

A New Interpretation of Qohelet 10:10

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ABSTRACT

We offer a new interpretation of *Qoh* 10:10, which is based on the view that the unit consisting of vv. 10-11 is an expansion of the original proverb אִם־קִקְהָה הַבְּרִזָּל אִין יִתְרוֹן לְבַעַל הַלְּשׁוֹן, "If a blade became blunt, then the owner of the blade (הַלְּשׁוֹן) has no advantage." The rest of the unit is an elaboration of the idea that a blunted tool offers no advantage to its owner. We suggest that *Qoh* 10:10 consists of a rhetorical question (10:10a), and an answer which advises proper training for a battle-axe user (10:10b). *Qohelet* exploits the example of a battle-axe user to bring home the idea that honing wisdom skills would keep them useful. The hallmark of Wisdom is sharpness of thought encapsulated in few words, as is the ease of using effectively a sharp axe. This advantage is lost when the tool becomes blunted, and can be maintained by training and exercise.

A INTRODUCTION

Qohelet 10:10, which reads,

אִם־קִקְהָה הַבְּרִזָּל וְהוּא לֹא־פָנִים קְלָקֵל וְחִילִים יִגְבֵּר וְיִתְרוֹן הַכְּשִׁיר חֲכָמָה¹

is a long standing crux. Ginsberg preambles his commentary on this verse with "a verse close to despair" (פסוק קרוב לייאוש) and ends with "the hardest of verses in the hardest of sections" (הקשה שבמיקראות שבפרשיות).² Wright observed: "This, linguistically speaking, is confessedly the most difficult passage in the Book of Koheleth."³ All that Ehrlich can say about this

¹ According to the Massorah, in the Land of Israel the reading was לו and in Babylon לא. This does not indicate existence of two different versions. The *ketib-qere* apparatus attests to the frequency of the לא/לו confusion: Lev 25:30 לא (Ketib) but לו (Qere); 1 Sam 2:3 לאו (K) but ולו (Q); 1 Sam 20:2 לו (K) but לא (Q); 2 Sam 16:18 לא (K) but לו (Q); 2 Sam 18:12 לאו (K) but ולו (Q); 2 Sam 19:7 לא (K) but לו (Q); Isa 9:2 לא (K) but לו (Q); Isa 49:5 לאו (K) but ולו (Q); Isa 59:5 לא (K) but לו (Q); Ps 100:3 לאו (K) but ולו (K); Ps 100:3, 139:16 לאו (Q) but ולו (Q); Ps 139:16 לאו (K) but ולו (Q); Prov 19:7 לא (K) but לו (Q); Job 13:15, 41:4; לא (K) but לו (Q); Ezr 4:2 לאו (K) but ולו (Q); and 1 Chr 11:20 לאו (Q) but ולו (Q).

² Harold L. Ginsberg, *Koheleth* (Tel Aviv: Newman, 1961), 121.

³ Charles H. H. Wright, *The Book of Koheleth, Commonly Called Ecclesiastes* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1883), 423.

verse is: "וְיִתְרוֹן הַכְּשִׁיר חֲכָמָה וְהוּא לֹא־פָּנִים קְלָקֶל." Der Text ist hoffnungslos verderbt."⁴

The verse presented to the commentator not only linguistic but also thematic and contextual difficulties. They were baffled by the image that Qohelet had in mind and by the idea he tried to convey. Is the iron implement that the verse refers to an implement of war or a peaceful tool? What specifically happens to the iron implement? How can it be avoided? What is the lesson learned regarding the utility of wisdom? Should the verse be understood in context of what precedes or what follows?

Delitzsch notes: "Dieser Spruch vom Eisen d.i. Eisenwerkzeug ist der schwierigsten einer im B. Koheleth, sprachlich der schwierigste weil kaum anderswo so viel Spracheigentümliches und Unbelegbares zusammen trifft."⁵ Indeed, commentators were challenged by the grammatical form קָהָה and יִגְבֵּר, the peculiar word order of לֹא־פָּנִים קְלָקֶל וְחֵילִים, the meaning of הַכְּשִׁיר, the form וְיִתְרוֹן הַכְּשִׁיר חֲכָמָה, *et cetera*. Is the verse a question, statement of advice, or a conditional? How does it fit the context? If the verse follows vv. 8-9, which speak about dangers associated with various activities, then one would expect in v. 10 a statement about the dangers of using a blunt tool. However, no dangers are mentioned or alluded to in v. 10.⁶ If v. 10 is linked with v. 11, one would have expected it to refer to speech. However, nothing related to speech can be found in v. 10.

The verse elicited numerous drastically conflicting interpretations. For instance, Ginsburg viewed the verse as Qohelet's advice against "attempting to raise a feeble revolt against the mighty trunk of despotism." In his view,

Cohleth takes up, from another point of view, the illustration used in the second hemistich of the foregoing verse. If one will go to work with a blunt axe, and does not take due precaution to sharpen the instrument before using it, he will only make the tyrant increase his army, and thereby augment his sufferings. But it is the preroga-

⁴ Arnold B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel* (vol. 7; Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1968), 99.

⁵ Franz Delitzsch, *Hoheslied und Koheleth* (Leipzig: Dörfling und Franke, 1875), 367.

⁶ Thomas Krüger, *Qohelet, A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 185. Krüger says, "After v. 9b calls attention to the dangers of splitting wood, one expects after v. 10aa, a statement about the increased dangers that can arise from a poorly maintained tool in the working of stone or wood (v. 9). What follows in v. 10aβ, however is a reference to the greater strength and effort required by the work in this case. For avoiding this (and not the unavoidable risks; cf. 9:11-12), the wisdom of the expert is to his advantage (v. 10b)."

tive of wisdom to repair the mischief, which such precipitate folly occasions.⁷

About half a century ago, Gordis *tentatively* offered the completely different translation: "If an axe is blunt, and a man does not sharpen it beforehand, then he must exert all his strength to wield it, but it is an advantage to prepare one's skill in advance." In his view "The theme is the virtue of being prepared for any given task – a typical maxim of prudence, of which there are many in this section."⁸ Whether Gordis is correct regarding Qohelet's intent in 10:10, as will become evident, is debatable. It seems that Gordis rightly sensed that it would be rather difficult to anchor his translation in the text, and that it does not present a coherent thought.

