CHAPTER THREE

WISDOM IN TRANSITION:
THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

1. Introduction

The book of Ecclesiastes (or Qoheleth), a classic among ancient Wisdom texts and throughout all of world literature, has received a great deal of attention in the last few decades. Commentaries, major monographs, and entire symposia have taken up these memorable reflections, prompting a reevaluation of the book’s meaning, historical context, and the possible influences on its author(s). The reasons for the resurgent interest are varied. An increased scholarly engagement with the sapiential literature of the ancient Near East is a significant factor. As commentators have examined the larger corpus of ancient instructions, it has become increasingly important to determine the period in which Qoheleth had his career, the nature of his perspective, and the factors that shaped his thought. Global tragedy has also led readers to this incisive commentary on human existence. Qoheleth’s existential probing is strangely accessible to the modern interpreter, and the uncertainties of recent years have made this an appealing book to examine. As Frank Crüsemann explains, “Unlike any other book of the Bible, we can read him without intermediaries and think we understand

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1 Following most commentators, this study will use the Hebrew title “Qoheleth” in reference to this book and the author responsible for its content.

him." And just as this sapiential author reaches a profound rhetorical moment in the book, Qoheleth undermines the statement by contradicting it. He cites the benefits of Wisdom at one point (2:13), only to bemoan the limitations of his intelligence a few verses later (2:19). This is an overtly paradoxical text, with many incongruous declarations about life, death, and the search for knowledge. The enigma of Qoheleth is another reason for its appeal, as the reader is presented with a fascinating array of contradictory assertions.

The book of Qoheleth is often classified as “crisis literature,” a caustic commentary on the absurdity of life and the inadequacy of traditional assumptions as found in the book of Proverbs. For example, James Crenshaw posits the complete absence of an act-consequence nexus and a striking disparity between this author’s conclusions and those of his predecessors: “Qohelet discerns no moral order at all. Humans cannot know God’s disposition. This argument strikes at the foundation of the sages’ universe.” Many statements in the text support such an interpretation, including 2:11:

Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

For Qoheleth, life’s ledger sheets do not balance, and this perspective places him in somewhat of a protest mode against earlier sages. When we consider the preoccupation with death in this text, this author’s break with the tradition becomes even more apparent. According to Shannon Burkes, Qoheleth understands human mortality to be “the chief flaw

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5 As the previous chapters have demonstrated, Qoheleth does not represent a complete reversal of earlier Wisdom, since neither the book of Proverbs nor antecedent texts from Egypt and Mesopotamia promise an infallible Tum-Engehen-Zusammenhang. Earlier sages had acknowledged the ultimate authority of the deity and the diversity of human experiences, even as they affirmed a character-consequence paradigm.