphorical reading is most obvious, and thus he understands the silencing of the daughters of song, the darkening of the sky and the return of the clouds, as well as the crushing of the various objects, as general metaphors for the end of life. Finally, in his view, the almond refers to the white hair of the old man, and the locust to his shuffling gait, whereas the metaphor of the caper scattering his seeds would be dramatically announcing death in verse 5c.

To be situated along the same line of interpretation is Maurice Gilbert, who also considers verses 3 and 4 as a literal depiction of what people actually experience when getting on in years: shaking, stooping, infirmity, blindness and isolation.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, he points out that the reference made in verse 3 to servants, their masters, female slaves and their mistresses at the same time emphasises that the fate of death is inescapable, while the fact that the number of grinding-maids has dwindled reflects the bitter reality in antiquity that few people reached an advanced age. Unlike Buzy, Gilbert suggests that 4b portrays the short and light sleep of the old man, who, in contrast to the birds, has no reason to sing. When he loses his appetite (5b), there is no pleasure for him anymore. Leading a secluded life in anticipation of his departure from the living, he is already on his way to the tomb according to the world outside, which impatiently awaits his burial (5c). From Gilbert's point of view, this description of the actual experience of the aged is framed by two metaphors: while verse 2 compares the final phase of life to a never-ending winter, the images of the lamp and the jar in verse 6 introduce the idea of death, which is made explicit by the separation of the soil and the life-spirit in verse 7.

#### 4 A Wealthy House Fallen in Disrepair

A few years earlier, John Sawyer had already spurred on the decline of the physiological reading by suggesting that the final poem be read instead as a “parable of a ruined house”.<sup>25</sup> Once more elaborating on his favourite theme of the failure of human efforts, Qohelet would be recounting in 12:3-5 the downfall of a mighty household at the time when its rich owner inevitably passes away. Sawyer surmises that these verses form a separate unity within the final poem, preceded by the conjunction *וְעַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא בְיוֹם שׁ* instead of *וְעַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא*, and composed of two stanzas. The first stanza (3a-4a) relates the reactions of the various classes associated with the house, both men and women, slave and free, and the

<sup>24</sup> Maurice Gilbert, “La description de la vieillesse en Qohelet xii 1-7 est-elle allégorique?,” in *Congress Volume Vienna 1980* (ed. John A. Emerton, Leiden: Brill, 1981), 96-109.

<sup>25</sup> John F. A. Sawyer, “The Ruined House in Ecclesiastes 12: A Reconstruction of the Original Parable,” *JBL* 94 (1975): 519-531. Shortly after, the same reading of verses 3-4 was adopted by Hagia Witzernath, *Süß ist das Licht ... Eine Literaturwissenschaftliche Untersuchung zu Koh 11,7-12,7* (St. Ottilien: Eos, 1979), 45.

fading of human activities appropriate at the time of a burial. The second stanza (4b-5b), then, opposes humanity's transience to nature's indifference, which contrasts sharply with the involvement of the inhabitants at the house's decay. Removing the prefix -ל as a secondary interpolation caused by the dominance of the allegorical reading in the Masoretic tradition, Sawyer considers קול הצפור as the subject of ויקום and subsequently argues for the emendation of וַיִּשְׁחַח to וַיִּשְׁחַח, yielding the translation "the sound of birds singing can be heard and all the chattering song-birds."<sup>26</sup> Insouciant nature's apparent jeering at the house's dilapidation continues in verse 5, with the birds "looking down" from up high, whereas down to earth the fauna and flora repossess the neglected garden. In Sawyer's view, the almond symbolises the re-awaking of nature in the abandoned estate, when the locust, which is easily frightened by people, is free to settle and stuff itself, and the caper can "grow" – accepting וְתִפֹּר instead of וְתִפֹּר – over the rocks and walls of the deserted place. Finally, yet another contrast is invoked in verse 5c when the wealthy owner's death increases the activities of the professional mourners: just as nature was unmoved when the estate fell in disrepair, so life goes on unchanged in the city when someone is being brought to his tomb.<sup>27</sup> Exemplifying that one man's death is another man's breath, no conclusion could have been more fitting to this parable of the fall of a house and its workers.