Gordis' hesitancy and his translation clearly illustrate the difficulties of 10:10, which to this day have not been resolved. It is with this recognition that I offer a new interpretation of 10:10, which is based on the view that the unit consisting of vv. 10-11 is an expansion of the original proverb אִם-קָהָה הַבְּרִזָּל וְאִין יִתְרוֹן לְבַעַל הַלְשׁוֹן (Qohelet 10:10), "If a blade became blunt, then the owner of the blade (הַלְשׁוֹן) has no advantage." The rest of the unit is an elaboration of the idea that a blunted tool offers no advantage to its owner and serves as a metaphor for Wisdom. The hallmark of Wisdom is using sharpness of thought encapsulated in few words, as is the ease of using effectively a sharp axe. This advantage is lost when the tool becomes blunted, and can be maintained by training and exercise.

B ANALYSIS

1 The Versions

Already the Versions unsuccessfully struggled to understand this verse, as is obvious from their substantially different translations, which do not make sense. For instance, LXX has "If the axe should fall, and it troubled his face, and he shall strengthen the forces; and wisdom is no advantage to man" (Ἐὰν ἐκπέσῃ τὸ σιδήριον καὶ αὐτὸς πρόσωπον ἐτάραξε καὶ δυνάμεις δυναμώσῃ, καὶ περίσσεια τῷ ἀνδρὶ οὐ σοφία). This incoherent translation makes the following emendations: (a) changes arbitrarily קָהָה into נָפַל;⁹ (b) deletes the לֹא in לֹא-פְנִים;

⁷ Christian D. Ginsburg, *Cohélet, Commonly Called the Book of Ecclesiastes* (London: Longman, 1861), 431.

⁸ Robert Gordis, *Koheleth – The Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes* (3rd ed.; New York: Schocken, 1968), 192.

⁹ It is possible that LXX harmonizes with Deut 19:5 where it renders נָשַׁל by ἐκπεσοὺν.

(c) gives קלקל the unattested sense “trouble”; (d) changes arbitrarily הכשיר to איש; and adds a negation before חכמה (ֹט).¹⁰

The Peshitta’s translation is no more cogent than that of the LXX. It renders 10:10 “If the axe is blunt, and it troubles the face and increases the slain, and the advantage of the diligent is wisdom.” This translation makes the following emendations: (a) emends לא־פנים to לו־פנים; (b) gives קלקל the unattested sense “trouble;” (c) emends וחילים to וחללים;¹¹ and, (d) considers הכשיר a noun.

It is difficult to see the relation between Qoh 10:10 and the Targum’s homiletic translation. The Targum translates: “And when the people of the house of Israel sin, and the heavens are made strong as rain to keep back the rain, and that generation does not pray before the Lord, all the world is afflicted with famine on their account; and when the multitude gather themselves together and overcome their evil spirit, and appoint their superiors to ask mercy from the Lord of heaven, there is acceptance for them, because of the abundance of their true wisdom.” The only word of this translation that also occurs in 10:10 is “wisdom.” This seems to be clear indication that the Targumist did not understand 10:10.

The Vulgate has “If the iron be blunt, and be not as before, but be made blunt, with much labour it shall be sharpened: and after industry shall follow wisdom” (*si retunsum fuerit ferrum et hoc non ut prius sed hebetatum erit multo labore exacuat et post industriam sequitur sapientia*). This translation makes the following emendations: (a) reads לא לְפָנִים for פָּנִים (לוֹ); (b) doubly translates קלקל, i.e., קלקל = “made blunt” and קלקל = “sharpen;” (c) reads בְּחִילִים instead of וְחִילִים; (d) gives יגבר the unattested sense of “much labor;” (e) gives יתרון the unattested sense of “after;” and, (f) gives הכשיר the unattested sense of “industry.” These emendations unfortunately result in senseless repetition and incoherent text.

It seems from this discussion that the authors of the Versions had before them the same text as the MT, but were confused about its meaning. That they resort to drastic and arbitrary alterations of the text, yet come up with meaningless content, clearly attests to the challenges that our verse posed to these authors. Later exegetes did not fare any better.

¹⁰ It is possible that LXX uses the Land of Israel reading, if ἀτῶ fell out after αὐτός. The Alexandrian version for τῶ ἀνδρὶ οὖ reads τοῦ ἀνδρείου and thus “Wisdom is the advantage of an energetic man.”

¹¹ A ל/י confusion is not attested in the *ketib-qere* system.

2 Classical Jewish Exegesis

Classical Jewish exegetes, though more faithful to the MT, are no less divergent or more coherent in their interpretations than the authors of the Versions. Rashi (1040-1105) apparently understands ברזל as referring to "sharp knives."¹² He explains that sharp knives that became blunt and tarnished still provide the soldiers with the advantage to win. Wisdom has yet a greater advantage over the ברזל. Though one might see the wise man, his face darkened from hunger, a poor man among the rich, many soldiers are empowered by him. Rashi clearly connects 10:10 with 9:13-16 and imbues the three words of 10:10b with much content. This is questionable. Moreover, one understands that weapons for face-to-face combat can be useful even if not maintained, and a wise man can give good advice even when poor and hungry. So what? What is then the conclusion? Why does 10:10b express an advantage over 10:10a? Rashbam (1085-1174), who essentially adopts Rashi's understanding of this verse, explicitly says that this verse repeats the idea טובה חכמה מכלי קרב in 9:18a. Both Rashi and Rashbam consider ברזל a weapon and קלקל a quadrilateral of קלל (Ezek 1:7, Dan 10:6).¹³

Ibn Ezra (1093-1167) seemingly considers ברזל a regular axe. He understands the verse as telling that an axe which is blunt and unpolished will faster tire anyone who uses it, causing him grief. However, wisdom's advantage is in circumventing the grief by preparing man and setting him straight.¹⁴ Ibn Ezra is more specific about the advantage of wisdom. Unfortunately there is nothing in the text that supports his view. Sforno (c. 1475-1550) adopts Ibn Ezra's understanding of 10:10a but leaves 10:10b unexplained.¹⁵

Qara considers 10:10a a rhetorical question:

Is it possible that a sword that has not been sharpened and polished would invite anyone to grab and use it? Certainly, any weapon of iron, any sword, which has not been sharpened and polished, is useless in the hands of its user.¹⁶

¹² Rashi takes הברזל = הרבות צורים, which in Jos 5:2 he translates according to the Targum by אומלון חריפין (מיקראות גדולות). Cf. *Rabbinic Bibles* (מיקראות גדולות). The word חָרַב could mean "knife, dagger" as in Ugaritic. Cf. Ezra 5:1.

