

# **The Wisdom of Remembering God in One's Youth (Qoh 12,1) And Why It Is Important**

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**Abstract:** The preaching of Qoheleth resonates through millennia and centuries: "Vanity of vanities! Everything is vanity!" Aside from this proclamation, Qoheleth and his book is relatively unknown and relatively unexplored. This article seeks to bring out from the treasure trove of Old Testament wisdom the voice of Qoheleth in perhaps one of the most important parts of his book - the concluding dialogue - his advice to the young man. Qoheleth advises the young man, "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth. (Qoh. 12,1)" In unpacking the richness of what seems to be a very simple counsel, this short paper brings to the reader the beauty of its every carefully chosen word (lexical analysis), the poetry that surrounds the injunction (syntax), the complex cultural and inter-textual dynamics (history and intertextuality) of the text. This paper was written for the young and for all who accompany the young that the voice of Qoheleth may reach them and bring them back to constantly remembering the Creator.

**Keywords:** Qoheleth, Preacher, Ecclesiastes, Youth, Young, Aging, Vanity, Futility, Pride, Wisdom Literature, Advice, Creator, Elohim

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## Introduction

One wonders how difficult it is to read Qoheleth and to preach his preaching these days. In the age of consumerism and secularism, and in the religious sphere where Prosperity Gospel is a growing movement and conviction, how does one cry out “הבֹּל הַבָּלִים” (vanity of vanities/futility of futilities) just as Qoheleth did? Would there be open ears, open minds and open hearts that would pay attention to these cries of warning, of advice, and of wisdom? Or will the wisdom of this sage be construed and dismissed as folly?

In certain periods of history and in particular circles, Qoheleth has enjoyed some prominence. For example, in the fifteenth century, in the city of Florence, the Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola based his preaching on Qoheleth. The way he expounded Qoheleth, to the point of building the Bonfire of Vanities in Florence, was greatly sensational. But as Qoheleth and anyone who would preach seriously like Qoheleth would be counter-cultural and counter-social, Savonarola, too, in the end, got burned in the bonfire.<sup>1</sup>

Qoheleth is mostly known because of the repeated cry: “Vanity of vanities!” He is also known for the very soothing wisdom of his poem, “There is a Time for Everything... (Qoh. 3,1-11)” But aside from these, perhaps there would only be a handful, and most of them biblical scholars and theologians, who know Qoheleth and his preaching more profoundly.

This short paper does not directly contribute to these already well-known themes. Instead, it concentrates on a part of Qoheleth’s advice to the youth (12,1) which the researcher considers as very vital to the book of Ecclesiastes itself and to the entire message of Qoheleth and yet unexplored by many of Qoheleth’s major commentators.<sup>2</sup> In this text also, one may appreciate some of the special characteristics of Ancient Israelite wisdom literature as emphasizing a theology of creation (*vis a vis* covenantal theology) and as a wisdom from experience (*vis a vis* revealed wisdom) given by way of an address to the youth by an elder.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a hagiography on the life of Savonarola and his use of Qoheleth, see H. GRUBB, “Burning Our Vanities with Savonarola.” *Dominicana*, 19 May 2016, <https://www.dominicanajournal.org/burning-our-vanities-with-savonarola/>.

<sup>2</sup> See for example C.L. SEOW, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 351-353.

<sup>3</sup> See L. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 19-75.

This humble research paper was written for the young ones, for their parents and guardians, their teachers, their pastors, and everyone who may accompany them in their growth and development. The aim of this work is to reflect with deeper circumspection and elaborate on the advice of Qoheleth as he speaks to the youth of his age and to the youth among his intended audience. Albeit only a short part of the advice is studied and elaborated here, the part that was chosen was the soul and essence of the concluding section of the book of Ecclesiastes. This paper seeks to resonate the voice of Qoheleth and revive his speech to draw out his timeless wisdom for today.

The advice of Qoheleth in Qoh. 12,1 is simple: “Remember your Creator in your youth...” But this apparently simple line of injunction provokes some questions: first, what does it mean to remember - for Qoheleth himself, for the ancient Israelite society (or societies), and for all the readers of Qoheleth – then and now? Secondly, how does Qoheleth imagine the Creator – who is God for him? And third, why does Qoheleth advice to remember the Creator in *one's youth*? Notice the emphasis on *one's youth* as this part of the injunction is deliberately essential in the chosen pericope.

