

# YOUTH AND OLD AGE IN QOHELETH\*

by

JAMES L. CRENSHAW

*Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN 37240*

The association of advanced age with wisdom is made in Ugarit, Mesopotamia, Egypt and Israel. Because this link is generally acknowledged, a few examples suffice. After mentioning El's advanced years, Athirat praises him: "You are wise indeed . . . The gray of your beard has truly instructed you . . . You are wise for eternity."<sup>1</sup> The Sumerian Instructions of Suruppak assert that the teachings of an old man are precious (5:13).<sup>2</sup> Egyptian Instructions constitute the insights of aged Pharaohs or viziers,<sup>3</sup> and Job's friends insist that age is on their side, and with it, superior wisdom.<sup>4</sup>

\* This essay is part of a larger research project on "The Depiction of Old Age in Ancient Near Eastern Wisdom Literature," which was generously funded by the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for the academic year 1984-85.

1. The translation in *ANET* (133) takes *rbt* to imply greatness instead of age: "Art great indeed, O El, and wise, thy beard's gray hair instructs thee (*šbt dqnk ltsrk*). Anath's praise of El is rendered as follows: "Thy decree, O El, is wise; Wisdom with ever-life thy portion" (138).

2. Alster (1974, p. 35) translates: "The Instructions of an old man are precious, may you submit to them!"

3. The Instruction of Ptahhotep is purported to have been written by the aged vizier of King Izezi of the Fifth Dynasty (c. 2350 B.C.E.). Here one reads: "How good for a son to grasp his father's words, He will reach old age through them" (Lichtheim, 1973, p. 74). Other Instructions include: The Instruction for Merikare by the old pharaoh to his son (c. the end of the 22nd century B.C.E.), The Instruction of Amenemhet I for his son Sesostri I (c. 1960 B.C.E.), The Instruction of Hordedef for his (27th century B.C.E., text from c. 1250-1150), The Instruction of Ani by a middle class father to his son Khonshotep (toward the end of the Egyptian Empire), The Instruction of Amenemopet (10th to 6th century B.C.E.), The Instruction of Onkhsheshonky (Ptolemaic period), The Instruction of Papyrus Insinger (Ptolemaic period).

4. "Both the gray-haired and the aged are among us, older than your father" (Job 15:10), a view that Elihu challenges: "It is not the old that are wise, nor the aged that understand what is right" (32:9, emended text). Naturally, Job also refuses to concede the claim that advanced years automatically bring superior understanding. An enthusiast for the torah

Of course, the ancients recognized that the link between old age and wisdom was not inevitable, for exceptions did occur. The author of Psalm 119, which exalts the Torah, claimed to have more knowledge than the aged precisely because of obedience to the divine precepts (v. 100), and Job's unjustified suffering, intensified by the unfair accusations of his friends, prompted him to oppose the learning of his older critics, a rashness that inspired the youthful Ehihu to speak his piece. This recognition that age did not necessarily bring superior wisdom achieves classic expression in 2 Maccabees, which refers to a certain Auranus as a man advanced in years and no less advanced in folly (4:40). One may compare the remark attributed to Joseph ben Tobias: "Pardon him because of his age; for surely you are not unaware that old people and infants are likely to have the same level of intelligence."<sup>5</sup> For this reason Ben Sira pokes fun at adulterous old men who resemble birds flying from one nest to another.

Youth, on the other hand, is viewed as a time of passion, naivete, and folly. Lacking self-control, youngsters speak when they should be silent,<sup>6</sup> they readily succumb to a trap set by an ever-present seductress, and they quickly express anger and resort to violence. Devoid of experience, young men drift into habits that society frowns on as disruptive.

The characteristic manner of viewing youth and old age becomes almost paradigmatic in the account of the transition of power from Solomon to his son, Rehoboam. True to form, the older counsellors advised a course of moderation, whereas the brash youth urged a show of force.<sup>7</sup> The reality of the political situation favored the counsel of the elders, on whose side was a combination of astuteness and compassion.

---

also came to the conclusion that a younger person could surpass elders in knowledge: "I have more understanding than all my teachers, for thy testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep thy precepts" (Ps 119:99-100).