According to John Jarick, Sawyer's understanding has been anticipated by Theodore of Mopsuestia, the church father from the Antiochene school who vigorously rejected the "allegorical" exegesis of the Alexandrian tradition, and for this text also argued for an unwaveringly literal reading of all the images as the fall of a mighty estate.<sup>28</sup> In Theodore's opinion, the smooth functioning of a house breaks down when the guards become weak and can no longer protect its riches, as a consequence of which the women of the house, afraid of robbers, are anxiously sitting in the dark and locking the doors, the grinding-maids grow feeble from poverty and hunger, and those who fill the pitcher with water from the spring cease their activity. Remarkably, even Theodore has to opt for a metaphorical interpretation of verse 5b in order to make its images fit his literal interpretation:<sup>29</sup> the slightest noise puts the inhabitants of the house on edge and fills them with fear consuming them like locusts devour a field and clinging to them like a caper-plant that fastens itself to rocks. However, Jarick points out an important *caveat* in this regard: as Theodore's comments are only

<sup>26</sup> Sawyer, "Parable," 530.

<sup>27</sup> Compare to the paraphrase of the parable in Fox, "Aging and Death," 58.

<sup>28</sup> John Jarick, "Theodore of Mopsuestia and the Interpretation of Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible in Human Society: Essays in Honour of John Rogerson* (eds. M. Daniel Carroll R., David J. A. Clines, Philip R Davies, Sheffield: Academic Press, 1995), 311-315.

<sup>29</sup> Once more, this is a case in point that Fox's three levels of meaning cannot be used in order to classify the various understandings of the poem.

known from the Syriac commentary of Dionysius bar Salibi, it cannot be ruled out that the latter made some adjustments where he found Theodore's interpretation unsatisfactory.

Be that as it may, a quite similar case for understanding verses 3-4 as a description of a wealthy estate at the day of its master's death has been made by Taylor, whose "dirge-theory" represents one of the first modern attempts to establish a persuasive alternative to the "allegory of old age".<sup>30</sup> Separating the figures of dissolution in verses 6 and 7 from the rest of the poem, Taylor contends that, with the plain reference to the mourners in verse 5c, verses 2-5b make up a short poem suited to a funeral procession. After the introductory symbols of unhappiness and calamity in verse 2, ביום marks the transition to the literal portrayal of the actual cessation of business and pleasure in a house when the hour of death tolls for its master:<sup>31</sup> all its inmates, men and women of the higher and lower degree alike, are in a state of mental perturbation, the great double street-door is closed to exclude visitors on the days of mourning, the mill stops as no food needs to be prepared for their reception, and while the merry voices of singing girls grow silent, the "bird of evil omen" raises his doleful dirge. Taylor takes verse 5a as depicting how terror encompasses people and lurks around them, so that every enjoyment is extinguished (5b): the delightful flower of the almond cannot please in this time of sadness, the consoling chirp of the grasshopper fails to comfort the mourner, and the delicacy of the caper-berry cannot awaken his senses. Finally, this dirge about the earthly house's decay at the time of its owner's death is suited to the funeral procession described in verse 5c when the mourners accompany his body to his "eternal house."<sup>32</sup>

## 5 The Closing Days of the Palestinian Winter

Only a few years after the first publication of Taylor's "dirge-theory," an alternative non-physiological understanding of the poem was proposed by C.H.H. Wright, who saw in the first five verses of the poem the imagery of the gloomy winter months of the Ancient Near East.<sup>33</sup> More in particular, Qohelet would be

<sup>30</sup> See Taylor, *The Dirge of Coheleth in Ecclesiastes XII*, as well as Charles Taylor, "The Dirge of Coheleth," *JQR* 4 (1892): 533-549; 5 (1893): 5-17.

<sup>31</sup> It should be remarked that Michael Friedländer, "Design and Contents of Ecclesiastes," *JQR* 1 (1889): 46, likewise briefly notes that verses 3-5 describe "the change of the stir and bustle in a castle into stillness and lethargy."

<sup>32</sup> Fox, "Aging and Death," 60-61, appreciating Taylor's attempt to grasp the literal meaning of the poem, points out that, although it is not impossible that some lines of the poem are derived from actual dirges – as is maintained by M.A. Anat, "The Lament on the Death of Man in the Scroll of Qoheleth," *Beth Miqra* 15 (1970): 375-380 – dirges were meant to mourn over the deceased rather than describing the funeral.