In going through these questions, one can appreciate the practical and religious wisdom that Qoheleth imparts to the youth – a characteristic of the Wisdom Literature, especially proverbs. In doing so, therefore, one needs to read closely the text of Qoheleth. His text itself sheds light and gives direction to eventual clarifications and answers. Also, these questions are tackled in this paper lexically and syntactically, albeit in a matter that makes the discussion less technical in terms of exegesis and more available for wider readership. The cultural background and aspects of the text are also considered to further understand the injunction and thus the wisdom tradition to which it belongs. To clarify and illustrate further, intertextual reading is also utilized in this study. This means other scriptural texts are read in parallel with Qoh.12,1 as aids, evidence, and cross-references.

### **There is Wisdom in Remembering**

First and foremost, the act of remembering contained in the injunction of Qoheleth has a religious sense. The advice, after all, is to remember the Creator. As the backdrop of the wisdom tradition is the search for meaning and orientation amid human experience, so the injunction of Qoheleth is to remember and to never lose sight of the Creator.

The themes of religious memory and remembrance in Ancient Israel, both in the personal and collective levels, have been the topic of several works of biblical

scholars in recent decades.<sup>4</sup> This act of recalling goes beyond the psychological processes and entails inter-personal and social dynamics. There is a cycle of remembrance that happens: the individual remembers because the community remembers, and the community remembers because its members remember. As this remembering goes deeper and deeper, enacted and re-enacted, ceremonial rituals also develop over time and monuments of commemoration are erected. These ceremonial rituals and monuments are institutionalized, even enshrined in legal codices, to further perpetuate this act of remembering. Mark S. Smith notes the importance of the roots of collective memory in the family setting as it emerges in the more public spheres of society, i.e., in the royal courts and in the sanctuaries.<sup>5</sup>

Intertextually, a good example of enshrining the act of remembering in a legal code is Deuteronomy 6, 6-9:

והיו הדברים האלה אשר  
אנכי מצוך היום על-לבבך

6 Let these words, which I command to you today,  
be upon your heart;

ושננתם לבניך ודברת במ  
בשבתך בביתך ובלכתך  
בדרך ובשכבך ובקומך

7 and you shall teach them diligently to your  
children, and shall talk of them when thou sit in  
your house, when you walk on the road, when you  
lay down, and when you rise up.

וקשרתם לאות על-ידך והיו  
לטטפת בין עיניך

8 And you shall bind them as a sign upon your  
hand, and they shall be between your eyes.

וכתבתם על-מזוזות ביתך  
ובשעריך

9 And you shall write them upon the door-posts of  
your homes and upon your gates.<sup>6</sup>

In Qoheleth's poem to the youth, a man of wise age addresses himself to a young man and puts forward his advice. The advice is to remember. This act of enjoining the young man to remember follows the dynamics of collective and individual remembering discussed above. The wise man enjoins the young man to remember because he himself remembers. They have a shared imagination

<sup>4</sup> See for example: J. Assmann, "Guilt and Remembrance: On the Theologization of History in the Ancient Near East," *History and Memory* 2 (1990): 5-33; J. Blenkinsopp, "Memory, Tradition, and the Construction of the Past in Ancient Israel," *BTB* 27 (1997): 76-82; M.Z. Brettler, "Memory in Ancient Israel," *Memory and History in Christianity and Judaism*, ed. M. Signer (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 1-17.

<sup>5</sup> See M. S. Smith, "Remembering God: Collective Memory in Israelite Religion," *CBQ* 64 (2002): 633.

<sup>6</sup> The translation is by the author.

and memory of the Creator, and this memory the elder enjoins the young man to perpetuate and to relive always. A wise man remembers and never forgets. A wise man, in order not to forget, causes himself and others to remember.

Grammatically, the advice in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book begins with “זכרו.” The waw is a resumptive *waw* as the unit is a continuation of the poem that begins in the latter part of chapter 11. זכר (to remember) is in its Qal imperative masculine singular form. To this verbal root, Brown, Driver, and Briggs devote an extensive explanation (see BDB 2142).<sup>7</sup> It shows that the act of remembering has very complex levels of meaning. In its scriptural use, זכר is that act of recalling that usually influences one's feelings, thoughts, and consequential actions. It is, therefore, a very powerful internal activity that has outward effects.