5. *Ho de sugginōske phēsin autō dia to gēras. Ou gar lanthanei se pantōs hoti kai tous presbutas kai ta nēpia tēn autēn dianoiān echein sumbebēken* (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 12.172). I thank Ray Newell for this reference.

6. According to Ben Sira, it is fitting for old persons to speak at a feast, if they have their facts straight and do not interrupt the music, but young men should speak only when asked to do so, and never more than twice (32:3, 7).

7. The old men who had served Solomon counselled conciliation, but Rehoboam's peer group added insult to injury. Their language is coarse and harsh: "My little finger (*virum membrile*) is thicker than my father's loins . . . My father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions" (1 Kgs 12:10-11). It required little intelligence on the part of representatives of the northern tribes to discern that they had no portion in David's kingdom.

But greed and arrogance prevailed, with unfortunate consequences for the empire.

Those who believed that the elderly embodied the human ideal were not blind to the discomfiture of old age. A Sumerian fragment faces this unpleasant fact without flinching.

My grain roasting fails,  
 Now my youthful vigor, strength and personal god  
 have left my loins like an exhausted ass.  
 My black mountain has produced white gypsum.  
 My mother has brought in a man from the forest;  
 he gave me captivity.  
 My mongoose which used to eat strong smelling things  
 does not stretch its neck towards beer and butter.  
 My urine used to flow in a strong torrent,  
 but now you flee from my wind.  
 My child whom I used to feed with butter and milk,  
 I can no more support it.  
 And I have had to sell my little slave girl;  
 an evil demon makes me sick. (Alster, 1975, p. 93)

Some of the images are perfectly clear, others less so. The roasting of grain symbolizes digestion; black mountain stands for the head, which is adorned with white hair; the man from the forest that relegated the speaker to captive existence represents a walking stick; the mongoose aptly evokes the thought of a hearty appetite. The straight-forward descriptions leave little to the imagination: exhaustion, malfunctioning kidneys and painful flatulation.<sup>8</sup> The allusions to a child and slave girl are less clear, but they seem to specify wife and concubine. If so, the allusions imply that although sexual desire is still present, it no longer achieves satisfaction.

The Egyptian Instruction of Ptahhotep sounds the same note.

Oldness has come; old age has descended. Feebleness has arrived; dotage is coming anew. The heart sleeps wearily every day. The eyes are weak, the ears are deaf, the strength is disappearing because of weariness of heart, and the mouth is silent and cannot speak. The mind is forgetful and cannot recall yesterday. The bone suffers old age. Good is become evil. All taste is gone. What old age does to people is evil in every respect. The nose is stopped up and cannot breathe. Simply to stand up or to sit down is difficult.<sup>9</sup>

8. Compare the proverb in Lambert (1960, p. 260), "A thing which has not occurred since time immemorial: a young girl broke wind in her husband's bosom."

9. The translation is taken from *ANET* (412).

Roughly two thousand years later the author of Papyrus Insinger expressed a similar sentiment.

He who has passed sixty years, everything has  
 passed for him.  
 If his heart loves wine, he cannot drink to  
 drunkenness.  
 If he desires food, he cannot eat as he used to.  
 If his heart desires a woman, her moment does  
 not come.<sup>10</sup>

This unknown author divides the human life span into forty years of preparation, twenty golden years, and forty years of unpleasantness. Before the onset of old age at forty, ten years are devoted to learning about life and death, the next ten years to vocational training, the third decade to acquiring possessions, and the fourth decade to gaining maturity. In this assessment, only twenty years, ages forty to sixty, are pleasant. This golden age is a good time in life because of its gentleness. The astonishing thing is that the author refuses to relinquish the conviction that old age is the human ideal.

A contemporary of this author, Qoheleth, who in all likelihood lived in Jerusalem,<sup>11</sup> clung to the realistic description of the aging process but let go of the conviction that the best years in life accompanied white hair. In an important article on “The Unchangeable World: The ‘Crisis of Wisdom’ in Koheleth,” Crüsemann observes that “the deterioration of old age and the picture of its obnoxiousness that is given in 12:1–8 represent a typical reversal of segmentary thinking, according to which the elderly embody the human ideal.”<sup>12</sup> What enabled Qoheleth to take this step into virgin territory? Was it the sight of young athletes, strong of body and alert of mind, the reminder of a Greek culture that had achieved incredible things? Was it something far more radical?