<sup>33</sup> Wright, *The Book of Koheleth*, 217-275. Comp. also the excursion by J.G. Wetzstein in Delitzsch, *Koheleth*, 445.

portraying in seven stanzas, which do not coincide with the seven verses in the Masoretic Text, the seven closing days of wintertime, which usually came at the end of February after a period of more genial weather, and were – though also considered as the heralds of spring – dreaded as fraught with death by the aged. These “days of death,” in which the cold was bitterly felt for the last time, are briefly characterised in the first stanza (verse 1b) as days in which there is no pleasure, which is then illustrated by the darkening atmosphere in the second stanza (verse 2). Their effects upon the aged are described more in detail in the third stanza (3a-4a), when servants and their masters alike cringe in the face of death, the maids cease from grinding the corn because too many of them have fallen ill, the face of the ladies at the windows darkens as death casts its shadow over them, and the doors are closed in a desperate attempt to keep death outside. The fourth stanza (4b-5a) anticipates the coming of spring, but at the same time indicates that the after-winter has done its work: while the young rise early at the sound of the birds, the elderly are sick and dying. This contrast is, in Wright’s opinion, further elaborated in the fifth stanza (5b-c): while the almond tree is blossoming and the locust is crawling out from his hole, the caper no longer appeals to the old man, who is going on his last journey, while the mercenary mourners are already loitering about his house, eager to be hired for his funeral procession. Even though he feels that death is slowly but steadily approaching, it still befalls him suddenly, as is apparent from the sixth stanza (verse 6), which compares his dying hour to the sudden snapping of the silver cord suspending the golden bowl of the lamp, and to a pitcher being shattered. That the aged have died at the end of winter is confirmed in the seventh and last stanza (verse 7) with the dissolution of their remains.

In more recent times, similar suggestions have been made to connect the poem to the dreariness of a winter’s day, albeit without Wright’s reference to the seven “days of death,” notably by Oswald Loretz and Lüdger Schwienhorst-Schönberger.<sup>34</sup> However, their respective understandings of the poem develop in different directions. On the one hand, Loretz notes that the coming of springtime with its chattering birds in verse 4 and its blossoming trees in verse 5, putting an end to the darkening of the sky from verse 2 and the cheerlessness of the city from verse 3, stands in contrast to the fate of man, who cannot escape the winter of his life.<sup>35</sup> Schwienhorst-Schönberger, on the other hand, considers the revival of nature in verse 5b as a cautious allusion to a new

<sup>34</sup> H.W. Hertzberg, *Der Prediger* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1963), 210, too, noted that Qohelet here compares the hopelessness of old age to the gloominess of the Palestinian winter, but he restricts this interpretation to verse 2 only.

<sup>35</sup> Oswald Loretz, *Qohelet und der Alte Orient. Untersuchungen zu Stil und theologischer Thematik des Buches Qohelet* (Freiburg - Basel - Wien: Herder, 1964), 189-193



beginning after the sudden rupture of death.<sup>36</sup> Specifying that spring is heralded by the blossoming of the almond, that the locust finds ample food when the new grass sprouts and that the bursting open of the ripe caper marks the beginning of summer, he is convinced that Qohelet implicitly offers a hopeful perspective for the dying old man, who is frightened by the terrors of death (verse 5a), in his future new and eternal house (verse 5c). As such, Schwienhorst-Schönberger disagrees with the *communis opinio* by denying Qohelet's belief in an absolute death.<sup>37</sup>

## 6 The Gathering of a Devastating Storm

Quite early in the nineteenth century, a different theory on the final poem's meaning was developed by F.W.C. Umbreit, who believed that Qohelet describes death as an approaching storm.<sup>38</sup> In the latter half of that century, his interpretation gained the support of Christian Ginsburg, whose theory specified that ביום at the beginning of verse 3 indicates that the storm would have lasted at least for twenty-four hours.<sup>39</sup> While forcefully dismissing the physiological reading, Ginsburg explains that these extraordinary atmospheric conditions are already indicated in verse 2, with the continuous return of the clouds bringing fresh rain and obscuring the celestial bodies, instead of the sky clearing up after the cloudburst. In the following verses, the desperation and dread of the city's inhabitants are depicted: slave and master alike are terrified by the threatening tempest, the revolving of the mill – indispensable for baking daily bread – ceases because the grinders seek shelter from the storm, the women who previ-

<sup>36</sup> Lüdger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, "Buch der Natur. Kohelet 12,5 und die Rückkehr des Lebens," in *Das Manna fällt auch Heute noch: Beiträge zur Geschichte und Theologie des Alten, Ersten Testaments* (eds. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Lüdger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, Freiburg - Basel - Wien - Barcelona - Roma - New York: Herder, 2004), 539-545. Cf. also Lüdger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Kohelet* (Freiburg - Basel - Wien: Herder, 2004), 534: "Es dürfte nur wenige Texte in der Heiligen Schrift geben, die auf so zarte und zurückhaltende Weise von einem neuen, ewigen Leben sprechen."

