

THE FIVE ROLLS

by

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‡ Ruth ‡ The Song ‡ Ecclesiastes ‡
‡ The Lamentations ‡ Esther ‡

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Preface

The Five Rolls (Hebrew, *Hamesh megillot*) refer to five books of the Hebrew Bible that, following ancient Jewish tradition, came to be read on five of the Jewish annual festivals. In the oldest periods, all biblical books were written on scrolls, and these five (along with the Torah) are commonly written on scrolls even in modern times. In the Hebrew Bible, all five are found in the third major section of the Hebrew canon, the *Kethubim* (= the Writings). In the Masoretic tradition, they are grouped together in chronological order (though in some Hebrew Bibles they are grouped in the order of the festivals.)

RUTH is read on Pentecost (Feast of Weeks) prior to the reading of the Torah.

The book's association with the festival of harvest derives from the return of Naomi to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. Also, an ancient Jewish tradition that King David both was born and died on Pentecost further developed the association of the book with the feast, since the book gives David's ancestry. Traditionally, the day that Israel accepted the Torah at Sinai was on Pentecost, and Ruth's acceptance of the faith of Israel further strengthens the tie between the festival and the book.

THE SONG OF SONGS is read at the Feast of Passover. In addition to its public reading in the synagogue on either the seventh or eighth day, it is sometimes read at the Passover seder meal. The general association of the Song with the Passover derives from the ancient interpretation that the Song is an allegory of the love between Yahweh and Israel. Later, in Christian circles, this same allegorical interpretation was popularized except that the meaning behind the allegory became Christ's love for the church.

ECCLESIASTES is recited during the Feast of Booths. It is read in the morning service prior to the reading of the Torah passage. The association of the book with the final celebration in the Jewish liturgical year derives from the various references within the book to joy and gladness, especially 11:2, which is thought by some Jewish interpreters to refer to the festival week itself.

LAMENTATIONS is read on the ninth of Av during the synagogue service as an expression of public mourning for the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem. These dirges of grief are broad enough to include the destruction of both the first and second temple as well as the failure of the

first and second Jewish revolts. The Lamentations generally are recited in the evening and the morning.

ESTHER's reading is the central feature of the Feast of Purim, and it is required that the story be read from an actual scroll. (The other four books might be read from scrolls, too, but they are just as likely to be read from printed Hebrew Bibles.) The Book of Esther is considered the most important of the Five Rolls, and according to Jewish tradition, the recitation of this book at Purim was first ordered by Mordecai and Esther themselves.

The association of these books with Jewish festivals was a gradual process. The reading of Esther at Purim was practiced during the second temple period, and so was familiar to Christ. The reading of Lamentations also is very ancient. The association of the other books with their respective festivals originated in various periods, along with musical traditions, melodies and accents for their recitation.

In Christian tradition, these books have been rearranged so that they do not appear together. Ruth follows Judges, since the story occurred during the period of the judges. Lamentations follows Jeremiah, since the tradition of the Septuagint is that Jeremiah was the author. Esther follows Ezra and Nehemiah as part of the history of the post-exilic period. The Song and Ecclesiastes fall into the poetical books after Proverbs, probably because of the traditional opinion that Solomon wrote all three.

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The Story of Ruth

One of the most charming and beautiful narratives in the Old Testament is the story of Ruth. It contains many of the prime elements that make for a fascinating story-romance, intrigue, local color, suspense and denouement. The account is narrated simply and directly. The story should be examined against the background of the tribal confederacy (1:1) while at the same time not losing the value of the story as a story. Beyond that, this beautiful narrative exemplifies God's redemptive action in human history as portrayed in the simply lives of a relatively unimportant family.

Introduction

In the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Ruth appears in the section of the *Kethubim* (= the Writings, the third major section of the Hebrew canon) called the *Megilloth*. The latter are the five scrolls read by the Jews at the various feasts. The Book of Ruth was read at the Festival of Shavuoth (Weeks, Pentecost), the annual celebration of the harvest (Ex. 23:16; 34:22; Nu. 28:16), and in the narrative, Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest (April/May). In the Septuagint and in most modern English Bibles, the book falls immediately after the Book of Judges.

Author and Date

The author of the Book of Ruth is anonymous. The Jewish Talmud suggests Samuel as the author, but without any direct link this assertion is considered doubtful by most scholars. Scholarly projections for dating vary from the time of David and Solomon to Hezekiah and the post-exilic community. Whenever it was written, the story has accurately preserved the customs and ethos of the troubled period of the Tribal League when Israel's presence in her new land was less than settled and secure.¹

Purpose

Ruth falls into a body of Old Testament literature that tells how God both

¹ R. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), p. 1059ff.

raised up and sustained selected individuals and families in spite of tremendous obstacles. In faithfulness to his covenant, Yahweh overcame the problems of sterility in the lives of Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel (Ge. 15:3; 16:1; 25:21; 30:1-2). Menaces from other sources, such as Jacob's elder brother Esau and the stubbornness of Judah's sons (Ge. 38), threatened to break the family lineage. In all this, Yahweh was providentially at work, preserving the family lines for his own redemptive purposes and fulfilling his covenant promises.

The Book of Ruth serves the same purpose. It tells one more episode in the story of how David's immediate ancestry was preserved from extinction, and for Christians, how the family of the Messiah began.²

Background of the Tribal Confederacy

The very first phrase in Ruth sets the story in the days of the Tribal League, after the conquest under Joshua but before the monarchy. The genealogy at the end of the book puts the story some three generations before David.

During the era of the Tribal League, the tribes of Israel were loosely bound together by their desert faith, but they were without any central government or concrete political affinities. After Joshua's death, the tribes were left with the second phase of conquest (Jos. 13:1-7), but though they seemed to have gained a firm foothold in the central hill country of Palestine, the plains were a nagging problem because of the sophisticated weaponry of their enemies (Jg. 1:19, 34). Even though the tribes attempted to complete the conquest (Jg. 1:1), they failed to dislodge a number of tenacious indigenous groups (Jg. 1:21, 27-36). It is against this tumultuous backdrop that the story of Ruth is painted.

Yahweh Brought Me Back Empty (1)

The story of Ruth unfolds dramatically with the dislocation of an Israelite family from their home in Bethlehem and their move to the transjordan nation of Moab. The ancestor of the Moabites was the son of Lot by an incestuous relationship (Ge. 19:36-37), and his clan settled in the area just east of the Dead Sea. Very probably, the clan of Moab intermarried with other indigenous peoples of the area to form the nation of the Moabites. Blessed with good agricultural and pastoral potential, a Moabite civilization developed that lasted until Palestine fell to the Mesopotamian empire-builders in the 6th century BC.³

The tension between Israel and Moab was exacerbated by Moab's

² G. Wood, "Ruth, Lamentations," *JBC* (1968) I.603.

³ J. Thompson, "Moab, Moabites," *NBD* (1962), pp. 786-787.

participation in a plot to seduce the Israelites in a fertility cult ritual (Nu. 25:1ff.). This offense resulted in the prohibition of any Moabites from participation in the assembly of Israel, that is, the congregation as called together for war or religious purposes (Dt. 23:3-6). In the early days of the Tribal League the Moabites invaded the Israelite holdings and reduced at least some of the Israelites to a vassalship for eighteen years (Jg. 3:12-14). It is to this land of Moab that Elimelech and his family moved during an extended drought in Judah. Apparently there was some amount of friendly relations between the clan of Judah and the Moabite nation across the sea, because David, the great grandson of Ruth, later sought temporary asylum for his family there (1 Sa. 22:3-4).

The Significance of Names in the Story

The names in the story are highly significant, since they reflect the action and character of both the people and their life situations.