¹³ Sarah Japhet and Robert B. Salters, *The Commentary of R. Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam) on Qoheleth* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1985), 115-116.

¹⁴ Ibn Ezra says: והענין שיש לחכמה יתרון על כל עצב כי תכשיר האדם ותישרנו בלא עצבון. והתשת כח. Cf. *Rabbinic Bibles* (מיקראות גדולות).

¹⁵ *Rabbinic Bibles* (מיקראות גדולות).

¹⁶ Berthold Einstein, *R. Josef Kara und sein Commentar zu Kohelet: Aus dem MS. 104 der Bibliothek des Jüdisch-Theologischen Seminars zu Breslau* (Berlin: Mampe, 1886), Part B (Hebrew Text), 43. Qara expresses his hesitancy by beginning his explanation with: דומה שזה פתרונו.

Qara concludes from this that making the iron functional is more important than having the iron (למדתה שהכשר החרב ותיקונו גדול מן הברזל עצמו). This reasoning enables him to explain 10:10b. As with the relation of the iron to its functionality, so is to any matter wisdom (כמו כן [יתרון הכשר] של כל דבר היא) (ה[חכמה]). However, one may well question Qara's relative valuation of iron and its functionality. Obviously, without iron no functionality of it could exist.

It seems as though classical Jewish exegesis, because of the terseness of 10:10b, could not come up with an advantage for wisdom, which could be logically compared to the situation described in 10:10b. It could provide a reasonable interpretation of 10:10a, but struggled with linking it to 10:10b.

3 Modern Exegesis

Modern commentators did not fare any better than their ancient predecessors in cracking the crux presented in 10:10. Coverdale, following Luther, renders "when an iron is blunt, and the point not sharpened, it must be whet again, and that with might; even so does wisdom follow diligence."¹⁷ This translation gives the MT non-standard meanings and highlights the logical disconnect between the two parts of the verse. Similar divergence, between the two parts of the verse and the detailed exegesis from the standard, is illustrated in the following sample of meanings that have been suggested:

- (i) Michaelis: *Wenn Eisen stumpf wird und auch ohne Schärfe stark ist und schmettern kann, so behält doch die Weisheit ihren Vorzug.*¹⁸
- (ii) Spohn: *Wenn eine Axt stumpf ist und man schleift sie, so kann man desto mehr damit ausrichten. Aber noch besser glückt es der Weisheit.*¹⁹
- (iii) Ewald: *Lässt man das Eisen stumpf und es nicht vorher geschärft, so greifts die Kräfte an: doch der Vortheil der Anstrengung ist die Weisheit.*²⁰
- (iv) Hitzig: *Wenn er das Eisen stumpf gemacht hat und es ohne Schneide ist, so schwingt er und strengt die Kräfte, Vortheil des Gedeihens ist Weisheit.*²¹
- (v) Graetz: *Wenn er das Eisen stumpf gemacht hat, so schleudert er es ins Gesicht und häuft Wunden ... Vorzug, unanstrengung, Weisheit (?).*²²

¹⁷ Cited by Ginsburg, *Coheloth*, 432.

¹⁸ Cited by Ginsburg, *Coheloth*, 432.

¹⁹ Cited by Ginsburg, *Coheloth*, 432.

²⁰ Cited by Ferdinand Hitzig, in *Der Prediger Salomo's* (W. Nowack [ed.]; Leipzig: Hirzel, 1883), 288.

²¹ Ferdinand Hitzig, *Der Prediger Salomo's* (W. Nowack [ed.]; Leipzig: Hirzel, 1883), 288-289.

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- (vi) Delitzsch: *Wenn stumpf geworden das Eisen und er hat nicht die Vorderseite geschliffen, so muß er die Kraftanstrengungen verstärken, der Vortheil aber der Zurechtmachung ist Weisheit.*²³
 - (vii) Wright: *If the iron has become blunt, and he has not whetted the face (of it), then must he put forth strength; a superiority in setting right (has) wisdom.*²⁴
 - (viii) Barton: *If the iron be dull, and he do not sharpen its edge, then he must strengthen his force; but the advantage of wisdom is to give success.*²⁵
 - (ix) Jastrow: (a) *If the iron be dull (comment: i.e., the edge has not been whetted) one must exert one's utmost force; and, (b) The advantage of wisdom is that it secures success.*²⁶
 - (x) Crenshaw: *If the ax is dull and no one sharpens its edge, then more effort must be put forth; and the advantage of skill is wisdom.*²⁷
 - (xi) Fox: *If the iron is dull and he has not sharpened the blade, then he must exert more force. But the skilled man has the advantage of wisdom.*²⁸
 - (xii) Longman: *The axe is blunt and the edge is not sharp, then he must increase his efforts. But the advantage of wisdom is success.*²⁹
 - (xiii) Seow: *If an implement is blunt and one one does not sharpen it first, then one must exert more force. It is an advantage to appropriate more wisdom.*³⁰

One can readily see in these illustrative examples the substantial divergence among the translations with regard to the general meaning of the verse, the detailed understanding of the text, and the continuity of thought. Graetz is certainly right that "Wie man auch den esrten Teil des Vs. fassen mag, der

²² Heinrich Graetz, *Kohelet קהלת oder der Salamonische Prediger* (Leipzig: Wintersche Verlag, 1870), 121.

²³ Delitzsch, *Hoheslied und Koheleth*, 367.

²⁴ Wright, *Koheleth*, 423.

²⁵ George A. Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the book of Ecclesiastes* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908) 169.

²⁶ Morris Jastrow, Jr. *A Gentle Cynic, Being a Translation of the Book of Koheleth* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1919), 234, note 157.

²⁷ James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1987), 168.

²⁸ Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and A Time to Build Up* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 305.

²⁹ Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 243.

³⁰ Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AnB 18C; New York: Yale University Press, 2008), 307.