<sup>37</sup> See also Lüdger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, "Vertritt Kohelet die Lehre vom absoluten Tod? Zum Argumentationsgang von Koh 9,1-6," in *Auf den Spuren der schriftgelehrten Weisen* (eds. Irmtraud Fischer, Ursula Rapp and Johannes Schiller, Berlin - New York: de Gruyter, 2003). With respect to Qohelet's perspective on life and death, see my contributions "Gedenk, o mens, dat je zult sterven... Het perspectief van het boek Prediker op het leven vóór en na de dood," in *Bijbelse wijsheid aan het woord* (eds. H. Ausloos and B. Lemmelijn; Leuven: VBS - Acco, 2007); and "Life-and-Death Advice from a Conservative Sage: Qohelet's Perspective on Life after Death," in *Text, Theology, and Trowel: New Investigations in the Biblical World* (eds. L.D. Matassa and J.M. Silverman, Scranton, PA: University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>38</sup> Friedrich W.C. Umbreit, *Koheleth des weissen Königs Seelenkampf*, (Gotha: Becker'schen Buchhandlung, 1818).

<sup>39</sup> Ginsburg, *Coheloth*, 457-469.

ously amused themselves by peering through the lattices are frightened, too, and the doors are barred against the wind and the rain. Anticipating the storm's approach, birds leave their nests, so Ginsburg maintains, and the shriek of the swallow fills the air – the swallow being the bird to which the general designation *הצפור* refers in his opinion. Together with the gathering clouds, all this makes people tremendously afraid of what is “up high” (verse 5a), so that even the highly prized almond and the delicious locust – which was, according to Ginsburg, an agreeable and wholesome food in the Ancient Near East<sup>40</sup> – remain untouched, and the caper-berry fails to excite the appetite. The literal portrayal of a funeral in verse 5c clarifies that Qohelet speaks metaphorically about the approach of death, with subsequently two further metaphors about its arrival and the dissolution of the body, i.e. the snapping of the silver cord by which the golden lamp was suspended and the disfunctioning of a well.

Leahy has advanced a comparable understanding of the poem in a short article where he amplifies the storm's horrors.<sup>41</sup> Terror is sent into the hearts of the various classes referred to in verse 3, all cowering from the raging storm. Merry-makers are terrorised into silence. The almond tree lies battered on the ground. The caper-shrub is torn apart, and even the locust is overpowered by the storm and barely able to move. Unlike Ginsburg, Leahy believes that this imagery continues in verse 6, portraying the ravages in the aftermath of the storm.

In similar vein, Fredericks considers verses 3-5, governed by *ביום ש-*, to be describing the social community and its natural surroundings' response to a calamitous storm already announced by the atmospheric imagery in chapter 11.<sup>42</sup> The hired and noble men are startled by the tempest's approach and humble themselves in order not to be exposed to its onslaught. The grinding-maids neglect their duty and watch the catastrophic disaster from behind the windows after having shut the doors to the street. The ominous song of the birds in the

<sup>40</sup> Cf. also Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York - London - Toronto - Sydney - Auckland: Doubleday, 1997), 362: “There is ample evidence, however, that the insect was consumed by people in the Levant in ancient times, as many Bedouin do even today.”

<sup>41</sup> Michael Leahy, “The Meaning of Ecclesiastes 12,1-5,” *ITQ* 19 (1952): 297-300. It must be noted that the interpretation of the poem as symbolising the fear and desolation of facing death under the image of a household facing a devastating storm, is also supported by Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI - Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998), 270.

<sup>42</sup> Daniel C. Fredericks, “Life's Storms and Structural Unity in Qoheleth 11,1-12,8,” *JSOT* 52 (1991): 95-114. It should be pointed out that Fredericks argues for the demarcation of the final pericope of the book as 11:1-12:8, for which he appeals to the same arguments that were given by Graham S. Ogden in favour of the independence of 11:1-6 in “Qoheleth XI 1-6,” *VT* 33 (1983): 222-224; reiterated in “Qoheleth XI 7-XII 8: Qoheleth's Summons to Enjoyment and Reflection,” *VT* 34 (1984): 27-28.

morning represents the proverbial calm before the storm, as even they are afraid of the heights in which they are flying. Vegetation and insects are also affected by the storm: the beautiful almond is made to look disgusting by the thunderstorm, the grasshopper can scarcely crawl in the torrential rain, and the caper-bush is broken by the squalls. When the interpretational key to the metaphor is finally provided in verse 5c, it becomes clear that the response to the storm closely resembles the despair of the aged at the nearness of death. The main reason for this is given in the next verse, in which the finality of death is emphasised by the shattering of four objects of everyday life: just as the storm leaves a wasteland, death leaves a crushed body to be buried.