Bethlehem (= house of bread)

Elimelech (= my God is king)

Naomi (= delight, pleasurable)

Mahlon (= sickness, sterility)

Kilion (= consumption)

Orpha (= neck, back of the neck)

Ruth (= friend)

Mara (= bitter)

Boaz (= in him is strength)⁴

Nameless man (the one who refused to redeem Ruth and give her his name for fear of corrupting his family property is himself unnamed in the book)

Given the significance of the names, the opening story line in the Hebrew text proceeds something like the following:

There was famine in the House of Bread. The man whose king was God went with his wife, Delight, to live in a foreign land. While there, the couple's two sons, Sickness and Consumption, married Moabites. The man My God is King

⁴ The meaning of the name Boaz is less clear than the others, cf. Wood, *JBC* (1968), p. 607. However, the same name was used for one of the pillars in Solomon's temple (2 Chr. 3:17). For further discussion, see R. Scott, *JBL* 58 (1929), p. 143ff.

and his two sons, Sickness and Consumption, died, leaving Delight with two widowed daughters-in-law, Back of the Neck and Friend, and no posterity. After hearing that the drought had ended in the House of Bread, Delight determined to return home. Her daughters-in-law asked to return with her, but after some discussion, Back of the Neck turned back to her ancestral home. Only Friend stayed with Delight. Together the two returned empty and alone to the House of Bread. Delight was so devastated by her recent circumstances that she requested her old friends to change her name to Bitter.

A Woman Without Posterity

It is difficult for contemporary readers to fully appreciate the emptiness felt by ancient peoples when they were left without posterity.⁵ It may help to remember that this story is set within an age that, as far as is known, had no clear conceptions of an afterlife or a resurrection. Immortality was sought through the perpetuation of the family name, in sons and grandsons. A man or woman without a son died altogether.⁶

This emptiness is strongly reflected in Naomi's description of her desolation (1:21) as well as her realistic despair that there were no more sons left in her womb (1:11-13). The hope of a future after death in one's posterity is strongly suggested several times in the book, such as, when Naomi speaks of Yahweh's loyal love⁷ toward the living and the dead in the prospects of Ruth's remarriage (2:20). For Ruth to remarry and have a child not only meant a good deal to Naomi personally, it would be the means by which Ruth's deceased husband might live on in the name of the child reckoned to him by levirate marriage (3:10). Ruth was not only being gracious to her mother-in-law, she was showing "greater kindness" to her deceased husband by marrying again so as to bear a child in his name. Hence, at the end of the book there appears the fervent prayer for further descendents (4:11-12). The repetitive phrase "call a name" (4:11, 14) and the fact that the child was considered to be a son of Naomi herself (4:17) reinforces the importance of posterity as the primary means of preserving memory and significance. By contrast, the man in the book who is unnamed-the one who refused to marry Ruth-

⁵ The repetition of Naomi's aloneness in the Hebrew text is striking. First, "she was left, she and her two sons" (1:3). Then, "she was left alone, the woman without her two children and without her husband" (1:5). Finally, in her attempted separation from her daughters-in-law, she frankly conceded that there were no more sons in her womb for them, so she said, "It is more bitter for me than for you," because the daughters-in-law could remarry and rear children, but Naomi was left totally without posterity (1:11-13).

⁶ Wood, *JBC*, 604.

⁷ The word **חסד** (*hesed* = loyal love) is best understood in connection with the idea of covenant. It is the attitude of loyalty and faithfulness that one exhibits toward covenant obligations, cf. N. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946), pp. 124ff. This word appears several times in Ruth (1:8; 2:20; 3:10).

disappears entirely from the pedigree of Israel.

Ruth, the Proselyte

The marriage of Israelites to foreigners was by no means unknown, in spite of a concern for racial purity. Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David and Solomon all had out-of-the-clan wives (Ge. 25:1-4; 41:45; Ex. 2:21; Nu. 12:1; Jg. 3:5-6; 2 Sa. 3:3; 1 Kg. 11:1). Indeed, the Torah provided for such marriage in special cases (cf. Dt. 21:10-14), though it was generally forbidden (Ex. 34:15-16; Dt. 7:1-4). Ruth, however, was in a somewhat different category, because she was willing to become a worshiper of Yahweh while abandoning her native gods (1:15-16). Her oath, which was extremely serious in ancient times, calls Yahweh as her witness in regard to her new direction of faith.⁸

Naomi, Bitter and Empty

The first act in the dramatic story closes with Naomi and Ruth's return to Bethlehem, the house of bread. Bereft of all future posterity, Naomi utters the bitter words, "Call me Bitterness!" A decade earlier, when she left Bethlehem with her husband, she had thought she was empty, since the house of bread was suffering from drought. Now she realized that what she lacked in food was more than compensated for by a husband and two sons. Ten years later, she was stripped of everything, so that, as she said, "I left full, but Yahweh brought me back empty" (1:21). The evil of which she speaks is natural evil, that is, evil consequences, not moral evil.

The final line in 1:22, the fact that the two widows arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest, is a teaser that will become significant later. It forms the prelude for the second act in the drama.

A Happy Coincidence (2)

If one were to describe this section in modern vernacular, it would be "girl meets boy." As it stands, the Hebrew text indicates that the meeting of Ruth and Boaz was one of those happy coincidences that was "meant to be."

The author captures the wonder, surprise and excitement of that meeting in two Hebrew idioms (2:3-4). The first is the phrase "now she happened to come upon...", a phrase that rendered literally would be "her chance chanced upon..."⁹ Of

⁸ The expression, "Yahweh may do whatever he pleases with me and even treat me with more severity [my translation]" (1:17), is a standard oath formula in the Old Testament. Quite literally, it reads, "Thus may Yahweh do to me and thus he may do over and beyond..."

⁹ This use of the infinitive absolute is a way of emphasizing the verbal idea, and here it serves to amplify the wonder and meaning of this special moment, cf. T. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (New York: Scribners, 1971),

course, the reader is not meant to take the chance meeting as a coincidence only. Rather, the providential hand of Yahweh is behind it all (cf. 2:19-20).

The second idiom is the familiar Hebrew “behold,” a word that means more than just “look” in Hebrew syntax. The force of the word is to emphasize the immediacy, importance, and the here-and-nowness of the situation. It is the Hebrew way of saying to the reader, “You are there,”¹⁰ and hence, carries the force of, “At just the perfect moment...” (or, “just then,” so NIV).

The Poor in the Land

This part of the story affords a brief look at the poor in ancient Israel, one of Yahweh’s special concerns. An important aspect of Israelite law was the favor Yahweh showed toward the poor, a favor expressed in special laws for their benefit. The poor were God’s special charge (Job 5:15; Ps. 9:12; 10:12-15; 34:6), and he granted them protection in the courts (Ex. 23:3), exemption from interest payments (Ex. 22:25; Lv. 25:35-36), and gleaning privileges (Lv. 19:9-10; 23:22; Dt. 24:19). The accusation of oppressing the poor was particularly serious in God’s eyes (Is. 1:23; Eze. 22:6-7; Am. 2:6, 13-14; 4:1-2, 12; 5:11-14).

When Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem, they were the epitome of poverty. It was well for them that the barley harvest was just beginning.

The Redeemer-Kinsman

The reader’s introduction to Boaz in 2:1 marks him as a relative of Naomi’s deceased husband. Later, in 2:20, Naomi exclaims to Ruth that their newfound benefactor was a close relative, or as the Hebrew idiom puts it, “near to us.” The importance of this fact lies in the ancient custom of levirate marriage,¹¹ the provision that a brother-in-law might marry his brother’s widow in order to produce an heir (Dt. 25:5-6; cf. Ge. 38:6-8; Mt. 22:24-28). This practice not only was a matter of Israelite law, but it was observed by various of Israel’s Canaanite neighbors as well as the Assyrians, Hittites, Hurrians and the citizens of Ugarit.¹² Furthermore, in this story the laws of levirate marriage are tied to the general laws of the redeeming of real estate that had been sold (cf. Lv. 25:25; Je. 32:6-12).

An important word group appears in Ruth that describes the position of one who would marry the widow and reclaim the clan’s property that presumably had

p. 158.

¹⁰ Lambdin, p. 168.