10. Lichtheim (1976, p. 199). The Sixteenth Instruction, lines 11–14, advises individuals to provide for their old age, arguing that a brief old age is preferable to one in which the unfortunate person is reduced to begging. Nevertheless, the author acknowledges that nothing can alter one’s allotted life span.

11. Neither the Egyptian influence on Qoheleth (the royal fiction in 1:12–2:26, the reference to casting bread on the waters, the concept of chance, the *carpe diem* theme, the image of the grave as an eternal tomb) nor Phoenician vocabulary and orthography requires an origin for the book outside Judah. The content fits Palestine (cisterns, snakes in rock walls, clouds and rain, and grain, wine, and oil as the basic economic products), and many interpreters assume that Qoheleth wrote in Jerusalem.

12. An English translation appears in Schottruff and Stegemann (1984, pp. 57–77). The quotation is from page 69.

In Crüsemann's analysis, Qoheleth belonged to the wealthy class of landowners who eventually gave up their kinship ties because such obligations were not economically profitable. Building on the initial insight of Gordis (1943/44, pp. 77–118)<sup>13</sup> and its elaboration by Bickerman (1967, pp. 139–167)<sup>14</sup> in terms of an acquisitive society like that underlying the Zenon correspondence,<sup>15</sup> Crüsemann searches for evidence of class conflict in Qoheleth's teachings. The breakdown of segmentary thinking is particularly evident, Crüsemann believes, in Qoheleth's individualism that cannot even derive satisfaction from knowledge that an heir continues one's name. Like Gese (1963, pp. 139–151)<sup>16</sup> Crüsemann stresses the crisis that resulted from the collapse of the connection between act and consequence.

Belief in an impenetrable deity is a corollary of this intellectual crisis. A benevolent creator and sustainer of order no longer undergirds a world view according to which one's status as good or evil was evidenced by a person's conduct and position in society.<sup>17</sup> Behind this old view of things Crüsemann posits a social class, specifically the landed upper class. Ownership of the land was a family matter that was perpetuated by economic self-sufficiency. In this context, a *ṣaddîq* was one who met

13. He writes: "It is the thesis of this paper that Wisdom Literature, which reached its apogee during the earlier centuries of the Second Temple, roughly between the fifth and the first half of the second centuries B.C.E., was fundamentally the product of the upper classes in society, who lived principally in the capital, Jerusalem" (p. 81). The existence of wisdom academies, which presupposes a leisure class; the warning against sexual relations outside marriage; the references to precious stones, expensive clothes, wine to drink and meat to eat; the utilitarian morality, and virtue of charity; the refusal to endorse belief in life after death as the answer to the dilemma of reward and punishment, which was acute for the oppressed but not for the wealthy; the lack of enthusiasm for the Temple cult or religious exercises in general; the attitude toward labor and trade; and the conservative political and social ideas—these are some of the things leading Gordis to the conclusion that the sages belonged to the wealthy classes.

14. Bickerman conjectures that Qoheleth was possibly tried in the wrong way, with rewards (p. 147). Unlike some Greek philosophers, Qoheleth asks his hearers to share their wealth with their bodies rather than with others (p. 165).

15. A prominent businessman in the middle of the third century B.C.E., Zenon has bequeathed his archives to posterity. The refrain of his correspondence, according to Bickerman, is "Hurry up," for his business was his life (p. 159). Hengel (1974, p. 116) also places the composition of Qoheleth in the period of the Zeno(n) papyri when "considerable political and economic activity was developing in Palestine which could not in the end fail to make its mark in the intellectual sphere."