Schluss passt keinesweges dazu; daher zeugen sämmtliche Uebersetzungen nur von Desperation."³¹

4 The Text

קָהָה is the *Pi'el* of קָהָה, "be blunt, dull," and this grammatical form occurs only here. The *Qal* of קָהָה, in reference to teeth, occurs in Jer 31:29, 30; Ezek 18:2; and Sir 30:10. Normally the *Pi'el* of קָהָה would be transitive. In this case, as Driver notes

the subject is any one of the craftsmen mentioned in the previous clause; since then the following הוּא implies a different subject, this will be the ברזל and the passive קָלְקַל must be read (Targ., Hebr. Mss.).³²

However, it has been often assumed that קָהָה here is being used intransitively. Support for this view is drawn from the kindred קָהָה occurring in Ezek 21:12 and having presumably an intransitive sense. Ginsburg felt that the *Pi'el* form "has been chosen in preference to the *Kal*, קָהָה, because of its forming a paronomasia with בּוֹקֵעַ."³³ Gordis suggested that קָהָה is intransitive "perhaps because the verb may contain an attenuated vowel, and is equivalent to the *Pual* קָהָה; cf. וּמַדֵּד, Job 7:4."³⁴

The *Pi'el* of some verbs could certainly be intransitive (cf. 12:3). There is, however, no compelling argument to understand so the *Pi'el* of קָהָה. Both Hitzig and Knobel have strongly argued against such an approach.³⁵ Seow takes the term to be the adjective קָהָה, which often occurs in postbiblical He-

³¹ Heinrich Graetz, *Kohelet קהלת oder der Salomonische Prediger* (Leipzig: Wintersche Verlag, 1870), 120. In his view, "Man muss eben bei solchen Versen den Muth der Bescheidenheit haben und eingestehen, dass man sie nicht versteht. Scheint das Trümmerstück eines untergegangenen Verses oder einer Versgruppe zu sein."

³² Godfrey Rolles Driver, "Problems and Solutions," *VT* 4 (1954): 232.

³³ Ginsburg, *Cohleth*, 433.

³⁴ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 322.

³⁵ Graetz, *Kohelet*, 120. Graetz says, "Die sprachliche Erklärung desselben, welche davon ausgeht, dass intransitive zu nehmen sei, und dadurch zu vielen falschen Consequenzen führt (so unter den Neuern Ewald und Hengstenberg), haben Knobel und Hitzig abgefertigt." For instance, Knobel says: "קָהָה geben die meisten Ausleger unrichtig durch: 'stumpf sein' für: stumpf machen. Subj. ist der Hackende, an den man auch bei idem folgenden הוּא zu denken hat." Cf. August Knobel, *Commentar über Das Buch Koheleth* (Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth., 1836), 318.

brew.³⁶ Graetz avers that "unzweifelhaft ist קהה = כהה 'stumpf machen,' in Piel-Form schon in Ezech. [21:12] mit ק statt כ."³⁷

בְּרִזָּל is a masculine noun meaning "iron, an iron, tool of iron, axe" (Deut 27:5, Jos 8:31, 2 Kgs 6:5, Prov 27:17, Isa 10:34). It has been conjectured that the quadrilateral form ל ברז + has been derived from ברז, where ברז = "pierce,"³⁸ or as others think from ברזל (as זלעף from זעף), where בזל = Aramaic פזל = "to be hard, solid."³⁹ Some explicitly or implicitly connect 10:10 with 10:9b, taking אִם-קִהָה as referring to the בּוֹקֵעַ עֵצִים in 10:9b. This forces understanding ברזל as being an axe.⁴⁰ Others (Rashi) take it to be a sword. Many⁴¹ leave the term in its generic meaning "iron."⁴²

וְהוּא means "and he, and it, and a man, and someone" (Cf. Job 13:28). Some commentators take the הוּא as referring to the cleaver of wood in the preceding verse or the person using the axe,⁴³ some to the iron,⁴⁴ and others to the owner of the ברזל.⁴⁵ Longman takes וְהוּא as referring to פְּנִים.⁴⁶

פְּנִים is usually translated "edge," on the basis of Ezek 21:21 and the use of פִּי חֶרֶב "edge of a sword." This support does not appear to be adequate, and

³⁶ Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Talmud* (Brooklyn: Traditional Press, 1903), 1321.

³⁷ Graetz, *Kohelet*, 120. So does also Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, *Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia: Smith, English, and Co., 1860).

³⁸ Francis Brown, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001), 137a.

³⁹ Ginsburg, *Coheloth*, 431.

⁴⁰ So do, for instance, Ibn Ezra, Sforno, Ginsburg (*Coheloth*, 431), Gordis (*Koheloth*, 192), Ginsberg (*Koheloth*, 121).

⁴¹ So do, for instance, Hitzig (*Prediger*, 288), Stuart (Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes* [New York: Putnam, 1851], 246.), Elster (Ernst Elster, *Commentar über den Prediger Solomo* [Göttingen: Verlag der Dieterichschen Buchhandlung, 1855], 119), Barton (*Ecclesiastes*, 169).

⁴² Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 317. Seow's translation of ברזל by "implement" is misleading, though he explains: "Hebrew *barzel* often refers to instruments of iron, specifically iron tools for cutting wood (Deut 19:5; 2 Kgs 6:5-6; Isa 10:34)—i.e., ax, hatchet, or the like."

⁴³ So do, for instance, Hitzig (*Prediger*, 288), Graetz, (*Kohelet*, 121), Ginsberg (*Koheloth*, 121), Ginsburg (*Coheloth*, 431).

⁴⁴ So do, for instance, Jastrow (*Gentle Cynic*, 234), Crenshaw (*Ecclesiastes*,), Longman (*Ecclesiastes*,), Zer-Kavod (Mordechai Zer-Kavod, "קהלת", in *חמש מגילות* [דעת מקרא; Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1973], 63), etc.

⁴⁵ So do, for instance, Delitzsch (*Hoheslied und Koheloth*, 367), Wright (*Koheloth*, 423), Barton (*Ecclesiastes*, 169), Fox (*Time to Tear*, 305), etc.