¹¹ The word “levirate” comes from the Latin *levir*, which translates the Hebrew *yabam* (= brother-in-law), R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Social Institutions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), I.37.

¹² Vaux, I.38.

been sold when Elimelech first moved to Moab.

לָאָץ (verb meaning “to reclaim, redeem, buy back”, cf. 3:13; 4:4, 6)

לָאָץ (noun meaning “deliverer, redeemer,” 2:20)

הַלְאָץ (noun meaning “right of redemption,” 4:6-7)

Boaz was a redeemer-kinsman, that is, one who because of bloodline was qualified to reclaim clan property and/or to fulfil levirate marriage obligations. In a religious sense, this same concept is used of Yahweh’s reclaiming of Israel from Egypt (Ex. 6:6; 15:13), and later, Babylon (Is. 43:1; 48:10). In the New Testament, this concept centers upon the atoning death of Jesus (1 Pe. 1:18-19).

Yahweh’s Providential Care

As alluded to earlier, the reader must not miss the religious context of the story. Yahweh not only is the one “under whose wings Ruth came to take refuge” (2:12), the tender metaphor of a tiny bird snuggling under the wings of a foster mother (cf. Ps. 17:8; 36:7; 63:7),¹³ he also is the protector of Naomi, the widow, as well as all those who show loyalty (2:12; 4:14). The frequent use of Yahweh’s name is more than incidental, and it is intended to suggest his providential care, even though it reflects the Hebrew idiomatic manner of social greetings and conversations:

“Yahweh be with you!” (2:4)

“May Yahweh bless you!” (2:4)

“May Yahweh repay your deed, and may your reward from
Yahweh be rich” (2:12)

“He [Boaz] will be blessed by Yahweh, who has not abandoned
his loyal love” (2:20)

Yahweh is never far out of the picture, and even as Boaz prays, “May Yahweh repay your deed,” he scarcely realizes that he himself is to be Yahweh’s reward to Ruth. Naomi, for her part, exhibits the first budding of hope when Ruth returns. However vague at that time, she anticipates that Yahweh has not forgotten the dilemma of her family that has no heir (2:20). It is in this sense that she says, “Yahweh has not abandoned his hesed (= loyal love) toward the living and toward the dead” (2:20).

¹³ A Cundall and L. Morris, *Judges and Ruth [TOTC]* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1968), p. 277.

Yahweh's Universal Care

A further theme that should not be missed is Yahweh's concern for the alien. Out of the twelve occasions where Ruth is mentioned, five of them specify that she is "the Moabite" (1:22; 2:2, 21; 4:5, 10). Furthermore, her own frank admission of her alien status to Boaz (2:10, 13) emphasizes that Yahweh's concern is not bound to a narrow nationalism.

The Demand and the Dilemma (3)

Good stories seldom come to a successful conclusion without a major deterrent. This certainly is the case in Ruth's story. The happy coincidence of Ruth's introduction to Boaz promised rich results, and to enhance these possibilities, Naomi coached her widowed daughter-in-law to make a bold demand for levirate marriage. However, an unforeseen circumstance arose to bar the way, and the third act of this little drama ends with a period of suspenseful waiting.

The Plan

Ruth's promising encounter with Boaz and the ensuing days of gleaning in his field inspired Naomi. The situation was perfect! Boaz obviously was extending special care to the young widow, and he was a redeemer-kinsman as well. Still, he had made no overture toward Ruth aside from his general kindness. Perhaps his age¹⁴ or Ruth's nationality made him reluctant. In any case, Naomi determined to precipitate a response.

She carefully instructed Ruth to prepare herself as attractively as possible. This included a bath and perfume.¹⁵ Then Ruth was to go to the threshingfloor where Boaz would be winnowing grain, the process by which the stalks were laid out on a flat area, often a surface of rock, and pounded to loosen the heads. The wind would then blow away the chaff.¹⁶ Ruth was not to greet Boaz, however, but to remain unrecognized. Boaz would sleep at the threshingfloor to prevent theft, as would the other workers, and Ruth was to note where he lay down. In the night, she was to uncover him and lay down beside him.¹⁷

¹⁴ There are linguistic as well as contextual reasons (cf. 3:10) why Boaz probably was Ruth's senior by a number of years, cf. E. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), p. 116.

¹⁵ The LXX adds "and rub yourself with myrrh," and if this is original, it would mean that Ruth was to make herself as enticing as possible, cf. Campbell, p. 120. Notice the other uses of perfume or myrrh in the context of romance, cf. Song 1:3, 13; 3:6; 4:14; 5:1, 5, 14; Ps. 45:8; Est. 2:12; Pr. 7:17.

¹⁶ H. Richardson, *IDB* (1962) IV.636.

¹⁷ The Hebrew phrase is literally "the place of his feet," but this expression is a euphemism for the genital area, cf. Holladay, p. 332. Moffat renders the expression as "uncover his waist." If this is indeed the meaning of Naomi's instructions, then Ruth's action would have constituted a bold invitation for levirate marriage. Even so, it would be a

The Bold Invitation for Levirate Marriage

Naomi's instructions to Ruth may seem strange to modern ears, and our knowledge of the marriage customs prevalent in Israel is limited. However, we must remember that what Naomi was doing was certainly within her rights under levirate law. The extreme measures taken by Tamar in securing posterity for her deceased husband formed a precedent (Ge. 38:6-19), and especially, Judah's pronouncement that Tamar's actions were more righteous than his own (Ge. 38:24-26). While the language of Ruth's action is ambiguous,¹⁸ one should not conclude that this was an act of promiscuity, for such a judgment would, as Wood has said, "clash violently with the over-all character manifested by the women through the book."¹⁹ Rather, Ruth's action was a bold invitation to levirate marriage, and it was precisely engineered to put Boaz in the position of having to make a decision regarding her. Ruth possibly had other invitations for marriage (3:10),²⁰ but in faithfulness to her deceased husband she was willing to wait for a kinsman-redeemer.

Ruth's invitation to Boaz to "spread the corner of your skirt over your concubine" was apparently a gesture symbolizing engagement for marriage (cf. Eze. 16:8), a custom also practiced in early Arabia.²¹

Ruth's Double Hesed

Boaz clearly recognized the sterling quality of the young woman who confronted him.²² He called attention to her two acts of hesed (= loyal love), the first being Ruth's loyalty to Naomi in returning to Bethlehem and in gleaning to

mistake to accuse Ruth of outright seduction or a trifling promiscuous liaison, for the fulfillment of the levirate marriage custom is what is primarily in view, cf. Morris, pp. 286-287; Wood, *JBC*, p. 608. It is to be remembered that levirate marriage was Ruth's right by Israelite law. Furthermore, this right once exonerated Tamar, an ancestor of Naomi's, when she seduced Judah in order to bear a child in behalf of her deceased husband, Judah's son (Ge. 38).

¹⁸ For detailed discussion of the nuance of ambiguity in the Hebrew text, see Campbell, pp. 130ff.

¹⁹ Wood, p. 608.

²⁰ The phrase "in that you have not run after the young men" might mean that Ruth had received proposals for marriage, cf. Campbell, p. 124. The point, of course, is that if Ruth merely had been interested in a sexual escapade, she would have consorted with a younger man. Her former action of faithfulness to Naomi is now surpassed by her devotion expressed in her willingness to raise up for her deceased husband posterity in Israel under the levirate custom.

²¹ M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20 [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), p. 277.

²² The Hebrew text literally reads that Boaz awoke "trembling," but while such an expression might suggest that Boaz was cold (which certainly could have been the case if his upper legs had been exposed), it could also mean that he was startled, which no doubt he was! The niphal imperfect of the verb *laphat* means to twist, turn or feel around, cf. *BDB*, p. 542; Holladay, p. 178. This may mean that he turned over (so RSV, NEB), that he bent forward (so NASB), or that he felt around in the dark (Holladay).

support her, and the second being her loyalty to her deceased husband in securing a levirate marriage to provide him with posterity. Ruth, as a Moabitess, would not have been expected to show such loyalty. It would have been far easier for her either to return home to Moab, or if not, at least to begin a new life altogether rather than dedicate her first son to a dead spouse's memory.