16. An English translation appears in Crenshaw (1983, pp. 141–153).

17. The clearest and most extreme presentation of the act-consequence relationship is by Koch (1955, pp. 1–42). An English translation appears in Crenshaw (1983, pp. 57–87).

the requirements set by the group and lived in harmony with their norms. For the rich, segmentary ties with the poor were an expensive luxury. Under the Ptolemaic rulers, the urban aristocracy became an instrument of a heavy taxation policy, resulting in its alienation from the rest of society. A developing monetary economy, a decline in rural self-sufficiency, and a heavy burden of taxation hastened the collapse of traditional norms, which were no longer in harmony with social reality. Qoheleth's repudiation of the Yahwistic tradition and surrender to a calculative mentality of materialistic thought on an individualistic level "give death a fascination that eclipses everything else."<sup>18</sup> Personal ethics thus place a premium on conduct that avoids risk. Even oppression is explained as an inevitable consequence of the hierarchic organization of the state, and Qoheleth appears to stop short of criticizing the king. In one place Qoheleth uses religious terminology to lend support to the authority of the king (*šēbūʿat ʿelōhīm, mišwāh*).<sup>19</sup>

It is unfortunate that Crüsemann did not take into consideration several studies of the role of elders in ancient Israel, which offer an alternative explanation for the loss of esteem in which society held its older citizens. The pioneer study by Seesemann, "*Die Ältesten im Alten Testament*"<sup>20</sup> concluded that Israel's monarchs deliberately suppressed the power of family chiefs, breaking up their solidarity as a deliberative body and replacing them with persons who posed no threat to the power of the crown. With the disappearance of the monarchy, the elders emerged once more to a position of authority. Van der Ploeg (1961) refined the latter point, noting that the centrality of the law during the

18. Crüsemann (1984, p. 68). The basis for this assessment of Qoheleth as calculating is the use of the word *hešbôn* (sum), the expression "one to one to discover the total," the word *yitrôn* (profit), and the general emphasis on *ʿāmāl*, both the toil and its monetary yield. On the prominence of the idea of death in Qoheleth, see Crenshaw (1978, pp. 205–216).

19. Eccl 8:2, 5. The text of 8:2 is difficult. Interpreters have emended the initial *ʿanī to ʿet* or *bēnī* or they have retained *ʿanī* and added *ʿāmartī* on the basis of 2:1; 3:17, 18. A remarkably similar text in Ahiqar (*hzy qdmtk mnd'm qšh [ʿP] npy m[lk] ʿl tqwm . . . ʿnt ʿstmr lk*) prompted Whitley (1979, pp. 71–72) to translate Eccl 8:2 by "Take heed in the presence of a king." Lindenberger (1983, p. 81) renders the Aramaic as follows: "Here is a difficult thing for you: do not stand opposed to the king . . . look out for yourself," thus raising serious objection to Whitley's interpretation of the verse. The sacred oath is either subjective or objective genitive (God's oath concerning kingship or a subject's expression of loyalty taken in God's name). Ambiguity also surrounds the word *mišwāh* in 8:5, which may refer to a royal edict or to a divine statute. The word *mišpāʿ* may connote procedure as in Judg 13:12.

20. I have not seen this Leipzig dissertation from 1895. Its contents are summarized in van der Ploeg (1961, p. 185).

exile turned the council of elders into a governing body that issued decisions on the basis of the written law. In time the influence of the heads of families decreased and that of teachers of the Mosaic law increased. McKenzie (1959)<sup>21</sup> isolates loss of land as an important factor in the decline of elders' authority, although he thinks the policies of various monarchs were decisive in eroding the power of local family chiefs. The complexity of the situation after the exile comes to expression in Conrad's essay on "zāqēn" in *TDOT* (1980) who distinguishes between elders, whose authority was virtually nonexistent, and heads of distinguished families, who exercised considerable power.

Crüsemann's conclusions are significant nonetheless, for they greatly clarify Qoheleth's readiness to abandon traditional teachings, particularly with respect to youth and old age. But Crüsemann fails to do justice to Qoheleth's profundity in this as in other teachings. The tone of Crüsemann's essay is judgmental, and Qoheleth is summarily dismissed as a callous rich man whose ethical and political views eventuated in those criminal activities attacked by the author of Wisdom of Solomon.<sup>22</sup> The evidence does not support the claim that Qoheleth was wealthy,<sup>23</sup> and the force of the poignant expression which occurs twice in connection with the discussion of oppressed victims of society—and they had no comforter—is overlooked in Crüsemann's effort to place a wedge between Qoheleth and the poor.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, another look at Qoheleth's attitude to youth and old age seems appropriate.