To conclude this section, an embarrassing interpretation along the same line is to be mentioned, notably the explanation given in the late nineteenth century commentary by Plumptre, who combines the thunderstorm approach with the traditional understanding of the poem as an “allegory of old age” by asserting that each element in the gathering of the tempest has its analogue in the microcosm of the individual human.<sup>43</sup> Even though he formally rejects the poem’s mere physiological interpretation as “a morbid outgrowth of prosaic fancy in men in whom the sense of true poetic imagination was extinct,”<sup>44</sup> he connects the description of the storm’s effect on the people (verse 3) to the bodily changes caused by old age – the shuffling gait, the flaccid arms, the toothless mouth and the upcoming blindness – and the portrayal of the terrors brought about by the storm (verse 4) to the weakening of the bodily functions – the dulling of sensation and of the desire to eat, the fading of the voice and its childish sound, and the inability to sing or enjoy songs. Furthermore, for the following verses, he resorts exclusively to the physiological understanding and drops the meteorological reading altogether. This leaves the reader with the impression that by the end of his commentary, Plumptre’s own “sense of true poetic imagination” had also been extinguished.

## 7 Natural Upheaval and Universal Cataclysm

Reaching further back in time to the commentaries of Gregory Thaumaturgos and Didymus the Blind yields yet another interpretation of the poem, which can also be found in the works of several medieval authors, among whom are Richard of Saint-Victor and Bonaventure.<sup>45</sup> While Didymus sees it as a vision of the

<sup>43</sup> See Edward H. Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes or the Preacher: with Notes and Introduction* (Cambridge: University Press, 1881), 213-222. A somewhat similar approach is taken by James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1987), 185, when arguing that verse 2 suggests both the approach of a storm and the failing of eyesight during old age. However, he does not sustain this line of interpretation throughout the whole poem; see 5.

<sup>44</sup> Plumptre, *Ecclesiastes*, 214.

<sup>45</sup> For the understanding of the final poem in medieval exegesis, see Leanza, “Eccl 12,1-7.”

church's completion, Gregory – like Didymus a pupil of Origen – considers it an apocalyptic oracle about the approaching *eschaton*, the end of days that had been announced by the prophets. In his paraphrase of the book of Qohelet, which is also today's earliest extant commentary, Gregory relates the guardians of the house to the angels who will go into action when the sun, moon and stars no longer shine, and put a stop to all work, so that the grinding women will flee into the dark places of their houses and will only dare to speak with the weakest voice, like a tiny bird.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, according to Gregory, divine retribution – which will be inflicted “from above,” 5a – is foretold by the images in 5b: to bloodstained cities and their leaders will be given a bitter and bloody punishment, rising like a blossoming almond-tree and imposed on them like a swarm of flying locusts, so that each and every lawbreaker will be thrown out like the contemptible caper-shrub. In these days, neither silver nor gold will be of use for people on earth (verse 6), who can only be saved through acknowledging the One who brought them into being (verse 7).

Although Leanza noted that the eschatological reading had been abandoned at the time when he wrote,<sup>47</sup> it has been revived by several scholars at the dawn of the present millennium. Dismissing the exclusive preoccupation of scholars with aging and death because it ignores the proto-apocalyptic idiom of the poem, Beal has argued that Qohelet, who would be longing for a justice beyond the limits of the worldly order, presents in his final words a vision of the disjunction of the cosmos and its collapse into “chaosmopolis.”<sup>48</sup> In his opinion, the undoing of creation is announced in verse 2 with the heavenly lights ceasing to function as they are supposed to, and the clouds shrouding the world in darkness, which goes against the common wisdom that the sun will return after the rain. He maintains that starting from the next verse the poem paints a random collage of the calamity and desolation in the wake of this threat of cosmic magnitude: verse 3 shows the vulnerability of the four social, domestic levels within the house, whereas verses 4-5a describe the disorder and terrors on the street. With the mention of the almond, the locust and the caper, Beal infers that even nature takes part in the disorientation brought about by this universal disaster: nature has gone awry with the counter-natural images of an almond going to waste, a locust being a burden to itself and a caper having

<sup>46</sup> For the text of Gregory's commentary on the final poem, see John Jarick, “An ‘Allegory of Age’ as Apocalypse (Ecclesiastes 12:1-7),” *Colloquium: the Australian and New Zealand Theological Review* 22 (1990): 19-27; *Gregory Thaumaturgos' Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990): 289-299, and on the design and contents of Gregory's paraphrase, “Gregory Thaumaturgos' Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes,” *Abr-Nahrain* 27 (1989): 37-57.

<sup>47</sup> Leanza, “Eccl 12,1-7,” 193, 205.