The Dilemma

Boaz' willingness to marry Ruth was duly expressed. He would gladly act responsibly and properly. Now, however, a shocking surprise awaited Ruth. Boaz was not her nearest kinsman! Levirate marriage always proceeded on the grounds that the redeemer should be the nearest kin, preferably the full brother of the deceased, and if not, the next nearest relative. Though it seems unlikely that Naomi would have been ignorant of this fact, it may well be that a ten year absence had created different circumstances with which she was not familiar. In any case, this revelation by Boaz could only have come as a shock to Ruth, who in all events would have had a limited knowledge of Naomi's family. Furthermore, as future developments would show, this nearer kinsman was not a man of selflessness, but he was narrowly concerned with his own interests.

The Morning of Suspense

Ruth must have returned home with a racing heart. She was so close, yet so far! Naomi, however, had not misplaced her confidence in Boaz' integrity. She calmed her daughter-in-law, and together they waited to see how it would all turn out.

The Denouement (4:1-17)

Those familiar with short stories know that the term denouement refers to the final unraveling of the main dramatic complication. In the story of Ruth, the third act of the drama ends in that morning of supreme suspense while Ruth and her mother-in-law awaited the outcome of Boaz' confrontation with the nearer kinsman.

The Legal Procedure

The gate of ancient cities served as a defense station during invasion and as a sort of civic center in times of peace where news could be passed, business transacted and judicial matters settled.²³ Sometimes, city gates were constructed with plastered benches upon which citizens could sit while negotiating legal

²³ C. McCown, *IDB* (1962) II.355.

matters.

Elders in an ancient Israelite city were the mature men with legal competence in the community. The word *zaqen* (= elder) is derived from the word *zaqan* (= beard), so that an elder was literally “a man with a full beard,” that is, mature.²⁴ The city elders, since they were not elected representatives, often comprised a rather large body (cf. Jg. 8:14). It is from these men that Boaz selected a smaller group to hear his case.

The Mystery Man

It is significant that the kinsman nearer Ruth than Boaz is unnamed. In fact, the Hebrew expression is a double noun that roughly corresponds to our English phrases “so-and-so” or “whoever-you-are”.²⁵ As the story goes on to recount, he was unwilling to perform his levirate duty to Ruth in order to preserve her deceased husband’s name. The supreme irony is that his own name died, an event that eloquently advertised his stinginess.

Boaz’ Presentation of His Case

When Boaz approached the nearer kinsman, he adroitly introduced his case with no initial reference to Ruth. He explained that Naomi was selling her husband’s clan property, and this necessitated that the buyer be the nearest kinsman (cf. Lv. 25:25; Je. 32:6-12). If the nearer kinsman did not wish to claim his redemption rights, Boaz indicated his own willingness to step in as next-in-line. The nearer kinsman, however, responded with enthusiasm. To buy Elimelech’s property was nothing less than a windfall, for while Naomi’s sale of the land was due to her poverty, the fact that she was old and had no surviving heirs meant that it would not have to be sold back at a later date (cf. Lv. 25:25-28). It could be completely absorbed into his own family holdings.

Boaz, however, cleverly disconcerted his “no-name” relative by springing on him the fact that the purchase of the land also involved the redemption of Ruth. It meant that he would have to fulfill levirate marriage obligations. This, in turn, changed what had appeared to be a windfall into an act of selfless piety with no material benefit whatsoever. If the man married Ruth, the property would belong to Ruth’s first son, a son that under levirate law would be credited to Elimelech’s and Mahlon’s family (cf. Dt. 25:5-6). Furthermore, if he had any other children by

²⁴ Holladay, p. 91; G. Davies, *IDB* (1962) II.72-73.

²⁵ The meaning of the expression is not as clear as could be hoped. The word *p’loni* (= a certain one) combined in construct with the word *al’moni* (a certain man) yields the idiomatic “a certain one of a certain man,” an expression that probably is comparable to the English “so-and-so.” The intended irony is that the man who refused to preserve the name of Ruth’s deceased husband was himself unnamed in history.

Ruth, they would become potential heirs of his own property along with his other sons. If he exercised his right of redemption, it could only be from the purest of motives. In the end, he would be left with no extra property, one extra wife, more mouths to feed, and the possibility of more heirs to further divide his own clan property. Such a situation the nearer kinsman was not willing to embrace.

The Attestation

The custom in Israel regarding the validation of such a transaction was the public gift of a sandal, a practice that seems to have been used by other nations as well.²⁶ A similar but more severe custom was observed if a full brother-in-law refused levirate marriage (Dt. 25:7-10). The elders and the crowd who had gathered witnessed this proceeding with great interest and offered their congratulations to Boaz.

The conclusion of the story emphasizes that the family of Naomi and Elimelech was not left without posterity, an emphasis that centers around the preservation of the deceased husband's name.

*Call a name in Bethlehem (4:11)*²⁷

*His name will be called in Israel (4:14)*²⁸

It should be observed that not only the fertility of Israel's wives were remembered, but also the fertility of Tamar, whose situation was so similar to that of Ruth. In the end, it could be said that Naomi-not merely Ruth and Boaz-gave birth to a son!

The Appendix (4:18-22)

The story of Ruth concludes with a genealogy linking Perez, the son of Judah (Ge. 38:27-30), with David (cf. 1 Chr. 2:3-5, 10-15). This connection was important, for the Book of Ruth serves as an explanation as to how a king so greatly revered as David had blood connections to the Moabites (cf. 1 Sa. 22:3-4).

It is likely that the names mentioned in the genealogies are not consecutive, as one might expect in a English family tree, since the Hebrew ben can mean not

²⁶ The exchange of sandals as a legal attestation is also found in the Nuzi texts, cf. Cundall and Morris, p. 307.

²⁷ The exact meaning of the idiom is uncertain, but it probably has something to do with making one's name well known, cf. Holladay, p. 323.

²⁸ The idiom here is similar to that in 4:11, and the context seems to suggest the wish for fame is directed toward the child.

only “son” but “grandson” or even the more general “descendent.” Similarly, the verb *yalad* (= to father) need not be taken in the immediate sense but may be taken in the extended sense of “to become the ancestor of.”²⁹ Boaz’ apparent grandfather, Nahshon, was the father-in-law of Aaron (Ex. 6:23; Nu. 1:7; 7:12), while Boaz’ apparent father was the husband of Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho (Mt. 1:5). Yet if this is so, it would require only two generations to cover more than 250 years, a span far too long for the names listed.³⁰ Thus, one should conclude that the genealogy is selective rather than comprehensive.

Ruth and The Christian Community

Not only was Ruth in the lineage of David, according to the New Testament she was in the family lineage of Jesus (Mt. 1:5; Lk. 3:23, 32). It is particularly in Matthew’s genealogy that this connection is specified. Furthermore, the story of Ruth illustrates admirably the theme of redemption, a theme that is central to the life, ministry and meaning of the Christian gospel.

The Women in Matthew’s Genealogy (1:3, 5-6)

Besides Mary, there are four women listed in Matthew’s genealogy. This fact is remarkable in itself, since it was not normal to find feminine names in a Jewish pedigree.³¹ Two motifs are common in the lives of all four women.

First, the four women represent the foreign barrier that separated Jew from Gentile. Tamar was probably a Canaanite like Judah’s first wife (cf. Ge. 38:2-3). Rahab was certainly a Canaanite, albeit one who accepted the faith of Israel (Jos. 2:1; 6:25). Ruth, of course, was the Moabite widow who accepted her mother-in-law’s faith, while Bathsheba was the wife of a Hittite soldier and presumably Hittite herself (cf. 2 Sa. 11:3). This alien motif depicts a universalism in the lineage of the Messiah. The Christ was for the world, not merely for the Jew (note this same alien motif in Matthew’s story of the Magi’s visit and the brief home of Jesus in Egypt).