Qoheleth has little to say about youth, apart from his remarks that are juxtaposed with a depiction of old age and death. The two exceptions are 4:13–16 and 10:16. The former text contrasts a poor and wise youth (*yeled miskēn*<sup>25</sup> *wēḥākām*) and an old and foolish king (*melek zāqēn*

21. The biblical literature from this period is not entirely consistent in the way it describes the role of the elders.

22. Crüsemann (p. 73) distinguishes between Qoheleth's actual teaching and its political and social consequences, which are "closely related" and which make the attack in Wisdom of Solomon appear to be not "so wide of the mark."

23. I understand the royal experiment in 1:12–2:26 as fiction, hence worthless for determining the author's social status, and I do not distinguish between the author and Qoheleth; for an opposing view, see Fox (1977, pp. 83–106). The references to money, fine clothes, expensive perfumes, drinking wine, and so forth say more about Qoheleth's audience than they do about his standing in society. He may very well have been wealthy, but the evidence is inconclusive.

24. In my judgment Qoheleth's compassion for the oppressed is genuine and should not be viewed as a wealthy man's light dismissal of well-deserved misery.

25. The only uses of *miskēn* in the Bible are in Eccl 4:13 and 9:15–16, although Ben Sira also uses it twice (4:3; 30:14). The Mari documents and the laws of Hammurabi have a similar word for the underprivileged (*muskenum*).

*ûkēsîl*) who refuses to take advice. From this point on, the text is somewhat obscure, but it seems to say that the poor youth had risen from poverty and imprisonment in the king's territory, eventually to sit on the throne. The allusion to a second youth<sup>26</sup> muddies the waters, but it probably refers to the poor man who became king, unless it means that there was yet another young man who usurped power. Qoheleth's point is that the crowd is fickle, forgetting rulers of accomplishment in record time.

The other text pronounces a malediction on the land that has a child (*na<sup>c</sup>ar*) as king so that the princes feast in the morning, but utters a benediction over the land when the king is born of nobility (*ben ḥôrîm*)<sup>27</sup> and princes feast at the right time and for the correct reason.<sup>28</sup> Two things make this verse problematic in determining Qoheleth's view about youth. The semantic range of *na<sup>c</sup>ar* is vast, from a child to a vigorous warrior, which places age over against social status, posing a special problem. Here, as in the previous text, historical allusions and typical examples merge, making it impossible to determine the precise context. The drone of Ptolemaic politics mutes the echoes of the Joseph narrative.

The other references to youth in Qoheleth occur in the exquisite depiction of old age and death (11:7-12:7).<sup>29</sup> Here the abstract terms *bāḥûr*, *yaldût* and *šāḥârût* specify prime years when the hair is black or when one is experiencing the dawn of life.<sup>30</sup> Qoheleth urges young persons to seize this period and make the most of it, daring to do the forbidden,<sup>31</sup> and throwing caution to the wind. In a time of sensual

26. The allusion to the second (*haššēnî*) links this verse with the previous unit (4:7-12) which deals with the advantages of having a companion. In context *haššēnî* seems to mean "another," or it refers to the second youth who emerged from poverty to riches. The point appears to be that changes in kingship occur repeatedly and the masses quickly forget previous rulers regardless of their achievements.

27. One expects a contrast with *nā<sup>c</sup>ar* such as *zāqēn*. Instead Qoheleth uses a rare expression that means free men. Elsewhere nobility is expressed by *ḥôrîm* (I Kgs 21:8, 11; Jer 27:20; 39:6; Neh 2:16; 5:7). Parallels to Qoheleth's use appear in Gittin 4:6 (*ben ḥôrîn*) and Ahiqar 217 (*bar ḥrn*), and Jewish coins of the First and Second Revolts use the abstract term "freedom" (*hr[w]t*).

28. The advice of Lemuel's mother is that rulers should scorn wine lest they pervert justice, but that strong drink be given to individuals who are in misery (Prov 31:4-7).

29. Four recent studies of this text reach different conclusions: Sawyer (1975), Gilbert (1980), Ogden (1984), and Witzernath (1979).