The usual subject of the verb זכר in the Hebrew scripture is God, with 68 occurrences.<sup>8</sup> When the object is the human person, which is also usual, the text would speak of God being mindful of the human object or the covenants he made with his people.<sup>9</sup>

In this pericope, the subject of the verb in the imperative is a human person and the object is God. Theologically, this textual phenomenon, i.e. man is the subject and God is the object of the verb of remembering/recalling, evokes the Deuteronomistic command of recounting the history of salvation – the marvelous works that the Lord has done to free Israel from slavery.<sup>10</sup>

When the subject of זכר is a human being and its object is a person – divine or human – and in a positive sense, it means to cherish the other's memory, to fulfill one's obligation to, to abide with and never forsake the other's commandment, and to live according to an agreement or a covenant. All these positive meanings of זכר appropriately apply to the injunction of Qoheleth to the young. And although “in your youth” is a special phrase in this advice, one may understand the injunction as ingressive, i.e. the action begins at a certain point, “in your youth” and then complexive, i.e. the action is continuous, thereafter.

The opposite of remembering is forgetting. If there is wisdom in remembering, there is folly in forgetting. One inter-textual reference that may help in the discussion of remembering in this pericope is Hosea 4,6:

<sup>7</sup> See F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2020), 269-271.

<sup>8</sup> H. Eising, “זכר,” *TDOT* 4, ed. by G.J. Botterweck and H. Ringren. (Stuttgart: Eerdmans, 1980), 67.

<sup>9</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> See *ibid.*

נדמו עמי מבלי הדעת כי־אתה הדעת מאסת (ואמאסאך) מכהן לי ותשכה תורת אלהיך אשכה בניך גם־אני  
 My people are ruined for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you from my priesthood. Because you have forgotten the law of your God, I will also forget your children.

In this prophetic verse, the addressee of the oracle has done exactly the opposite of the counsel of Qoheleth. This verse is conspicuously heavy in its indictment as it pronounces doom. And the doom is due to forgetting. In this verse, forgetting is synonymous to forsaking. Reading the verse closely, one may notice that if there is forgetting on the side of the human person in his relationship with God, so it is paid equally on the other end by the Divine. The consequence of divine forgetting and forsaking is catastrophic for humanity. This prophetic verse is utterly rich and itself deserves its own research paper. Furthermore, the topic on the Divine is dealt with more profoundly in the next section. Summarily, reading Hosea 4,6 in parallel with Qoheleth 12,1, one can see the folly of forgetting the Creator and wisdom of Qoheleth's advice to remember him.

It may be too much to say that the author of Qoheleth knew and has read the text of Hosea. After all, Qoheleth has his own theology, and he is delivering a message completely different from that of the 8<sup>th</sup> century prophet. But one could appreciate here how passages of the scriptures can shed light in order to bring about better understanding when read in parallel with each other, especially if their theologies, although different but not totally alien to each other, have confluences.

Finally, one may notice that at the concluding part of the entire book of Qoheleth, the sage addresses the young man in Qoh.12,12 as בן – my son (בן + 1<sup>st</sup> person genitive suffix). The addressor and the addressee (real or imagined by the author), whether biologically related or not, have a parental-filial relationship that fits into the discussion of the dynamics of remembrance from the family nucleus to the social institutions. This is also very much in parallel with the character of Wisdom as passed on in the conversations between father and son, teacher and student, elder and the young ones in the family or community. This mark can also be seen in other wisdom texts like Proverbs.

### **“Your Creator:” A Glimpse of Wisdom in Qoheleth’s Religiosity**

One of the hallmarks of the wisdom tradition is the emphasis on creation theology and on regarding God as the source, the author of order, the sustainer, and



the transformer of all things. God worked and continues to work on his creation in the progress of time and history. In this advice, Qoheleth does not simply call the young man's attention to God as God in the general sense of the word, but to God as Creator. But how does Qoheleth see God?