<sup>48</sup> Timothy K. Beal, “C(ha)osmopolis. Qohelet's Last Words,” in *God in the Fray. A Tribute to Walter Brueggeman* (eds. Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998).

lost its aphrodisiac effects. The sphere of death is further evoked by the lament at the end of verse 5 and by the urban ruin suggested by the demolished and abandoned everyday items in verse 6, resembling a ghost town. The undoing of creation reaches its climax in the last verse, which at the same time concludes the breakdown: as the dust of the earth and the breath of life have been separated again, the re-intrusion of chaos in the divine order is complete. Contrary to what one might expect, this is no desperate conclusion for Beal, as he opines that the reference to dust and wind opens up a “chaotic desert” on the edge of which otherness might be revealed and a new creation established. With such a conclusion, however, he goes far beyond the actual words of Qohelet, who does not even slightly hint at the establishment of a new world and instead leaves his readers in a wasteland.

A similar eschatological understanding of the poem has been put forward by Choon-Leong Seow, who likewise thinks that Qohelet depicts a cosmic disaster as a metaphor for the permanent end of human existence.<sup>49</sup> This universal destruction is announced by the threatening cosmic signs in verse 2, after which the terror and desolation that will reign “on that day” (ביום) are portrayed in verses 3-5a. The watchers are terrified at the sight of these signs, and the sturdy men crouch in fear, while the utmost important life-sustaining activity of grinding the corn stops, and the women look out their windows in vain, realising that all hope has been dashed and that only death is left. In verse 4, the scene moves to the crowded bazaar in the city,<sup>50</sup> the centre of economic and social activities of which the double door is closed. The shutting of these doors ominously hints at the calamity, along with the silencing of the assuring and salutary revolving of the mill, which normally drones on unabated. The diminishing sounds of social intercourse and domestic activity are replaced by the rising noise of the birds that typically come down from up high to devastated places where the population has been annihilated.<sup>51</sup> After a short reference to the panic in the thoroughfares in verse 5a, the poem continues by painting the countryside as unsavoury, again foreboding the vast catastrophe that is about to strike the earth. Three plants, which were very common in Palestine, languish in the face of doom. The almond tree, renowned for its beauty, becomes disgusting to see. Since הגב is sandwiched between two plant images, Seow argues that it does not refer to the insect, but rather to the tree which is also known as “Saint John’s Bread” and normally lives for centuries, but now droops misera-

<sup>49</sup> Seow, “Eschatological Poem,” 209-34.

<sup>50</sup> In this regard, it must be noted that Graham S. Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Sheffield: Phoenix Press,<sup>2</sup> 2007), 218, points out that *sûq* represents the modern Arab equivalent of the market-place.

<sup>51</sup> Seow, “Eschatological Poem,” 218-219, points to the parallel with Rev 18, where the end of Babylon is symbolised by the mill’s permanent silence, and the city is haunted by birds.



bly.<sup>52</sup> And finally, the caper-bush is defoliated. The next part of the verse explains these eschatological signs in a phrase introduced by כִּי: mankind is marching towards a place of no return, the finality of which is further illustrated in verse 6. The silver thread signifies, according to Seow, a durable lampstand in the form of a tree with a golden bowl attached to it as the receptacle for the oil, symbolising life and fertility and often placed in tombs, but even this last spark of hope is crushed as the lamp of humanity is extinguished. The smashing of pottery likewise symbolises death and may have been part of a funeral rite, reinforced by the shattering of the jar into the “pit,” as בּוֹר can also be a euphemism for the grave. Finally, the extinction of human life culminates in the body’s return to the dust of the earth and God taking back the breath of life.

The apocalyptic language of the poem and its resemblances to prophetic announcements of divine judgment are also emphasised by another present-day commentator on the book of Qohelet: Krüger believes that Qohelet uses eschatological images to deconstruct the expectation of a universal destruction.<sup>53</sup> He points out that the judgment God will cast on the individual is already alluded to at the very beginning of the poem (verse 1a), probably referring back to the warning near the end of the previous chapter (11:9b). Moreover, he contends that, while verses 2-5a evoke the end of the entire world, the following contrasts limit the scope to the individual’s fate. While nature flourishes again (verse 5b), man heads relentlessly towards death (verse 5c), his utensils are destroyed (verse 6) and his dead body will disintegrate (verse 7). As such, Krüger contends that the cosmic eschatology is demythologised and reduced to the realistic expectation of death, which ends the individual’s personal world and is “universal” in the sense that nobody can escape from it.