30. In Job 30:30 the root *šhr* has the connotation darkness (*°ôri šāḥar mē°ālāi*), but the root also indicates the dawn (*ka°ālôti haššāḥar*, I Sam 9:26). The latter sense also occurs in the Mesha Inscription (l. 15, *mbk° hšhrt*).

31. A warning against following the organs of desire, the heart and eyes, is found in Num 15:39.

gratification, one obeys the dictates of sight and imagination, leaving no place for responsible thought or physical pain. Such is the conduct that Qoheleth recommends before the deterioration of the body begins. Youth is the bright antechamber in which one resides before entering an increasingly dark tomb.<sup>32</sup>

But what characterizes old age? Qoheleth describes it in unforgettable, if mixed, images and metaphors. The earthly house crumbles and its inhabitants are severed from contact with the essentials of life, ushering them into residence in an eternal house.<sup>33</sup> Guardians of the terrestrial abode lose their strength, men of property stoop with age, slave women stop grinding flour because the inhabitants are so few,<sup>34</sup> and the mistresses of the house are obscured, perhaps because they wear black or because they have lost interest in the world and seldom appear at the windows to see what is happening in the streets below.<sup>35</sup> Although the doors are closed for privacy, sexual activity is rare, and the chirping of a bird awakens the man whose sources of sensual gratification have departed.<sup>36</sup> Terror reigns in the form of fear of heights and dread of the unknown on ordinary paths. Digestion ceases to function and physical desire fails to respond to aphrodisiacs.<sup>37</sup> A moving from one house to another takes place, presaged by professional mourners parading the streets. Then all at once death strikes: a shattered lamp spills its precious oil, a broken pulley hurls its pitcher into the well, where its water flows freely,<sup>38</sup> and the body disintegrates into dust, releasing the divine breath.<sup>39</sup>

32. Witzernath (1979) emphasizes the significance of the images of light and darkness in this poem.

33. The expression "eternal home" refers to the grave in a Palmyrene inscription from the end of the second century B.C.E. (*bt ʿlm ʿqbr ʿdnh dy bnh zbdʿth*), a Punic inscription (*hdr bt ʿlm*), Egyptian usage; the Targum on Isa 14:18; and Sanhedrin 19a; cf. Tobit 3:6, which has *topos aiōnios*.

34. If the subject of the verb were the grinding women, one would expect Qoheleth to say that they work all the more vigorously because of their decrease in numbers. An impersonal subject for inhabitants seems required.

35. If the description of a funeral procession governs more than 12:5, the allusion may be to the clothing worn by grieving women.

36. The slightest noise disturbs the elderly, whose sleep is light and who awake before wishing to do so.

37. The precise meaning of "caperberry" is unclear, although its use as an aphrodisiac makes sense in this context.

38. The association of water with life is natural; here the flowing of vital fluid from its container signifies death.

39. The idea is that the creator breathed life into human beings and takes back that life-breath at the moment of death. This understanding of mortality has no positive feature, for the pessimistic refrain dashes all such hopes.

The essential thought is the same if one interprets the images allegorically.<sup>40</sup> It is then the human body that is being described rather than an estate. Arms and legs tremble, the back stoops, teeth fall out, eyes are darkened, hearing is impaired, the voice becomes shrill, the hair turns white, the joints creak, and sexual desire disappears. Because the images are literal in some instances, it seems wiser to avoid the allegorical interpretation.<sup>41</sup> Even if one accedes to the claim that the second part of the description contrasts nature's rebirth with a collapsing house,<sup>42</sup> the attitude to youth and old age remains unchanged. There is nothing pleasant about old age and death, regardless of how one approaches this text. This point stands in spite of Sawyer's remark (1975, p. 523) that Qoheleth was not particularly interested in old age, an opinion that Ogden shares (1984, p. 35).

There are two troublesome comments in Qoheleth's advice to youth: "But know that God will bring you into judgment for all this . . . For youth and black hair are fleeting." Two attempts have been made to rob the first observation of its sting: (1) viewing the *waw* as conjunctive (and know that God will judge you if you overlook such pleasures; Gordis, 1951, p. 336); and (2) understanding *mišpaṭ* in a non-forensic sense (Gorssen, 1970, esp. pp. 304–305). More probable is the explanation that the warning was added by an editor who adhered to traditional piety and sought to neutralize Qoheleth's heterodoxy (Sheppard, 1977). The second observation that youth is short-lived accords with Qoheleth's understanding of reality. The contrast between a brief period of pleasure and an extended stay in Sheol does more than justify the description of everything as futile;<sup>43</sup> it also provides an image of death's power to obliterate all memory of pleasure.