⁴⁶ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 243.

the meaning "edge" is not in line with the sense פנים has in the Hebrew Bible.⁴⁷ The active metallic part of the sword or ax is called להב, the edge designed for cutting or penetration is called פה, and each of its sides is called שפה. Fox suggested that פנים could mean "blade," since it means "surfaces." However, the concept "blade" comprises more than just surfaces.⁴⁸ Hertzberg notes

פנים ist hier wie öfter die Vorderseite des Gegenstandes, natürlich nicht die dem Hauenden zugekehrte (Euringer), sondern die scharfe, dem Objekt des Schlagens Zugewandte, wie Ez 21,21.⁴⁹

As was noted, the Vulgate's *ut prius* suggests the minor emendation of פנים to לפנים, "beforehand," which was adopted by a number of scholars.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, לפנים means "formerly" (1 Sam 9:9), but not "before that" (cf. Neh 13:4) or "first."⁵¹ Delitzsch felt that פנים is used here in the sense of the *face* of the iron.⁵² He and others (Wright) transpose פנים and לא, obtaining קלקל והוא לא פנים לא. This seems gratuitous (Num 16:29, 2 Sam 3:34, cp. Isa 53:9). Ginsberg raised the possibility that פנים is a corruption of the Aramaic פמין = "mouths, edges."⁵³ Winkler suggested the reading פלח מקל, "he split a stick," instead of פנים קלקל, which Siegfried characterized as "gewaltsame."⁵⁴ Zapletal deletes פנים for metrical reasons.⁵⁵

קלקל is usually assumed a quadriliteral from קלל, "polish" (Ezra 1:7, Dan 10:6), and consequently translated by "sharpen." Delitzsch notes that

⁴⁷ Ginsburg, *Cohélet*, 433, says: "To appeal to the prosopopœia in Ezek. xxi. 21, as those do who maintain that פנים here denotes *edge*, is most unjustifiable." Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 317, says that "The sword in the Ezekiel passage is personified, however, so one cannot argue from that text alone that פנים in Hebrew has the meaning 'edge.' The text simply refers to the direction that the personified sword may take." Zer-Kavod (קהלת, 64) tried to deduce that פנים = פה from a comparison of Num 12:8 with Deut 34:10. However, Num 14:14 and Isa 52:8 indicate that another part of the human front might have served the same purpose. Cf. Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19* (WBC 28; Dallas: Word, 1990), 20.

⁴⁸ Fox, *Time to Tear*, 305.

⁴⁹ Hans W. Hertzberg, *Prediger* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1963), 191.

⁵⁰ Ginsburg, *Cohélet*, 433. Ginsburg considers פנים to be an abbreviation for the adverb of time לפנים, the ל dropping out because of its proximity to לא.

⁵¹ Driver, "Problems," 232. Driver argues that לפנים "has very nearly this sense in Sir 1:10 'first enquire and afterwards blame' (J.b. Sir. xi 7)." However, in Sir 1:10 the contextually better reading might be לפנים.

⁵² Delitzsch, *Hoheslied und Kohélet*, 367. Wright (*Kohélet*, 424) notes that this transposition is "fully justified" by 2 Sam 3:34 and Num 16:29.

⁵³ Ginsberg, *Kohélet*, 121.

⁵⁴ Carl D. Siegfried, *Prediger und Hoheslied* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1898), 70.

⁵⁵ Vincenz Zapletal, *Das Buch Kohélet* (Freiburg: Gschwend, 1905), 214.

“קִלְקַל oder קִלְקַל hier bed. es leicht = eben und glatt machen.”⁵⁶ However, Elster says

auch mindestens zweifelhaft ist, dass das Adjectivum קִלְקַל an den Stellen Ez. 1, 7. Dan. 10, 6 die Bedeutung ‘geglättet, poliert’ habe, worauf man sich zu berufen pflegte, um für קִלְקַל die Bedeutung ‘schärfen’ nachzuweisen.⁵⁷

Hengstenberg felt that “for this latter meaning we need adduce no examples, seeing that ‘to sharpen’ is simply ‘to make light.’”⁵⁸ However, while it might be true that “‘to sharpen’ is simply ‘to make light,’” the converse is not necessarily true. The term occurs only another time in Ezra 21:26, in an act of prognostication by means of arrows, but it is not clear how exactly the arrows were used. The term has been emended by a number of commentators. For instance, some read קִלְקַלו “sharpen it,” קִלְקַל “ruin,” and קִלְקַל “was sharpened.”

Were it Qohelet’s intent to say “sharpen” he could have used a form of the root לִטַּשׁ, “hammer, sharpen, whet,” which is well represented in the Hebrew Bible (Gen, 1 Sam, Pss, and Job) and used for describing the sharpening of such tools as sword, ploughshare, axe, razor, *et cetera*. Why would he use a term such as קִלְקַל for “sharpen” when this sense is not directly attested or obvious (if קָלַל is its root), and a better term exists?

חֵילִים has been routinely rendered “then physical power, strength, force,” taking the ו as introducing the *apodosis* after אִם.⁵⁹ Support for this meaning was believed to be the idiom גִּבְרוּ חֵיל “grow in strength” in Job 21:7 and Isa 30:6. Delitzsch adopts Abu al Walid’s and Qimchi’s interpretation of גִּבְרַת חֵילִים, “Verstärkung der Kräfte” or “Steigerung der Kraftanstrengungen,” finding support in 1 Chr 7:5, 7, 11, and 40.⁶⁰ However, while חֵיל means “strength, wealth,” the plural חֵילִים always means “soldiers.” The meaning of the passage in Isa 30:6 is disputed. Anyway, the text there is חֵילֵיהֶם. Chronicles uses the noun גִּבּוֹר in the construct גִּבּוֹרֵי חֵילִים (1 Chr 7:5, 7, 11, and 40). If Delitzsch logic is followed and גִּבּוֹר = “Starke” then חֵילִים could only mean “soldiers.” It would seem prudent to adhere to the meaning “soldiers” for חֵילִים.

Among the various emendations that have been suggested for חֵילִים are: חֲלִילִים and חֲבִילִים.

⁵⁶ Delitzsch, *Hoheslied und Koheleth*, 369. Delitzsch says that the meaning of the term is derived from: “der Wurtzelbed. *levem esse* biblisch mit Leichtigkeit d.i. Schnelligkeit bewegen (wie auch in Arab. und Aethiop.), schütteln.”

⁵⁷ Elster, *Commentar*, 119.

⁵⁸ Hengstenberg, *Ecclesiastes*, 228.

⁵⁹ Brown et al., *BDB*, 254b.

⁶⁰ Delitzsch, *Hoheslied und Koheleth*, 368. Delitzsch calls attention to LXX’s δυνάμεις and Peshitta’s חֵילֵא.

יְגַבֵּר is the *Pi'el* of גָּבַר, "be strong, mighty," (cf. Zech 10:6, 12). This grammatical form of גָּבַר occurs only here. Thus, יְגַבֵּר means "he would strengthen, it would strengthen." גָּבַר has been assumed to mean "überwältigen," "exert," "anstrengen," "increase," "put forth," "strengthen/ *verstärken*," *et cetera*.