Second, all four women confronted sexual irregularities peculiar to their individual circumstances. Tamar was denied levirate marriage and thereby was forced to resort to seduction in order to gain her rights. Rahab lived as a prostitute before accepting the faith of Israel and marrying into the clan of Judah. Ruth was forced to press for levirate marriage after accepting the faith of Israel. Bathsheba committed adultery with David, and later in life she bore him Solomon, the heir to

²⁹ T. Mitchell and A. Milland, *NBD* (1962), p. 409.

³⁰ C. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, trans. J. Martin (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 493.

³¹ W. Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), I.16.

the throne. Such a motif is surely more than incidental in view of the rumor that must have attached itself to Jesus' birth (cf. Lk. 3:23; 13:55). Matthew may well be suggesting that the unusual circumstances surrounding the virgin birth of Jesus and the stigma that accompanied it was no hindrance to God's purposes, and in fact, he may be boldly intimating that the divine plan arose above such concerns.

The Redemptive Theme

Redemption in the Old Testament is the reclaiming or buying back of something or someone. The comparable concept in the New Testament is the securing of a release on the basis of payment.³² As such, Jesus redeemed humans from the power of sin, guilt, death and the devil by his sacrificial work (Mk. 10:45; 1 Co. 6:20; 7:23; 1 Ti. 2:5-6; 1 Pe. 1:18-19). It is in order to recall the qualifications of the go'el (redeemer) as illustrated in the story of Ruth. They apply to Jesus directly, the ultimate go'el for the human race. The go'el must have been a close relative, and Jesus, who was equal with God, did not cling to his prerogatives but was incarnate in a human body (Jn. 1:14; Phil. 2:6-8; He. 2:14-15). Furthermore, the go'el must have been both able and willing to exercise the right of redemption. In his whole life, Jesus demonstrated his ability and willingness to exercise his right to redeem (Mk. 14:32-42; Ro. 5:6-8; Rv. 5:9-10). The properties of redemption that are so important for the New Testament was vividly illustrated in the redemption of Ruth.

³² See the extensive discussion in L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 11ff.

The Song of Songs

Each year at the Passover, the traditional Jewish seder meal is interspersed with the reading of selected biblical passages, some of the most important being from the Song of Songs. This tradition presumes that the love poetry in the Song reflects Yahweh's choice of Israel for his bride, a theme that one finds several times in the prophets (cf. Jer. 3:6-20; Eze. 16:4-14; Hos. 2:14-23). Such an interpretation is old and dates back at least to the Jewish Mishnah (c. AD 2nd Century), which specifies the readings for the Jewish festivals.³³

The Hebrew title of the book, "The Song of Songs," is taken from the first line. Idiomatically, it means "the best of songs" or "the most beautiful of songs" (the Hebrew idiom is a superlative). The phrase "to Solomon", like the parallel phrase "to David" in the Psalms, is more debatable. It can be taken as "by Solomon", thus indicating authorship, but it can equally be taken as "for Solomon" or "in honor of Solomon". In either case, the superscription in 1:1 is usually understood to be by a later hand.³⁴ In Christian tradition, the book also is known by its Latin name, Canticles.

Author, Date and Canonicity

Formally, the book is anonymous. Traditionally, due to the superscription "to Solomon," the author has been supposed to be the great king, David's son, whose songs numbered more than a thousand (1 Kg. 4:32). As we have seen, however, the superscription may not be an indication of authorship. While the name Solomon appears several times in the book (1:5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11-12), it always appears in the third person on the lips of one of the speakers, which is of little helping in determining authorship one way or another. The presence of Persian and Greek loan words have convinced many scholars that the book is too late for Solomon.³⁵ On the other hand, loan words are not an absolute determinative, since there was considerable cultural exchange in the ancient Near East. In any case, while loan words may reflect upon the final form of a literary work, they do not necessarily eliminate the possibility of an earlier primary

³³ Megillah.

³⁴ The use of the relative word **אֲשֶׁר** in the superscription is different than the relative particles in the remainder of the book, leading most scholars to the conclusion that it was added later.

³⁵ For instance, in 3:9 the word **אֶפְרָיִם** derives from the Greek **φορμα** (= chariot), while in 4:13 the word **פָּרְדֵּס** derives from the Persian word for "park" (and from which we get the English word "paradise", cf. R. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), p. 1050.

author.³⁶ Solomon must remain a potential candidate. The Talmud, on the other hand, credited the book to the “men of Hezekiah”,³⁷ who also collected many of the proverbs (cf. Pro. 25:1). Most contemporary scholars are doubtful about Solomon as an author, and not a few see the book as a collection of love poems by more than one author. In the end, the question of authorship and dating must be left open. Suffice it to say that most scholars prefer a later date rather than an early one, largely based on linguistics.

Though the canonicity of the Song was questioned by the Jewish rabbis at Jamnia in the late 1st century, it is widely believed that its allegorical interpretation as a celebration of Yahweh’s love and choice of Israel seemed adequate for retaining its recognition.³⁸ However, Gottwald is probably correct in saying that the allegorical interpretation followed canonicity.³⁹ Rabbi Akiba at Jamnia offered the dictum, “For all the world is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.”⁴⁰ Among Christians, the canonicity of the Song was never officially questioned.⁴¹

Interpretation

The most significant issue with the regard to the Song is hermeneutical. The fact that it contains erotic love poetry as it explores the themes of beauty, courtship, separation, reunion and sexual consummation means that it is unique in the documents of either the Old or New Testaments. Furthermore, like Esther, the book has no explicit religious content, and there is no reference to God.⁴² In general, there are four major interpretive approaches to the book.

In the allegorical model, the book is interpreted as an extended metaphor of God’s love for his people-Israel, if one is Jewish, and the church, if one is Christian. This interpretation was dominant both among Jews and Christians until

³⁶ So, O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, trans. P. Ackroyd (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), pp. 490-491.

³⁷ Baba Bathra, 15a.

³⁸ F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1988), p. 35.

³⁹ N. Gottwald, *IDB* (1962) IV.422.

⁴⁰ M. Yadayim 3.5.

⁴¹ However, some individuals questioned the Song’s canonicity when the clear meaning of its eroticism became apparent, such as, Sebastien Castellion (1544), the disciple of John Calvin, William Whiston (1723), J. G. Semler (1771) and Eduard Reuss (1879), cf. Gottwald, *IDB* (1962) IV.422.

⁴² It can be debated in 8:6 that the final word in the verse might be rendered “flame of Yah,” but even if so, the religious sentiment of the book is exceedingly sparse.

relatively modern times. To be sure, Theodore of Mopseustia believed the book should be taken at face value, but his view was condemned as heresy in AD 553 at the Second Council of Constantinople.⁴³ Origen (185?-254?), by contrast, wrote extensively on the Song as an allegory of Christ and the church. Most interpreters up to and including the reformers followed this lead.⁴⁴ Sebastien Castellion (1515-1563), mentioned earlier (see footnote 41), was an exception, and he refused to allegorize the work. So firm was the Protestant conviction concerning the allegorical interpretation, that Castellion's opinion prevented him from being ordained by the Reformed Church in Geneva.⁴⁵ The allegorical approach immediately avoids the problem of eroticism, unless, of course, one holds that it is a double entendre, describing both the romantic love of a man and a woman as well as the covenant love of God and his people.