These two assessments of youth suggest that Qoheleth has not altogether relinquished the older attitude toward youth. His abandonment of the conviction that old age was the human ideal does not carry with it the belief that youth is the ideal time of life. Youth was fleeting, perhaps futile as well.<sup>44</sup> Because Qoheleth subscribed to the view that the end of

40. The difficulty of maintaining a consistent interpretation of this kind is increasingly recognized, although a few images do lend themselves to an allegorical reading.

41. This claim does not deny the existence of powerful imagery and metaphorical profundity within the poem.

42. That is the understanding of the poem advocated by Sawyer (1975).

43. On translating *hebel* see Fox (1986). Fox argues for the translation "absurd."

44. The essential meaning of the root *hebel* was ephemerality (breath) and insubstantiality (idols).

a thing was better than the beginning, it was impossible for him to see youth as the optimal age. Furthermore, the role of chance<sup>45</sup> cancelled the advantages of athletic training, for superior athletes did not always win the race. For Qoheleth, youth was preferable to old age because in the early years one had the capacity to enjoy life. But the advantage was a relative one, like that of sages over fools.<sup>46</sup> In terms of absolute profit, which was the measure of all things for Qoheleth, youth and old age alike were futile, absurd, and without substance.

Qoheleth's gloomy picture of old age is set over against a brighter portrayal of nature. Elsewhere the universe itself is subjected to the same dark brush. Deutero-Isaiah envisions the future decay of the universe like a garment (51:6), and Ben Sira observes that everything decays, including leaves and generations (14:17–19).<sup>47</sup> Second Esdras extends the thought further, remarking that the world has lost its youth, times begin to grow old, weakness and increased evil accompany age (14:10–18).<sup>48</sup>

Desperate measures were adopted in a vain attempt to rejuvenate the aged. A Sumerian king was advised to find a beautiful young woman who would restore his vitality (Alster, 1975, pp. 92–94), and David followed the same strategem. One Egyptian response to this problem of waning powers approaches voyeurism.<sup>49</sup> The afflicted Pharaoh was told to search for nubile women who would row his barque while he observed the rhythmic movements of their naked bodies. But some people made peace with their dwindling powers; the octogenarian Barzillai declined David's offer of a place at the court, conceding that his ability to discriminate tastes had vanished, along with his appreciation for sensual pleasure with women. Others, like Sinuhe, began the journey into eternity by returning home at any cost (Lichtheim, 1973, pp. 222–235).

However, the epithet for God, the Ancient of Days, in the book of Daniel preserves the earlier attitude toward old age. The comforting power of this image becomes clear by reflecting on two texts, one from the legal codes and the other from exilic prophecy. In Lev 19:32 we read: "You shall rise up before the hoary head and honor the face of an old

45. The concept of chance (*miqreh*) is central to Qoheleth's thinking, but it also looms large in the Insinger Papyrus.

46. No scholar has emphasized the relative teaching of Qoheleth more than Loader (1979).

47. In his view, personal circumstances determined whether this gradual decay was greeted with open arms or with dismay.

48. The idea was not unique to Israel, as the description of human decline in terms of a golden age that gave way to silver, copper, and iron ages demonstrates.