הַכְשִׁיר is the *Hiph'il* infinitive absolute of כָּשַׁר, "advantageous, proper, suitable, succeed." The *Hiph'il* of כָּשַׁר does not occur elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. The term has been emended by a number of commentators. For instance, some read הַכְשִׁיר "preparing,"⁶¹ הַכְּשִׁיר "the skillful,"⁶² הַכְּשִׁיר "Gibt es (dann) ein Gewinn" (Hertzberg),⁶³ הַכְּשִׁיר "the capable, agile,"⁶⁴ and השכיר "hire" (Sandoval, Akoto).⁶⁵ The verb כָּשַׁר is frequently used in the Rabbinic Literature in the sense "make fit," "prepare."⁶⁶ Whitley recommends translating הכשיר as the *Aph'el* of כָּשַׁר (אֲכַשִּׁיר) in Talmudic Hebrew, "to improve, grow better."⁶⁷ Delitzsch opted for the meaning הכשיר has in this literature, rendering it "tauglich, erfolgreich sein."⁶⁸ Many transpose the words הכשיר חכמה of the MT. Frendo notes that the transposition is not necessary, because 10:10b can be considered a case of the "broken construct chain."⁶⁹ However, Schoors pointed

⁶¹ So do for instance, Hitzig (*Prediger*, 288), Elster (*Commentar*, 169), Siegfried (*Prediger*, 71), Seow (*Ecclesiastes*, 318), etc.

⁶² So do for instance, LXX^A, Peshitta, Symmachus, and Vulgate. Cf. BHS.

⁶³ Hertzberg, *Prediger*, 192. Hertzberg says: "הכשיר hatte als schließende Laute noch ןן, die vor ןי leicht überlesen werden konnten; vielleicht hat das ך der Plene-Schreibung noch eine Erinnerung daran bewahrt. Das Verschwinden der Endung mag der Grund für die später erfolgte Umstellung gewesen sein."

⁶⁴ So do for instance, Ginsberg (*Koheleth*, 121), Fox (*Time to Tear*, 305), Bianchi (Francesco Bianchi, "Qohelet 10,8-11 or the Misfortunes of Wisdom,: BEO 40 [1998], 113).

⁶⁵ Timothy J. Sandoval and Dorothy B. E. A. Akoto, "A Note on Qohelet 10,10b," *ZAW* 122/1 (2010): 90-95. The authors suggest that the error occurred by a scribe trying "to understand the consonantal text as a form of the root כָּשַׁר that is nearly exclusive to Ecclesiastes."

⁶⁶ *b. Git. 87a; b. Hul. 36b; b. B. Mesi'a 89b.*

⁶⁷ Charles F. Whitley, *Koheleth: His Language and Thought* (BZAW 148; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979), 86.

⁶⁸ Delitzsch, *Hohelesied und Koheleth*, 368; cf. Sir 13:4, in A. Sh. Artom, בן־סירא (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1967), 51.

⁶⁹ Anthony Frendo, "The 'Broken Construct Chain' in Qoh 10,10b," *Bib* 62/4 (1981): 545. Frendo says: "In the light of the grammatical phenomenon, the 'broken construct chain' we think that there is actually no need to make use of any transposition. In fact Qoh 10,10b can be analysed and accounted for grammatically if we read a broken construct chain. יתרון would be the construct and חכמה the *nomen rectum* whilst the infinitive הכשיר would be the element separating the *regens* from the *rectum*." Similar cases are משליכי ביאור חכה (Isa 19:8), דָּבַר בשמי שקר (Jer 29:23), אריד, בשיחי ואהימה (Ps 55:3).

to the grammatical and syntactical difficulties of this approach.⁷⁰ Hertzberg reads וְיִתְרוֹן הַכְּשִׁיר הַכְּשִׁיר, ⁷¹ and Galling וְיִתְרוֹן וְכִשְׁרוֹן חֲכָמָה. ⁷² BHS mentions the transposition וְיִתְרוֹן חֲכָמָה הַכְּשִׁיר, and וְיִתְרוֹן הַכְּשִׁיר חֲכָמָה. Siegfried emends the *חכמה* to *בחכמה*,⁷³ and Zapletal deletes *חכמה* for metrical reasons.⁷⁴

The colon וְיִתְרוֹן הַכְּשִׁיר הַכְּשִׁיר has been understood by some as meaning “Ein Vorteil ist es, die Weisheit richtig anzuwenden.” This understanding assumes the vocalization הַכְּשִׁיר, and is simply an improper use of the word. Some rendered the colon by “but the development of skills is an advantage,” and yet others by “the advantage of putting in working order is wisdom;” that is, “the advantage that a timely putting of tools in working order brings is proof of wisdom.” However, it is questionable whether הַכְּשִׁיר means “development of skills” or “putting in working order.”

C SOLUTION

We begin the construction of our solution with the observation that the immediately preceding discussion in 9b of a “cleaver of wood” suggests that the ברזל in Qoh 10:10 is an ax, and was the reason for placing vv. 9 and 10 next to each other. This understanding has been implicitly or explicitly adopted by many and has biblical support. I contend, however, that Qohelet has in mind a battle-axe.⁷⁵ This follows from the use of the word הַיָּלִים, which always means “soldiers” in the Hebrew Bible. Among soldiers the axe was a common weapon, but the expensive ax was not a common implement.

The purpose of the battle-axe was to cut and pierce the body of an enemy in face-to-face combat, and different shapes of axes maximized a particular function. Neglecting its keep-up, or misusing it, naturally led to the axe becoming blunt. A blunt axe was useless for either cutting or piercing. The first part of v. 10 highlights this reality by posing the rhetorical question: “If one blunted a battle-axe, and it is without a front, it is worthless, and would it strengthen the soldiers?”

⁷⁰ Anton Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasant Words: A Study of the Language of Qohelet* (OLA 41; Leuven: Peeters, 1992), note 12, 170-171.

⁷¹ Hertzberg, *Prediger*, 191.

⁷² Kurt Galling, “Der Prediger,” in *Die fünf Megilloth* (HAT 18; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1969), *ad loc.*

⁷³ Siegfried, *Prediger*, 70.

⁷⁴ Zapletal, *Kohelet*, 214.