The problem of the allegorical model is its subjectivism. Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), for instance, interpreted "between my breasts" (1:12) to refer to the Old and New Testaments, and "I have come into my garden...eaten my honeycomb...and drunk my wine" (5:1) as a reference to the last supper. The expression, "I am dark" (1:5), was taken by Origen to refer to the blackness of sin. The flowers that appear on the earth in spring (2:12) supposedly was an allegory of the preaching of the apostles, according to Pseudo-Cassiodorus.⁴⁶ Almost everyone from Moses and Aaron to the Messiah to the virgin Mary have been found in the Song through allegorization. The plausibility of such imaginative interpretation militates against the method. Furthermore, the medieval negativity toward marriage, including the role of celibacy for the clergy, probably contributed to the allegorical model. Celibacy was believed to be virtually the only way to live in chastity, and virginity was regarded as especially pious. Hence, the medieval church could read the Song at a spiritual level, even its most erotic passages, while still condemning eroticism at the human level.⁴⁷

In more modern times, the cultic interpretation, coming from the History of Religions school, lies at the polar extreme from the allegorical method. Here, the poems in the Song are believed to have been borrowed from Canaanite mythology and the ancient Near Eastern fertility cults. Since both the Ba'al cult (Canaanite)

⁴³ Harrison, p. 1055.

⁴⁴ Indeed, in early copies of the Authorized Version (KJV), the book was sectioned off as follows: Chapters 1-3, The mutual love of Christ and his church; Chapter 4, The graces of the church; Chapter 5, Christ's love to it; Chapters 6-7, The church professeth her faith and desire; Chapter 8, The church's love to Christ, cf. E. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 333.

⁴⁵ Bruce, p. 102.

⁴⁶ See H. Rowley, "The Interpretation of the Song of Songs," *JTS* (Vol. 38, 1937), pp. 337-363.

⁴⁷ D. Kinlaw, "Song of Songs," *EBC* (1991) V.1205-1206.

and the Tammuz cult (Mesopotamian) produced considerable erotic literature, this viewpoint suggests that the Song is an edited collection of various pre-existing love songs that have been sanitized and editorialized to make them compatible with Hebrew culture. Such a view, of course, is incompatible with the idea of Scripture as the Word of God. Even apart from the issue of inspiration, it seems a considerable stretch to argue that the Jews would have canonized pagan fertility rituals and included them in their canon of sacred writings.

The dramatic interpretation has been quite popular among Protestant scholars for the last couple centuries. Here, the various poems in the Song are believed to be stretched over an historical story-line. The point of this interpretation is not that the Song was intended for the stage, but rather, that it bears evidence of a dramatic plot. The fact that the Song is divided into speeches, many of which can be easily identified as male or female due to the gender inflection of Hebrew, lends itself to this approach.⁴⁸

Two major forms of this interpretation exist. In the first, there are two main characters, Solomon of Jerusalem and the Shulammite girl from the country. After falling in love with her, Solomon took her back to Jerusalem to become his queen, and in so doing, rose above the level of ordinary human attraction to the purity of genuine love.⁴⁹ The conversations between the two lovers is punctuated with the refrain of a chorus, the “daughters of Jerusalem.” The second form of dramatic interpretation has three main characters, Solomon, the Shulammite and the Shulammite’s shepherd-lover from the country. Here, Solomon seeks to win the country maiden for his harem (or perhaps even takes her there by force), but though she goes to Jerusalem, the attractions of the court finally fail to win her. She longs for her true love, the country shepherd at home, and in the end, she rejects Solomon and flees to her true lover. In this “love triangle” interpretation, the “daughters of Jerusalem”, which usually are taken to be members of Solomon’s harem, function much as does the chorus in a classical Greek play. In the first of the dramatic interpretations, Solomon is a hero; in the second, he is the villain.

Doubt about the dramatic interpretation arises because among the Semitics there simply were no literary dramas using plot, movement and conversation to develop a story line. Herbert puts it bluntly: “To suppose that Canticles is a drama seems to suggest the appearance of an art form with neither ancestry nor posterity;

⁴⁸ In the older English versions, the gender identity of the speakers was not always apparent. Most modern translations, however, clearly label the speakers, as in “Bride” and “Bridegroom” (NEB, NASBmg), “Lover” and “Beloved” (NIV) or “The Beloved” and “The Shulammite” (NKJB).

⁴⁹ One of the earliest, and best, examples of this dramatic approach is in the commentary of Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, trans. M. Easton (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).

as such it would have no place in the life of a people.”⁵⁰

The lyrical interpretation is the one most widely held by contemporary scholars. It views the book as a collection of wedding songs by multiple authors praising both bride and groom. In this view, it is neither allegorical nor the borrowed literature from Israel’s pagan neighbors. Rather, the Song celebrates love in the biblical ideal of Genesis 2:25, “The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.” It parallels the ideal of the sanctity of sexuality in marriage expressed in the Wisdom Literature (Pro. 5:15-19). It anticipates the mutuality of the marriage partners described in the New Testament (cf. Ep. 5:21-33). In the culture of the ancient Near East, wedding festivities usually lasted for several days. The songs in the Song are held to be compositions for such a wedding festival.

One difficulty for the lyrical interpretation is that there is only one clear reference to marriage (3:6-11). To be sure, some interpreters have found various wedding themes, but marriage is not required in all these passages.⁵¹ On the other hand, if the poems surround a wedding festivity, then the anticipation as well as the consummation of marriage prevent the lyrics from being promiscuous.

Structure

The question of structure cannot be divorced from the question of interpretation. The two major approaches to structure are that the Song is a unity of about a half dozen poems with thematic continuity or that the Song is a collection of as many as thirty-four disparate poems. The former lends itself well to the dramatic interpretation, but it does not require it. The latter fits the lyrical model. In favor of the former are the various refrains, such as, awakening (2:7; 3:5; 8:4), movement (2:17; 4:6), possession (2:16; 6:3) and embrace (2:6; 8:3). In favor of the latter is the fact that any of the poems can stand alone and be read in isolation.

In the present treatment, we shall follow the unitary approach that the book offers a structure with five major interrelated themes.⁵² They are:

- Anticipation (1:2-2:7)
- Found, and Lost-and Found (2:8-3:5)
- Consummation (3:6-5:1)
- Lost and Found (5:2-8:4)
- Affirmation (8:5-8:14)

⁵⁰ A. Herbert, “The Song of Solomon,” *Peake’s Commentary on the Bible*, ed. M. Black and H. Rowley (Hong Kong: Nelson, 1962), p. 469.

⁵¹ Wurthwein, for instance, finds some twenty-four references to marriage, cf. R. Murphy, *IDBSup* (1976) p. 837.

⁵² G. Carr, *The Song of Solomon [TOTC]* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1984), p. 45

This approach is less elaborate than either of the dramatic interpretations, but it also does justice to the unifying themes and refrains in the book.

Anticipation (1:1-2:7)

The Young Woman Speaks (1:2-4a)

The musings of couples anticipating union are universal. The opening line after the superscription, “Let him kiss me...,” sets the mood for reverie (1:2a). Kissing is an ancient expression of affection, and most appearances of this word in biblical literature are reserved for relatives and friends without any romantic connotations. Here, however, the plural form of “kisses,” idiomatically rendered “smother me with kisses” (NEB), sets the expression apart from simply familial greetings.

It is significant that the young woman speaks first. In a patriarchal culture, this feature is all the more remarkable, since it depicts the couple on egalitarian terms. Her ardor is as strong as his and can be expressed as passionately as his. In fact, in the Song the woman speaks more frequently than does the man. There is complete freedom of dialogue between the two of them.

Special comment is in order concerning wine, since it is mentioned several times in the Song (1:2, 4; 4:10; 5:1; 7:2, 9; 8:2). Wine, because it is a mild intoxicant, is an appropriate analogy for romantic love, which is an even stronger intoxicant. Used moderately, wine delights (Ps. 104:15), but love delights even more!

The abrupt shift from the third person to the second person (1:2b), while it seems awkward to us, is not unusual in Hebrew poetry. Furthermore, it emphasizes that the desire for romantic expression, which began in the young woman’s mind, quickly assumes a material reality by the young man’s presence. The love extolled in the Song is no platonic relationship. It is physical, sensual and sexual. It stimulates all the five senses of smell (fragrance), sound (the speaking of the lover’s name), touch (kissing), taste (more delightful than wine) and sight (dark and lovely). The striking simile, “Your name is like perfume (lit., ‘oil’) poured out,” bypasses the expected comment on the sound of her name as it is spoken and replaces it with a description of scent (1:3a). Oils were the base for various perfumes, hence the NIV rendering “perfume.”