Qoheleth only uses the term *Elohim* in his book to pertain to God. He never uses the term YHWH. Aside from using *Elohim*, God is looked upon in the book using circumlocutions by way of his attributes – Creator, Judge, and Redeemer.<sup>11</sup> On the part of Qoheleth, the usage of *Elohim* and the non-usage of the tetragrammaton YHWH is a very deliberate choice and very reflective of his own theology, the theology of his community and of his intended audience. With further research, one may explore more deeply and elaborate the Elohist tendencies of Qoheleth – both the author and the biblical opus – and if the distinct theological traditions of the documentary hypothesis posed and expounded by Julius Wellhausen were already fully developed and noticeable distinct from each in the author's time.<sup>12</sup>

Many scholars note the transcendent quality of God in the book of Qoheleth. H.-P. Müller discusses God in the book of Qoheleth as the *Urheber* – not just in the sense of the Creator but the Creator and first initiator of causality – God is an absolute *other*.<sup>13</sup> One could only speculate if the author of the book of Qoheleth has carefully chosen how Qoheleth would call God. John F. A. Sawyer and Mark R. Sneed, in their respective works on Qoheleth, expound on the great divide between God and humanity which cannot be traversed, breached, or overcome.<sup>14</sup> The book of Qoheleth itself shows the otherness of God from humanity: while God is eternal and beyond change (see 3,14), humanity is fleeting, feeble, and transitory (see 1,4 and 3,18); while in God is wisdom and might, in humanity is vulnerability, foolishness, and finiteness of wisdom (see 8,17). God is beyond human understanding and his wisdom is beyond comprehension (1,14-15; 3,10-11; 8,6-17). Life and death depend on God (8,15), times and seasons (3,1-8) – things which are beyond human control. However, despite being transcendent, God is also benevolent as the maker

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed discussion in each of these divine circumlocutions in Ecclesiastes, see J. Crenshaw, *Qoheleth: The Ironic Wink* (Columbia: South Carolina University Press, 2013), 63-69.

<sup>12</sup> It is both interesting and important to read and compare the following works on the topic: J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994) and T.B. Dozeman and K. Schmid (eds.) *A Farewell to the Yahwist? The Composition of the Pentateuch in Recent European Interpretation* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> See H.-P. Müller, "Wie sprach Qohälät von Gott?" *VT* 18 (1968): 507-521.

<sup>14</sup> Both scholars discuss the divide between God and humanity from different angles, see their respective works: J. A. F. Sawyer, "The Ruined House in Ecclesiastes 12: A Reconstruction of the Original Parable," *JBL* 94 (1975): 519-531; M. R. Sneed, *The Politics of Pessimism in Ecclesiastes: A Social Science Perspective* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 166.

of all things (11,15) and the one, who, in his goodness, gives life (8,15 and 9,19).<sup>15</sup> In the continuing development of the religion of Israel, perhaps this last point was a Yahwistic touch in Qoheleth's theology – one could only speculate.<sup>16</sup>

Qoheleth advises the young man to remember God. In this advice, Qoheleth chooses to call God as “your Creator.” Your Creator in Hebrew is בּוֹרֵא'ךְ. This form is the qal participle masculine plural of the verb בָּרָא plus the genitive suffix pronoun of second person masculine singular. The plural form of the participle is problematic here.<sup>17</sup> The Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia offers a *proponitur* (i.e. an alternative reading) in its critical apparatus.<sup>18</sup> It is noteworthy that the Massoretes do not offer a *qere* to the *ketiv*, i.e. the Massoretic scribes' proposed reading to the text, in both the *massorah* parva and magna. Seow has reservations<sup>19</sup> but the most appropriate way to view this participle in the plural is that it is in the form of the plural of majesty when it used here for God.<sup>20</sup>

In its poetic style, בּוֹרֵא'ךְ (bôr'ekā – your Creator) rhymes with בְּחֹרֶתְךָ (bəhūrōtekā – your youth). The root בָּרָא (br') means to shape, to fashion, and to create.<sup>21</sup> It is a verb of divine activity. Moreover, it also has a sense of re-creation and transformation.<sup>22</sup> In using בּוֹרֵא'ךְ (bôr'ekā, – your Creator), Qoheleth may be pertaining to God connoting his punctiliar act of creation and his continuous act of renewing his creation – re-creating and transforming it. To this aspect of God, Qoheleth reminds the young and advises him to remember and commit himself.