Not to be confused with Krüger’s understanding of the poem is the proposal by Kruger, who suspects that the ancient mythical idea of a breaking millwheel looms in the background.<sup>54</sup> As this millwheel was supposed to cause the revolving of the celestial bodies and the rotation of the earth, Kruger believes that the darkening of the sun, moon and stars in verse 2 suggests the

<sup>52</sup> This interpretation of כַּבֵּב had already been proposed by George Henslow, “The Carob and the Locust,” *ExpT* 15 (1903-1904): 285-6. Some years before, Moore, “Caper-Plant,” 64, had raised the question whether the word could not refer to another vegetable, as it comes in strangely between the almond and the caper.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Krüger, “Dekonstruktion und Rekonstruktion prophetischer Eschatologie im Qohelet-Buch,” in *Jedes Ding hat seine Zeit... Studien zur israelitischen und altorientalischen Weisheit* (eds. Anja A. Diesel, Reinhard G. Lehmann, Eckardt Otto and E. Wagner; Berlin - New York: de Gruyter, 1996), 114-124; see also his *Qoheleth* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004), 202-204.

<sup>54</sup> Hennie A. J. Kruger, “Old Age Frailty versus Cosmic Deterioration? A Few Remarks on the Interpretation of Qohelet 11,7-12,8,” in *Qohelet in the Context of Wisdom* (ed. A. Schoors; Leuven, University Press – Peeters: 1999).

apocalyptic darkness caused by the millwheel being sundered from its pillars, of which the giving way is linked to the trembling keepers of the house. Moreover, Kruger sees this point of view corroborated through the references to the mill in verses 3 and 4 and to the destruction of the pulley (גלגל) used to draw water from the cistern in verse 6. The pulley falling into the cistern (בור) – which is, according to Kruger, together with the disputed form בוראִיך (12:1) part of a ring-composition – echoes the mythical whirlpool or maelstrom created by the millwheel falling into the ocean. Since, in ancient myth, the images of the whirlpool and the millwheel are often accompanied by the cutting down of the mythical tree, standing for the axis of the earth and the heavens, Kruger refers back to the falling of a tree mentioned in 11:3. He finds further support for his thesis in its parallelism to – allegedly – torrential rains poured out upon the earth and in the immediately preceding warning that “you do not know what disaster may happen on earth” (11:2). To make the story complete, Kruger associates the snapping of the silver cord with the disruption of the Milky Way, and the smashing of the pitcher with the completion of the Age of Aquarius. As such, Qohelet would be alluding in a veiled way to the beginning of apocalyptic upheaval at the end of the “old age” of the globe, thereby using ancient mythological imagery. Suffice it to say in response to this suggestion that the cosmological symbolism of the final poem is rather restrained, and that, as noted by Fox, Qohelet avoids heaping up pictures of cataclysm and destruction.<sup>55</sup>

## 8 An Allegory of Death

This last remark notwithstanding, Fox does not deny the presence of a certain amount of eschatological symbolism in Qohelet’s final poem and even elaborates on its connections to the prophetic announcements of universal desolation awaiting humanity at the end of times when discussing the symbolic level of meaning.<sup>56</sup> In his later monograph that offers a rereading of the whole book, he reissues his earlier suggestion that Qohelet’s last words can be read on three different levels of meaning, but appears less reserved about applying the term “allegorical” to the poem. In fact, he proposes an alternative allegorical reading, in which the theme of aging does not extend beyond 12:1 and all the images from 12:2 on are taken as ciphers for death.<sup>57</sup> Thus, for example, he sug-

<sup>55</sup> Fox, “Aging and Death,” 66.

<sup>56</sup> Fox, “Aging and Death,” 63-67.

<sup>57</sup> Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down & a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI - Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999), 347-349. That Qohelet’s perspective shifts to death from verse 2 onwards is also maintained by Ogden, “Qoheleth XI 7-XII 8,” 34-35, who asserts that “the contrast throughout xii 1-7 is not between youthfulness and old age, but rather between the full and vital life implicit in, or exemplified by, youth, and the emaciated half-life which is the awful prospect of Sheol”. However, to this point of view the following objection is made by Ronald E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (Nashville, TN - Dallas, TX - Mexico City - Rio de Janeiro -

gests that the darkening of the luminaries and the return of the clouds in verse 2 refer to the darkness of death. Similarly, he suggests that the trembling keepers of the house and the stooping powerful men in verse 3 portray people suffering from a mortal disease and writhing with pain in the throes of death, or that the sound of the bird and the bowing down of the daughters of song in verse 4 literally describe the threnodies and movements of the wailing women in a funeral procession. Most curiously, Fox accepts the idle grinding-maids to be understood as the teeth, the ladies looking through the lattices as the failing of eyesight in old age, the shutting of the doors as the closing of the bodily apertures of sensory input, and the fading sound of the mill as the silencing of the voice. This does not only seem incompatible with his earlier dismissal of the physiological interpretation of the poem, but it also contradicts his own statement that the poem as a whole is an allegory of death rather than of old age.