So, the object of this young woman’s affection is highly desirable (1:3b)! What she passionately hopes for, of course, is privacy with him (1:4a). The introduction of the term “king” has become a critical point for interpreters (1:4b). If one follows the dramatic interpretation of two lovers, then the statement that

“the king has brought me into his chambers” is a declaration that the Shulammite girl is now ready to consummate her marriage with Solomon. If one follows the love triangle drama, then the king is the antagonist who brings the girl into his harem against her will. The third possibility is that royal terms like “king” are simply the exalted language of the wedding ceremony. Some scholars have pointed out that Near Eastern wedding festivities include the bride and groom playing the roles of queen and king for the wedding week.⁵³ Similarly, the identity of the chorus is sharply debated. Who make up the “we”? Are they members of Solomon’s harem who admire the king?⁵⁴ Are they the women of Jerusalem? Or, are they simply the friends and attendants of the young lady who rejoice in her upcoming marriage? The text remains ambiguous.

Her Self-consciousness (1:4b-7)

All young love is self-conscious. Perceived flaws, however minor, become major catastrophes. Here, the young woman, while admitting that the admiration of her lover by others is well-deserved, reflects on the darkness of her own complexion (1:4b-5).⁵⁵ She has been deeply sun-tanned because her brothers compelled her to work the vineyards at home (1:6a). Her own “vineyard,” her personal appearance, she has been forced to neglect (1:6b).

Her sun-tanned complexion notwithstanding, the young woman does not hesitate to boldly inquire after her mate. She comes from a family of vineyard farmers and he from a family of shepherds. She is eager to follow the trail of the flock to be with him during the traditional noonday rest period, when both humans and animals seek shade from the oppressive heat of the East (1:7a). Still, she does not want to be mistaken as promiscuous. The trade of the veiled cult prostitutes who followed the shepherds in hopes of offering their services is not at all what she was about (1:7b; cf. Ge. 38:14-15)! She is available to one lover only-her true mate-and she seeks to be with him in solitude.

The Young Shepherd Responds (1:8-11)

For the first time, the young man speaks, responding to her query about the path of the flock. If she is self-conscious and shy, he offers encouragement and the affirmation that he considers her the most beautiful of all, sun-tan notwithstanding!

⁵³ F. Knutson, *ISBE* (1979) I.607. These ancient roles of royalty also are preserved in the Eastern Orthodox wedding traditions.

⁵⁴ The Hebrew pronoun “you” is male gender specific, so the object of admiration cannot be the girl.

⁵⁵ The hyperbole “dark like the tents of Kedar”, a region of Bedouins near Damascus, compares her complexion to the virtually black color of woven goat-hair tents.

If she does not know where to find him she can simply follow the tracks of the herd, bringing with her the flocks of her own family (1:8).

Now follows a series of exclamatory praises extolling the beauty of the young woman. Her grace and bearing were as striking as a prancing young filly leading a chariot of Pharaoh. The point of this simile is usually missed if the modern reader is not aware that Egyptian chariots were led by pairs of stallions, not mares.⁵⁶ A mare among Pharaoh's chariots-more to the point, a mare among a host of stallions-was likely to cause a considerable commotion! This young woman was like that-so sexually powerful that every stud within visual distance was distracted by her!

Jewelry, also, was a common enhancement of beauty for people in the ancient Near East, and archaeological finds are numerous. Earrings and necklaces studded with precious stones are well-attested in many museum collections. The young man offers to make for his mate golden earrings with silver decorations.

Mutual Admiration of the Lovers (1:12-2:2)

Once again, the reader encounters the title "king" with the same range of ambiguities discussed in 1:4. Here, however, it seems more strained to interpret the king as an antagonist (as in the love triangle model) and more likely that the king of 1:12 is the lover of 1:13 and 1:14.

The scene is the festival table in the ancient Near East, possibly the wedding festival, where the participants reclined on low couches.⁵⁷ The woman's perfume pervades the air, and she exclaims that her mate is like a small pouch of myrrh between her breasts. In reclining, he leans backward to lay his head on her chest, and his closeness is as fragrant as henna blossoms from En Gedi.⁵⁸

He exclaims upon her beauty (1:15)! The metaphor comparing her eyes to doves could mean several things-either the beauty of pairs, since doves frequently appear in pairs, or perhaps the demeanor of purity, gentleness and simplicity, since doves are generally recognized for their calmness. She exclaims upon his good looks as well (1:16a), and she uses a pet name that will appear some twenty-seven times in the Song. Translated "lover" or "my love", this Hebrew word (*dodi*) is common in Semitic love poetry, where it is used as a term of endearment with

⁵⁶ M. Pope, *Song of Songs [AB]* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 338.

⁵⁷ Hence, some translations read "table" (so NIV), some "couch" (so NEB) and some "banquet" (so NAB).

⁵⁸ En Gedi, the spring and oasis near the northern end of the Dead Sea, was an ancient site for the manufacture of perfume, cf. E. Blaiklock and R. Harrison, *New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), p. 180.

erotic overtones.⁵⁹ The tantalizing reference to the bed or couch surrounded by a canopy of leaves and foliage heightens the anticipation for consummation (1:16b). He remarks that the pastoral site of their love-making in the wooded glen is like having houses⁶⁰ with beams of cedar and rafters of fir (1:17). Like Adam and Eve in the primordial garden, they seek each other in the wider world of nature.

She⁶¹ now describes herself as a flower from the coastal Plain of Sharon or a fragile bloom from the deep valleys of the central mountains (2:1). He responds that her beauty is so profound that she stands out among the other girls like a flower among thorns (2:2)!

Longing but Willing to Wait (2:3-7)

The power of love and the intense longing for consummation are the common experience of courtship. Such emotions were no different for the two lovers in this poem. As the young woman contemplates her future union with her mate, she singles him out like a fruit tree in the forest (2:3a).⁶² She delights being with him (sitting in his shade) and sharing the romantic kisses of his affection (his fruit is sweet to my taste⁶³). At the beginning, she asked for his kisses (cf. 1:2); now, she receives them eagerly (2:3b).⁶⁴

Now the scene shifts to the wine-house,⁶⁵ though here, too, we should probably understand the metaphor to refer to the intoxicating power of love and desire (2:4). In view of her intense longing for consummation, she resorts to aphrodisiacs, like raisin-cakes⁶⁶ and apples (2:5). The posture of the lovers entwined with each other, his right hand under her head and his left hand caressing her, suggest that the lovers are lying down-which in turn suggests that they are very near the sexual consummation they both desire (2:6).⁶⁷

At the last moment comes the urgent resistance and the determination to

⁵⁹ J. Sanmartin-Ascaso, *TDOT* (1978) III.143-156.

⁶⁰ The Hebrew term is a plural.

⁶¹ It is unclear who is speaking here, but most translations attribute it to the woman.

⁶² The exact type of tree is unclear. Some translators suggest apple tree (so NAB) and some apricot (so NEB).

⁶³ Lit., “palate”, the seat of taste

⁶⁴ It is unnecessary to interpret the phrase “his fruit is sweet to my taste” as sexual consummation, especially in light of the urgent insistence, “Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires” (cf. 2:7).

⁶⁵ Lit., “house of wine”

⁶⁶ Raisin-cakes in the ancient Near East were small cakes baked in a mold shaped like a female nude, and therefore, a highly erotic symbol, while apple juice was believed to counter impotence, cf. Pope, pp. 379-381.