God, therefore, is awesome and awe-inspiring, properly pertained to and addressed in the plural of majesty even in a circumlocution. And Qoheleth, in his conception of God as *Elohim* the majestically transcendent, does not presume to display a very intimate and warm relationship with him. This most proper regard and relationship with God is Qoheleth's wisdom heritage. Qoheleth is not

<sup>15</sup> S. de Jong, “God in the Book of Qoheleth: A Reappraisal of Qoheleth's Place in Old Testament Theology,” VT 47 (1997): 154-167 challenges the mainstream view of God's absolute transcendence. Reading de Jong's work with those of the contrary position, one may say that Qoheleth's view of God is a balance of transcendence and providence – perhaps even more balanced than his commentators.

<sup>16</sup> See M.H. Segal, “El, Elohim, and YHWH in the Bible,” JQR 46 (1955): 89-115.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion on the problematic form of this participle in this verse and its suggested meanings, see Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 351-352.

<sup>18</sup> See the textual apparatus: K. Elliger, W. Rudolph, and A. Schenker (eds.), *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2020), 1353.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 351.

<sup>20</sup> See F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* (Translated by M. G. Easton; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1891), 402.

<sup>21</sup> See Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew*, 135.

<sup>22</sup> See *ibid.*



irreligious, nor does he have a pessimistic view of his God. He is a person of deep faith. What he imparts to the young is primarily his attitude of reverence and awe to a totally transcendent God and consequentially an attitude of trusting surrender to the God who continues to act on his creation but whose action is beyond human comprehension.

Qoheleth was a man of his time, and his wisdom book is a product of his epoch. J. A. Loader notes that in the post-exilic development of the religion of Israel, there was the growing tendency to avoid the use of the name YHWH in favor of circumlocutions.<sup>23</sup> This was due to the growing consciousness of God's transcendence in the development of Israelite monotheism.<sup>24</sup> Such circumlocutions, i.e., Creator, Judge, and Redeemer, we see in the book of Qoheleth. Qoheleth participates in religious dialogue of his time and contributes his wisdom to it: while accepting the transcendence and remoteness of God, he also points at his provident action, albeit beyond ordinary human comprehension – thus, finding himself in a state of being in between and at the threshold of the Israelite traditions that respectively emphasize God's closeness and majestic transcendence.<sup>25</sup>

### **In Your Youth: Wisdom from an Elder's Experience**

At the heart of this study is the phrase “in your youth” in the advice of Qoheleth to the young man to remember his Creator. Why does Qoheleth have to remind the young man not only to remember God simply, whenever or wherever, but to remember God especially in his youth. In fact, to emphasize the phrase “in your youth” in 12,1, Qoheleth proceeds with a pattern of “before...”, “on the day...”, and “when...” clauses in 12,1-7, describing old age and succumbing to death using metaphors of daily life: e.g., “before the sun is darkened (v.2)”, “when the guardians of the house tremble (v.3)”, etc. If one looks at the syntactic structure of 12,1-7, one realizes that the advice of Qoheleth “Remember your Creator in your youth” is the independent clause. The second part of 12,1 to the end of v.7 is a series of dependent clauses qualifying the phrase “in your youth.” With seven verses qualifying it, this phrase must be very important. One may appreciate it more fully by looking at the text itself:

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<sup>23</sup> For a discussion on the historical context of the book of Ecclesiastes and its contribution to the development of the faith of the post-exilic Jewish believers, see J.A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qoheleth* (BZAW 152; Berlin, NY: de Gruyter, 1979), 124.

<sup>24</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> See *ibid.*, 128-131.

זכר את־בוראיך בימי בחורתיך עד אשר לא־יבאו ימי  
הרעה והגיעו שנים אשר תאמר איך־לי בהם חפץ

**1** Remember then your Creator in  
the days of your youth, *before* the evil days  
come, and the years approach when you  
say: "To me there is no more pleasure";

עד אשר לא־תחשך השמש והאור והירח והכוכבים  
ושבו העבים אחר הגשם

**2** *before* the sun, and the light, and  
the moon, and the stars, are darkened, and  
the clouds return after the rain;