## C CONCLUSION

Venturing their criticism on the traditional understanding of Qohelet's final poem as an "allegory of old age," several scholars have observed that this reading misses as much as it captures in its desire to find coherence in the text,<sup>58</sup> and that the issue is not so much the impossibility of connecting some parts of the poem to bodily deterioration, but rather that many associations are completely arbitrary and open to multiple possibilities, which makes the allegorical approach as a whole an extremely subjective undertaking.<sup>59</sup> However, the present study has demonstrated that the alternatively proposed interpretations of the poem are just as difficult to corroborate and no less arbitrary in making all the images portrayed by Qohelet "fit" into their overall understanding of the poem, some of them even relying on doubtful emendations lacking any textual basis. As I have observed elsewhere with respect to the at least as emendation-haunted verse on the doings of the wicked in chapter 8, the question can and should be raised whether it is necessary to attribute a single meaning to each image of this beautiful and multifaceted poetical composition.<sup>60</sup> Why can it not simply be accepted that they are applicable to a multipli-

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Beijing: Nelson, 1992), 115: "The distinction between old age and death is minimal here; the really critical issue is the nature of the language in vv. 2-6."

<sup>58</sup> So Beal, "C(ha)osmopolis," 295.

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, James L. Crenshaw, "Youth and Old Age in Qoheleth," *HAR* 10 (1986): 10, n. 40, and Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 263. Cf. also R. Norman Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans; London, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1989), 163: "None of these hypotheses, however, can be wholly sustained without straining the sense of some of the items in the list."

<sup>60</sup> See my "What about the Wicked? A Survey of the Textual and Interpretational Problems in Qoh 8,10a," in *Florilegium Lovaniense: Studies in Septuagint and Textual Criticism in Honour of Florentino García Martínez* (eds. Hans Ausloos, Bénédicte Lemmelijn and Marc Vervenne. Leuven - Paris - Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2008), 145.

city of situations and contexts? As is so often the case with poetry, the emphasis is here, in my view, not on the specific meaning of each image as such, but rather on the general feeling evoked by their quick succession. For instance, whether the watchers of the house are taken to denote the arms of the old man, or actual guards facing an upcoming storm or a cosmic disaster, or even the pillars on which the mythical millwheel rests, their trembling undoubtedly evokes a certain amount of fear, which fits the general tenor of gloom and darkness pervading the poem as a whole. To put it in the words Fox once used in his famous discussion of the poem: this atmosphere is the visible surface of the poem, which should not be quickly discarded and substituted by the “true” meaning that one believes to be hidden in the poem.<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, at the end of the present survey, it is equally interesting to note that the proponents of the interpretations outlined above disagree in many details on the textual form and meaning of quite a few individual words. Who is it, for example, that fears the heights and the terrors on the road, and who or what is rising up “at” or “to” the sound of the bird, or should the prefix -־ simply be considered a secondary addition? Does the almond-tree “blossom” or are its fruits “despised”? Has the locust become a burden to itself or is the carob tree drooping from the weight of its pods? Is the caper-berry bursting, has its assumed aphrodisiac or appetising power become ineffectual, or is the caper-shrub budding? True enough, the attestation of the physiological interpretation in ancient Jewish treatises testifies to its early establishment, but does this imply that it has also affected the Masoretic vocalisation of the poem and caused corruptions in the consonantal text, as Sawyer has it and many others implicitly suppose? From these kinds of questions, which go beyond the mere interpretation of the various images of the poem, it can only be inferred that the exegesis of the final poem of Qohelet is desperately in need of thorough preliminary text-critical research, instead of unwarranted speculations about the meaning of the individual images.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Fox, “Aging and Death,” 57.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. the indispensability of textual criticism as a first phase of biblical research as emphasised by Bénédicte Lemmelijn, “The So-Called ‘Major Expansions’ in SamP, 4QpaleoExod<sup>m</sup> and 4QExod<sup>j</sup> of Exod 7:14-11:10: On the Edge between Textual Criticism and Literary Criticism,” in *X Congress of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies, Oslo 1998* (ed. Bernard A. Taylor; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001); see also her *A Plague of Texts: A Text-Critical Study of the So-Called ‘Plagues Narrative’ in Exod. 7:14-11:10* (Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2009), 11. At present, I am undertaking a text-critical investigation of the final poem within the scope of my research project *Words of a Sceptical Sage: A Text-Critical, Thematic and Literary-Critical Study of Qohelet*, funded by the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO-Vlaanderen), which I hope will result in a number of publications on a number verses in particular in the near future.

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