QOHELETH XI 7-XII 8: QOHELETH’S SUMMONS TO ENJOYMENT AND REFLECTION

by

GRAHAM S. OGDEN
Taipei, Taiwan

In recent articles investigating the closing pericopai of the book Qoheleth, I have suggested that the author employed a structural device in which the theme of the unit was set forth in the opening statement, then elaborated throughout the pericope: thus, ix 17-18 introduces the unit ix 17-x 20 with the theme of wisdom’s power and vulnerability; xi 1-2 provides the thesis of xi 1-6 with its twin thoughts of what man can and cannot know. This same structural and stylistic phenomenon may now be observed in xi 7-xii 8.²

Our task in this article is to examine the structure of Qoh xi 7-xii 8 for clues as to the pericope’s precise meaning, and then to probe the relationship of this final pericope to the wider work.

I

The Limits of the Pericope

I have already suggested in “Qoheleth xi 1-6”, pp. 222-4, that, in the context of ch. xi, vv. 1-6 form an independent unit of thought, though not without some relationship to vv. 7-8 where references to light, darkness and the sun provide links with the natural phenomena mentioned in what preceded. However, in view of other factors such as the structural phenomenon of paired sentences in parallel form, and the twin themes set out in the opening verses (vv. 1-2) which are then woven together in vv. 3-6, it is justifiable to

² H. Witzenrath’s dissertation recently published as Süss ist das Licht ...: Eine literaturwissenschaftliche Untersuchung zu Kohelet 11, 7—12, 7 (St Ottilien, 1979), has identified the two verbs simh and zkr as establishing the two themes of this pericope.
conclude that xi 7 does not belong with what precedes, but that it signals the commencement of a new unit.

As far as the extent of the pericope is concerned, it is a question whether we conclude at xi 10 or continue on into ch. xii. For reasons of structure and vocabulary, which I shall detail later, it is justifiable to see the unit carrying on into ch. xii. This is in fact the view held by most scholars. The only remaining question is where to terminate the unit. This question reduces itself to a decision whether to include xii 8 or to end with v. 7. In view of the hbl phrase’s function throughout the document as a concluding device, I would prefer to include xii 8 within the limits of the pericope. A structural reason for this will also become apparent.

Within the limits of xi 7-xii 8 then we are able to isolate a unit with a distinctive topic. By means of two imperatives which summarize how one should best approach life in the present, Qoheleth encourages his readers to reflect on life before future realities overtake them.

II

The Structure of the Pericope

Witzenrath’s recent publication (pp. 26, 34-6) points out the first of the significant structural elements in this pericope. Selecting two verbs, šmh and zkr, Qoheleth identifies two themes on which the thought of the unit is to focus. These two themes are then elaborated in the material which follows: thus, xi 8a introduces the theme of enjoyment, and this is then developed in xi 9-10; xi 8b identifies the theme of remembering, which in turn is expanded in xii 1. The two verbs (yišmah ... w5zzko-r) used thematically in xi 8 are jussives (contra A. Lauha3), while in their reiteration they are expressed more emphatically as imperatives (šmah ... ūzkrit). In this manner Qoheleth is better able to indicate what advice he is tendering. We note a similar use of imperatives in the preceding section, xi 1-6.

A second structural element also appears in the introductory statement of xi 8. It is a reference to time. The many years of one’s life (šānim harbēh), if one be given them, are to be enjoyed; the many years of possible “darkness” (yīmé haḥōšek kī harbēh yihyū) are to