ביום שיזעו שמרי הבית והתעותו אנשי החיל ובטלו  
הטחנות כי מעטו וחשכו הראות בארבות

**3** *on the day* when the people who  
watch over the house tremble, and men of  
valor bow down, and the grinders cease  
because they are few, and those that look  
out shall be darkened in the windows,

וסגרו דלתים בשוק בשפל קול הטחנה ויקום לקול  
הצפור וישחו כל־בנות השיר

**4** and the doors along the streets  
are shut when the sound of the grinding is  
low; and one shall rise up at the voice of a  
bird, and all the daughters of music shall be  
brought low;

גם מגבה יראו וחתחתים בדרך וינאץ השקד ויסתבל  
החגב ותפר האביונה כ־הלך האדם אל־בית עולמו  
וסבבו בשוק הסופדים

**5** also they shall be afraid of  
heights and terrors shall be on the way;  
and the almond-tree shall blossom, and the  
grasshopper shall drag itself along; thus  
desire shall fail for a person is going to his  
forever home, and the mourners are going  
about the streets;

עד אשר לא־[ירחק] (ירחק) חבל הכסף ותרוץ גלת  
הזהב ותשבר כד על־המבוע ונרץ הגלגל אל־הבור

**6** *before* the silver cord is snapped  
asunder, and the golden bowl is shattered,  
and the pitcher is broken at the fountain,  
and the wheel falls shattered into the pit;

וישב העפר על־הארץ כשהיה והרוח תשוב אל־האלהים  
אשר נתנה

**7** and the dust returns to the earth  
as it was and the spirit returns to God who  
gave it.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> The translation and the emphases are by the author.

Notice how 12,1 is a very long sentence and all the seven verses are appositional clauses describing what Qoheleth meant by the phrase “the days of your youth.” In Hebrew, a *waw* (ו) may be translated as “and.” However, a *waw* also has many grammatical functions. Syntactically, in this pericope, the entire seven-verse sentence is weaved together a series of *waws* that are conjunctives (i.e. they simply connect or join together the clauses or sentences) and appositional-epexegetical (i.e. they connect clauses or sentences with the succeeding clause or sentence explaining the preceding one) as reflected in the translation.

If one reads the autobiographical parts of the book, especial in 2,4-10, one may notice that these verses make up a list of Qoheleth's credentials – his fine accomplishments in the days of his own youth – which he in 2,11 calls הבל (hebel) – vanity, vapor, and a chase after wind. Indeed, Qoheleth in 2,4-10 offers a glimpse of his accomplishments in his *autobiographic* pericope: he undertook great works, built a great house and planted vineyards, made gardens and parks, constructed water reservoirs to maintain woodlands, acquired slaves, amassed wealth, became richer than anyone, became wiser than anyone, etc. All these when he was younger.

Reading this “autobiographic” pericope, one may conclude that Qoheleth is presented as a truly accomplished person. He has attained his goals in life, fulfilled his dreams, even served his community in his generosity, magnanimity, and benevolence. One may say that he had a very good reputation, confident in his self-worth, well-spoken of, esteemed, and perhaps even loved by his community for the many things that he did for the common good. He has accomplished so much when he was in his prime. But he realized in his advanced age that these are all הבל (hebel). One may ask, is it bad or evil to earn money, to build a reputation for oneself, to make improvements for oneself and for one's community, to be of service to others and earn the community's esteem, admiration, and even affection? All these Qoheleth has earned for himself. But he calls them הבל (hebel).

One cannot really evade a discussion of הבל (hebel) in the study of Qoheleth. הבל (hebel) is ordinarily translated as *vanity* (e.g., KJV) or *meaninglessness* (e.g., NIV) in many English versions. Vanity and meaninglessness may loosely fit the meaning of the term as its usage in the book of Qoheleth may have more and deeper implications which one may judge as analogically related to the English terms *vanity* and *meaninglessness*. In his critical analysis of the term הבל (hebel), K. Seybold recognized that it is an emotive and judgmental concept for human aspirations.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> See K. Seybold, “לִבְהֵל hebbhel,” *TDOT* 3, ed. G.J. Botterweck and H. Ringren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 318.