49. Lichtheim (1973, pp. 216–217) understands the diversion as royal amusement.

person, and you shall fear your God; I am the Lord." The point is not merely the obvious one of showing respect for authority,<sup>50</sup> for a much bolder thought struggles to be born in the command. The natural flow of thought from the aged to God implies that our most eloquent witness to the reality of the living God is a hoary head and wrinkled visage. The other word comes from Isa 46:4 ("Even to your old age I am the One, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save"). Here is the unforgettable image of the Ancient of Days cradling the people of Israel like babes in solicitous but powerful arms. This breath-taking image is the poet's response to a persistent suspicion that God might forsake one in old age, a fear that evokes a prayer in Ps 71:9, 18. Like Deutero-Isaiah's proclamation of something extraordinarily new, this one also fell on deaf ears as far as Qoheleth was concerned. How chilling his teachings must have been to those individuals who had already experienced their golden years! And how sobering to those who still possessed youthful vigor!<sup>51</sup>

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alster, B. 1974. *The Instructions of Suruppak*. Copenhagen.  
 ———. 1975. *Studies in Sumerian Proverbs*. Copenhagen.  
 Bickerman, E. 1967. *Four Strange Books of the Bible*. New York.  
 Crenshaw, J. L. 1978. "The Shadow of Death in Ecclesiastes." *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien*, pp. 205–216. Eds. J. G. Gammie et al. Missoula.  
 ———. Ed. 1983. *Theodicy in the Old Testament*. Philadelphia and London.  
 Conrad, J. 1980. "Zaqen." *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 4, pp. 122–131. Grand Rapids.  
 Crüsemann, F. 1984. "The Unchangeable World: The 'Crisis of Wisdom' in Koheleth." *God of the Lowly*, pp. 57–77. Eds. W. Schottroff and W. Stegemann. Maryknoll, N.Y.  
 Fox, M. V. 1977. "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qoheleth." *Hebrew Union College Annual* 48:83–106.

50. Compare the acknowledged superiority of the aged in Job 12:12.

51. The attitude to youth and old age in the ancient Near East serves as a window through which modern interpreters may be able to view Israel's intellectual development. This essay is but one of several essays that will be necessary before the reliability of such viewing can be assessed.

- \_\_\_\_\_. 1986. "The Meaning of Hebel for Qoheleth." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105:409-427.
- Gese, H. 1963. "Die Krisis der Weisheit bei Kohelet." *Les sagesses du Proché-Orient ancien. Colloque de Strasbourg 1962*, pp. 139-151 (E. T. in Crenshaw, 1983: 141-153).
- Gilbert, M. 1980. "La description de la vieillesse en Qohelet XII 1-7 est elle allegorique?" *Vetus Testamentum Supplement* 32. *Congress Volume Vienna 1980*, pp. 96-109.
- Gordis, R. 1943/44. "The Social Background of Wisdom Literature." *Hebrew Union College Annual* 18:77-118.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1951. *Koheleth: the Man and his World*. New York.
- Gorssen, L. 1970. "La cohérence de la conception de Dieu dans l'Ecclésiaste." *Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium* 46:282-324.
- Hengel, M. 1974. *Judaism and Hellenism*. Philadelphia.
- Koch, K. 1955. "Gibt es ein Vergeltungsdogma im Alten Testament?" *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 52:1-42 (E. T. in Crenshaw, 1983:57-87).
- Lambert, W. L. 1960. *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*. Oxford.
- Lichtheim, M. 1973, 1976, 1980. *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vols. 1-3. Berkeley.
- Lindenberger, J. M. 1983. *The Aramaic Proverbs of Ahiqar*. Baltimore.
- Loader, J. A. 1979. *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet*. Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, 152. Berlin and New York.
- McKenzie, J. 1959. "The Elders in the Old Testament." *Biblica* 40: 522-540.
- Ogden, G. S. 1984. "Qohelet XI 7-XII 8: Qoheleth's Summons to Enjoyment and Reflection." *Vetus Testamentum* 34:27-38.
- Sawyer, J. F. A. 1975. "The Ruined House in Ecclesiastes 12: A Reconstruction of the Original Parable." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94:519-531.
- Schottroff, W. and W. Stegemann. 1984. Eds. *God of the Lowly*. Maryknoll, N.Y.
- Sheppard, G. T. 1977. "The Epilogue to Qoheleth as Theological Commentary." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39:182-189.
- van der Ploeg, J. "Les anciens dans l'Ancien Testament." *Lex Tua Veritas. H. Junker Festschrift*, pp. 175-191. Eds. H. Gross and F. Mussner. Trier.
- Whitley, C. F. 1979. *Koheleth*. Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, 148. Berlin and New York.
- Witzenrath, H. 1979. *Süss ist das Licht*. St. Ottilien.