⁷⁵ Yigael Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1963), 11-13. The battle-ax is one of the oldest weapons for face-to-face combat. It consists of a short wooden handle at the end of which is the active part of the weapon made of metal or stone. Use of the metal ax began in the Chalcolithic Age (ca. 4000-3200 B.C.E.) and spread in the Early Bronze Age (ca. 3200-2800 B.C.E.).

I obtain this sense for 10a by taking the *Pi 'el* קָהָה in its normal transitive sense, "he blunted." As we see from the end of 10a, the person who blunts the iron is probably a soldier, but obviously someone else could have done it. וְהוּא לֹא פָנִים is rendered "and it is without a front," taking וְהוּא as referring to the ברזל and פָּנִים = "front," as in 2 Sam 10:9 = 1 Chr 19:10; Joel 20:2; Ezra 2:10; 1 Chr 2:30; 2 Chr 13:14; Jer 7:24; Ezra 21:21.⁷⁶ Elster correctly understood here: "פָּנִים 'Vorderseite' bezeichnet hier die 'Schneide' des Beils."⁷⁷ Indeed, in Akkadian *pan ilippi* is the ship's forward part (prow). This interpretation would explain the degree of bluntness of the ax, it is so blunt that it is impossible to identify the front. לֹא פָנִים could mean "without a front" as לֹא בָנִים means in 1 Chr 2:30 and 32 "without children."

I read קָלְקַל, "contemptible, worthless" (Num 21:5) instead of קָלְקַל. It is difficult to believe that Qohelet would use a dubious expansion of the semantic field of קָלְקַל to convey such a common concept as "sharpen," when a specific word such as לָטַט exists. The single word קָלְקַל sums up the state of the axe, "it is worthless." From the military point of view, which I adopted here, the blunt battle-axe is worse than worthless, because its ineffectiveness exposes its user to risks which he would not have otherwise taken. Obviously, such a weapon would not increase the soldier's military capability.

The tantalizingly obscure v. 10b has led scholars to abandon the approach we have taken to the interpretation of v. 10a. Hitzig avers

Als bedeutungslos sind alle die Erklärungen anzusehen, die אַם als Fragepartikel fassen, wobei völlig ungewiss bleibe, wo die Antwort zu beginnen hätte, ebenso die, welche unter Kriegestruppen verstehen, wobei man zu keinem befriedigenden Sinn gelangt.⁷⁸

Similarly, Delitzsch says: "Dialogisten haben hier an dem אַם einen Anhalt, welches sich fragend fassen last, aber wo ware syntaktisch wie sachlich sich kennzeichnende Antwort?"⁷⁹ Now it will become evident that it is possible to construe v. 10b as providing a meaningful conclusion to the rhetorical question.

While many emendations have been suggested for הכשיר, the word חכמה was basically left unchanged. Perhaps, commentators felt that because חכמה is so obvious for the Qohelet text, and sometimes collocated with יתרון (2:13, 7:12), it must be authentic. However, I believe that the word חכמה is at the root of the disconnection between vv. 10a and 10b, because coupled with

⁷⁶ Cf. BDB: 816a.

⁷⁷ Elster, *Commentar*, 119.

⁷⁸ Hitzig, *Prediger*, 287.

⁷⁹ Delitzsch, *Hoheslied und Koheleth*, 368.

יתרון it elevates 10b to an abstract assessment of wisdom that the mundane 10a cannot reflect.

I suggest reading הַמִּכֶּה, "the one who smites," the *Hiph'il* participle of נכה, instead of חכמה. The term הַמִּכֶּה occurs a number of times in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 36:35; Exod 21:19; Num 35:21, 24; 2 Sam 24:17; 1 Chr 1:46), the act of smiting (הַכָּהוּ) is associated with an iron tool (בְּכֶלִי בַרְזֶל) in Num 35:16, and with specific weapons in Jos 11:10; 1 Sam 22:19; 19:10, *et cetera*. It is obvious that ה and ח are orthographically very similar in the square Aramaic script, in particular in the old orthography, where they differ just by the length of the "roof." The confusion between these two letters is understandable and well attested in the *ketib-qere* apparatus.⁸⁰ Metathesis, transposition of two phonemes in a word, is also well attested in the Hebrew Bible.⁸¹ It is conceivable that a scribe reading ויתרון הכשיר המכה "and there is advantage in preparing the one who smites" thought that it is ויתרון הכשיר חכמה in which מ and כ have been transposed. He corrected this mistake making the obvious and minimal change of writing חכמה instead of המכה.

The relatively minor emendations that have been suggested result in an eminently cogent text. Qohelet tries to convey to his audience the idea that a tool has to retain its functionality ("sharpness") to be useful. He uses the battle-axe as a metaphor. A blunt battle-axe is worthless in battle. One can repeatedly hit an opponent with it to no effect. Consequently, there is advantage in making the battle-axe user cognizant of this truth and its dangers. This is the suggestion in v. 10b. The implication for Wisdom is now obvious. The hallmark of Wisdom is using sharpness of thought encapsulated in few words. This attribute must be constantly honed and practiced. Otherwise the wise would use many words to no effect, as the warrior a blunted battle axe. Qohelet concludes this idea with the observation in v. 11: "If a snake can bite without a hiss, there is no advantage to one who speaks much."⁸²

I propose the following reading of v. 10

*If one blunted a battle-axe,
and it is without a front,
it is worthless,*

אִם־קָהָה הַבְּרִזָּל
וְהוּא לֹא־פָנִים
[קִלְקֵל] <קִלְקֵל>

⁸⁰ Gen 2:14 חדקל but הדקל in Samaritan; Gen 25:9 צחר but צהר in Samaritan; 2 Sam 13:37 רוחימע (Ketib) but דוהימע (Qere); Prov 20:21 תלחבמ (K) but תלהבמ (Q); Cant 1:17 ונטיחר (K) but ונטיהר (Q); Dan 9:29 סתחלו (K) but סתהלו (Q); etc.

⁸¹ Naphtali H. Tur-Sinai, *Ha-Lashon ve-Haseper* (vol 2; Jerusalem: Bialik Inst., 1959), 106-149. In particular, we find in Qoh 9:4 יבחר (K) יבתר (Q) and in Ps 22:16 כחי for כחי.

⁸² A snake's hiss is purely a defensive tactic employed by the snake in order to scare its enemies away. By hissing the snake wants to convey that it can attack anytime, if provoked. The snake would bite if stepped on.

and would it strengthen the soldiers? וְחִלִּים יִגְבֵּר
 and there is advantage in וְיִתְרוֹן הַכְּשִׁיר [חֻכְמָה] <הַמְּכָה>
 preparing the one who smites.