What is human and mundane, what is aspired for and pursued by person for his own feelings and benefits – riches, wisdom, and honor – all these are הבל (hebel). M.V. Fox, reading Qoheleth with the lens of Albert Camus' existential philosophy, recognizes that הבל (hebel) is *absurdity*, a state of being “in tension between a certain reality and a framework of expectations.”<sup>28</sup> One cannot live life to the full when he or she lives according to some expectations that are far from reality. Life will just be full of frustrations, discouragements, and regrets when unrealized and unrealizable expectations become the standard for living. This brings us back to Qoheleth's advice to the young man of which 12,1 is only a fragment part: Be happy, rejoice and let your heart be full of gladness in your youth (11,9).

While Qoheleth enjoins the young man to be happy and to live life to the full, he also warns that everything that is to come is הבל (11,8). He knew it as he experienced it himself. And he knows also that the experience of הבל (hebel) is inevitable. As far as human effort is concerned, one may say that the best antidote of הבל (hebel) is in Qoheleth's advise “Remember your Creator in *your youth*.” For everything that is הבל (hebel) is a protest against God.<sup>29</sup> הבל (hebel) is the realm of human creation. It is never used in the book of Qoheleth to pertain to God, to his activities, or to describe him. Humanity in הבל (hebel) and הבל (hebel) in humanity are totally opposite to God. הבל (hebel) is both vanity and vulnerability – qualities far from God and absent in God. The greater the הבל (hebel), therefore, the farther from God. After all the striving for great things and to be great, to enjoy and to be of great esteem, a person realizes that everything is meaningless and futile. The advice of Qoheleth to remember God in one's youth is to put in the center of one's life and to not forget. הבל (hebel) is anthropocentric. It displaces God from center and places the human person in his stead. It is idolatry: it is self-worship. Qoheleth warns against this so as for the young man to live his life meaningfully, recognizing that expectations, human toil, and reality can be harmonized when they are placed trustingly at the hands of the Creator who continues to renew his creation.

The injunction to remember the Creator *in one's youth* is given to the young man as he is susceptible and vulnerable to הבל (hebel). Moreover, to move from the self-centeredness and self-absurdity to the constant of God, living a life of constant reverence and surrender to him, is a discipline that is learned for a lifetime. It is not discipline that comes that is learned overnight or that one realizes after one event. It begins from one's youth towards a meaningful aging and holy passing to the eternal realm.

<sup>28</sup> See M.V. Fox, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*. (Decatur, GA: Almond Press, 1989) 31.

<sup>29</sup> See *ibid*, 46.

## Summary and Conclusion

This short paper is an attempt to study a fragment of the advice of Qoheleth to the young man (12,1). It tackles the importance of remembering the Creator in one's youth in the wisdom tradition of the Hebrew Bible and of the ancient Israelite culture. A wise person remembers and seeks not to forget. He causes himself and others to remember and to perpetuate the memory. This paper is also an attempt to discover the religiosity of Qoheleth in how he views God. Qoheleth calls God "Creator" in his advice. This orients the young man and the reader to God in the creation theology of the wisdom tradition. The use of the plural of majesty in his text is also very telling. God is the transcendent God – majestic and almighty – approached and worshiped in utmost reverence awe. One must not fail to recognize, however, the benevolence of God in his act of creation – a encompassing theme of the Wisdom Literature, and the divine circumlocution in the verse being studied – and renewal of creation and in his bestowal of gifts to humanity. Finally, this work demonstrates the relevance of the clause *in your youth* in Qoheleth's counsel. It is because הֵבֶל (hebel) is strongest in the age of youth when one pursues his own significance and self-determination. In his counsel, a man, already in the age of wisdom, speaks with a young man of his own experiences of הֵבֶל (hebel). One may say that his injunction may be an antidote to הֵבֶל (hebel). Qoheleth advises the young man to be constantly aware of God and to never lose sight of him, for in losing sight of him he loses himself to absurdity. The constant of awareness of God, present in the wisdom tradition, is an art and discipline that better begins in one's youth. All these for the young man to have a meaningful life and that his heart may be filled with gladness (11,9). This short advice in Qoh. 12,1 contains many elements of the Ancient Israelite Wisdom tradition. The advice in Qoh. 12,1 is curt and brief like a summary, but it is loaded with the classical wisdom of the chosen people. Each word is carefully chosen for the young man with the hope that the young man and all who may read Qoheleth's advice may benefit from his wisdom.**PS**

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