D CONTEXT

Commentators usually consider the Qohelet material in chapters 9 and 10 as consisting mostly of sayings with only localized thematic connections. For instance, Zimmerli considers 10:4-20 lacking any common theme⁸³ and so does Rankin, who sees no samblance of order in 9:17-10:20.⁸⁴ Similarly, Gordis thought that 10:2-10:20 depict a "lack of logical organization."⁸⁵ It has been suggested by Ogden that vss. 8-11 form a sub-unit. He says,

Verses 10-11 are two conditional clauses related by their contrast between יתרון (v. 10) and אין יתרון (v. 11). These verses are not an isolated pair for they are bound to vv. 8-9 by two rhetorical features: the *inclusiones* נחש and נשך in x 8, 11, and the bridge reference to the iron tool (ברזל) in v. 10 which is also implicit in vv. 8-9.⁸⁶

In his opinion the theme of the unit is "the constant danger to which one is exposed," though wisdom could mitigate it. While "danger to which one is exposed" is the theme of vv. 8-9, it is יתרון which is the theme of vv. 10-11.

The relationship between vv. 10-11 and vv. 8-9 is, however, very tenuous. They differ in structure, theme, and vocabulary. The bridge between them is only implied in the association between בוקע עצים and ברזל, and נחש and נשך are hardly compelling *inclusiones*. On the other hand, it seems to us that the link with 11 is considerable and intimate.⁸⁷ The theme and structure of vv. 10-11 suggest that it is a Qohelet expansion of the saying הַבְּרִזָּל וְאֵין יִתְרוֹן הַלְּשׁוֹן אִם-קָהָה לְבַעַל הַלְּשׁוֹן אִם-קָהָה, which because of its military content he probably borrowed from another source. This proverb consisting of 10aα and 11b, the beginning and end of vv. 10-11, originally meant "If he blunted the iron, there is

⁸³ Walter Zimmerli, "Das Buch Kohelet-Traktat oder Sentenzen-sammlung?" *VT* 24 (1974): 221-230.

⁸⁴ Oliver S. Rankin, "Ecclesiastes," *IB* 5:77.

⁸⁵ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 317.

⁸⁶ Grahm Ogden, "Qoheleth ix 17 – x 20: Variations on the Theme of Wisdom's Strength and Vulnerability," *VT* 30 (1980): 34.

⁸⁷ Ogden, "Qoheleth ix 17 – x 20," 34. In Ogden's view, vss. 8-11 form a sub-unit. He says: "Verses 10-11 are two conditional clauses related by their contrast between יתרון (v. 10) and אין יתרון (v. 11). These verses are not an isolated pair for they are bound to vv. 8-9 by two rhetorical features: the *inclusiones* נחש and נשך in x vv. 8, 11, and the bridge reference to the iron tool (ברזל) in v. 10 which is also implicit in vv. 8-9." In his opinion the theme of the unit is "the constant danger to which one is exposed," though wisdom could mitigate it. While "danger to which one is exposed" is the theme of vv. 8-9, it is יתרון which is the theme of vv. 10-11.

no advantage to the owner of the blade (הַלְשׁוֹן).” Indeed, Meek notes that “in the excavations all the way from Ras Shamra to Nihavand, swords and battle-axes have been found in which the blade is represented as the tongue sticking out of the open, ravenous mouth of a lion or dragon, which constitutes the base of the sword hilt or the head of the axe, as the case may be.”⁸⁸ It can be surmised that coming across this proverb, Qohelet saw its potential for making the point that Wisdom skills must be honed as the blade of a battle-ax (or sword), and that being an able “talker” does not provide an advantage.

Qohelet expanded the first part of the original proverb with the rest of the material in MT v. 10, explaining the nature of the iron’s bluntness, its effect, and giving advice about the preparation of the warrior. He changed the last part of the proverb from its military content to a Wisdom milieu activity, of using words and making arguments, by completing it with הַנַּחֵשׁ בְּלִוְאֵי-לֶחֶשׁ אִם-יִשָּׁךְ.⁸⁹ Indeed, it is possible that v. 11 is a standard proverb that Qohelet absorbed in his reconstruction of the original military proverb.

If we are correct, then the following unit (vv. 12-14), which compares the manners of speech of the כְּסִיל and חֲכָם, follows naturally. Moreover, vv. 10-11 offer an interesting insight into at least some aspects of Qohelet’s creative processes.

E CONCLUSION

Perusal of the exegetical literature on Qoh 10:10 leaves one with the impression that many commentators imagined Qohelet trying to convey the following notion:

When someone through much use blunted the ax, and is foolish enough not to sharpen it, then he has to suffer when cleaving wood, without much advancing. The wise on the other hand, more careful and wiser, makes easier his business by sharpening the tool and thereby ensures for him self success in this endeavor.⁹⁰

This notion, as Graetz noted, is rather trivial.⁹¹ Any farmer or warrior knew that a tool must be taken care of; otherwise it would require more effort when used, or will be useless. Daily experience inculcated into them this lesson. There was no need for advice from a philosopher on this matter.

I suggest that Qohelet used the experienced and obvious in the real world

⁸⁸ Theophile J. Meek, “Archaeology and a Point in Hebrew Syntax,” *BASOR* 122 (1951): 33. Cf. also Jer 18:18.

⁸⁹ The phrase בעל הלשון occurs only in 10:11. However, בעלת לשון occurs in Sir 26:27 and alludes to a loud woman.

⁹⁰ Knobel, *Commentar*, 318-319.

⁹¹ Graetz, *Kohelet*, 120. Graetz says: “Wie die Ausll. Ihn erklärin, sagt er, selbst wenn ihre Erkl. Richtig sein sollte, eine Trivialität.”

to draw some parallels about the learning and use of Wisdom. The wise knew how to present their thoughts (vv. 12-14), but this does not mean that their thoughts were sharp and effective. The warrior using a battle-axe can make all the trained moves in combat, yet he will not achieve his goal because his weapon is not sharp. Just as the battle-axe user must be properly prepared and be cognizant of this truth and its dangers, so also the wise. The wise should know that the elegance of words and presentation are no substitute for good ideas. There is no advantage in words without a sharp thought—a snake can bite without a hiss.

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