⁶⁷ Alternatively, the RSV renders this as a wish, not a *fait accompli*: “O that his left hand were under my head, and that his right hand embraced me!”

wait! The chorus of women are charged not to press the consummation beyond its proper pace (2:7). True love can await its proper time! The reference to gazelles and does is obscure in this context. The verbal part of the sentence, “I charge you...” is the language of oath-taking, but what it may mean to take oath by animals is unclear. Perhaps, as Orr suggests, it refers to the timid nature of the little deer, “which teach us that the time of love will come in due season.”⁶⁸ In any case, the refrain to withhold consummation until the appropriate time will be repeated twice more in the book (cf. 3:5; 8:4).

Found, and Lost-and Found (2:8-3:5)

The next section explores the universal theme of lovers who find each other, suffer separation, and then are united again. So far, the dialogue has followed the courtship of the woman and man from the first dawning of their love to the intense desire for its fulfillment in sexual consummation. The patterns are as old as the world.

Still, the sunrise of love is only the beginning. Sometimes there are misgivings and doubts. Sometimes there is separation. Sometimes the way which once seemed so clear becomes dim and uncertain. So it was in the Song. She said, “I looked for him, but did not find him. I will search for the one my heart loves. So I looked for him but did not find him. I called him, but he did not answer.” Yet, as the old expression says, love conquers all.

The Springtime of Love (2:8-17)

Here is the excitement and admiration of the young male who demonstrates his devotion through athleticism and energy. The young woman watches as her lover bounds toward her, quickly closing the distance that separates them (2:8). He is nimble and graceful as a deer (2:9a). He steals glimpses of her over the wall and through the lattice work of the windows (2:9b).⁶⁹ Such unselfconscious flirting is typical.

He speaks, urging the young woman to accompany him into the glorious world of spring (2:10). The gloominess of the winter rains are gone, flowers have sprung up, the trees are bearing early fruit and the deep fragrance of blossoms saturate the land (2:11-13). Even the doves, newly returned from their winter

⁶⁸ R. Orr, “Song of Songs,” *The International Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids/England: Zondervan/Marshall Pickering, 1986), p.708.

⁶⁹ The NIV “peering” and the NEB “peeping” are probably too strong. The point is not to make the lover out to be a “peeping Tom,” but rather, an ardent admirer who takes advantage of every opportunity to gaze and steal glances at the one he adores.

migration, sing the romantic songs of springtime mating.⁷⁰

Distance between lovers is always painful, and no less for the two lovers here. For him, this distance is symbolized by the pet name, Dove, with which he describes her. She is like the “rock dove”,⁷¹ whose nesting preference is in the rugged cliffs high above the surrounding landscape. He longs to be near, to hear her voice and see her face (2:14). Yet, nearness brings with it the risk of premature consummation. The imperative to “catch the foxes (or jackals)”⁷² probably serves as a warning against those things that would injure the purity of their love, especially premature union. The manner in which foxes damage vineyards is not entirely clear. Possibly they gnaw the base of the vine. In any case, as a couple the lovers must avoid whatever would injure their relationship. The imperative serves the same purpose as the repetitive theme, “Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires” (2:7b; 3:5b; 8:4b)!

So, they are willing to wait. Nevertheless, neither of them doubt that they truly and deeply belong to each other (2:16a). For the time being, they must be content with lesser intimacies, probably kisses (2:16b).⁷³ They have shared a wonderful day in the spring of nature. Now the day is over,⁷⁴ and they must part. She bids her young man to leave as he came-with the same quick energy and athleticism fueled by his passion for her (2:17).

Lost and Found (3:1-5)

Interpreters are divided over whether the following description is a dream or an event. What is clear is that the young woman awaits the arrival of her young man to her bed. Such a circumstance, in light of the previous urgency to postpone sexual consummation until the appropriate time, seems to favor a dream sequence. Furthermore, the young woman experiences this dream night after night.⁷⁵ She

⁷⁰ The KJV translation, “the voice of the turtle,” is seriously misleading (apologies to Ernie Harwell, who has quoted this verse for decades as the radio voice of Detroit Tigers baseball in the first broadcast of each season). The Hebrew reference is to the *Tor*, the migratory turtledove that regularly keeps the time of its annual return to Palestine (cf. Jer. 8:7), cf. G. Hasel, *ISBE* (1979) I.987-989.

⁷¹ The fact that two species of dove represented in Hebrew by two different words, *Tor* (turtledove) and *yonah* (rock dove), is confusing in English when both are rendered by the same English word.

⁷² The verbal form is a masculine plural imperative, which makes the identity of the speaker(s) obscure. Is the couple asking outsiders to help catch the “foxes”, or are outsiders asking the couple to catch the “foxes”? Either is possible, but in the end, both probably mean the same thing, especially if the “foxes” symbolize the injurious consequences of premature union.

⁷³ The meaning of metaphors in lyric poetry is often ambiguous. Here, the “lilies” may refer to lips (cf. 5:13).

⁷⁴ Lit., “until the day blows,” though commentators are unsure as to whether this means daybreak, with morning breezes (so NIV, KJV), or evening, when breezes arise during the cooling off period (so NEB, NAB, NASB).

⁷⁵ Lit., “in the nights”

longs for sexual union with her mate, and in the recurring dream, she cannot find him (3:1). She arises and hurries out into the street to search, yet still she is unsuccessful (3:2). Instead, she only encounters the soldiers who serve night duty as lookouts on the city walls, and she pauses only long enough to ask them if they have seen her mate (3:3). Then, abruptly, she finds him. Clinging to him, she brings him to her home, the site of her own conception (3:4).⁷⁶ This is no secret tryst, but a union with full family approval. Then, once again, there is the refrain exactly as before: Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires (3:5). The time for consummation, though not yet, is very near indeed!

Consummation (3:6-5:1)

It is far from accidental that the central lyrics in the Song describe sexual consummation in the context of a wedding. All through the courtship, the young woman and young man have desired this deeper union. Yet, they have restrained themselves, refusing ultimate intimacy until the right time and avoiding those “little foxes” that taint the future with remorse. Now, however, the time has come!

The Wedding Procession (3:6-11)

By the time of Jesus, Jewish marriage was completed in two stages, the betrothal and the home-taking. Betrothal formally began the process of transferring the girl from her family to her husband. Even though after the betrothal she was not yet living with her husband-to-be, she was committed to him to the extent that she could be widowed or divorced. The actual home-taking, which usually occurred a year or so after betrothal, was celebrated with a processional to the new home followed by a wedding feast. At this time, the bride and groom sexually consummated their marriage.⁷⁷

How far back into antiquity lie the roots of these marriage traditions is unclear. Certainly the idea of a wedding procession lies behind Psalm 45:13-15). We can safely assume that the wedding procession described in the Song must have been something along this same order. The question, “Who is this coming up from the desert like a column of smoke?”, refers to the young woman who is carried by litter to the home of the young man.⁷⁸ All the pomp and circumstances appropriate for such a procession are present (3:6-10). The bride is carefully

⁷⁶ The reference to her “mother’s house” reminds one of the consummation of Isaac’s marriage to Rebekah in Sarah’s tent (cf. Gen. 24:67).

⁷⁷ O. Baab, *IDB* (1962) III.284-285; A. Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 148ff.; R. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1977), p. 124.

⁷⁸ The Hebrew **הַזֶּה** (= this) in the question, “Who is this?”, is a feminine singular.

perfumed (3:6). The litter in which she rides is flanked by stalwart attendants dressed as soldier-protectors (3:7-8). The litter itself is fit for a queen, hand-crafted for this very event (6:9-10).

The various interpretive models vary radically in their understanding of this processional. The love triangle model views Solomon as attempting to seduce the young girl with all the attractions of his court. However, as Delitzsch points out, the fact that the processional is conducted with the full support of the queen mother (cf. 3:11) hardly lends itself to the seduction theory.⁷⁹ In a more direct way, some interpret the scene as referring to Solomon marrying Abishag, the young Shunammite woman who attended David near his death (cf. 1 Kg. 1:1-4, 15). That such a marriage was a significant advantage to securing the throne is evident by Adonijah's attempt to marry her (1 Kg. 2:13-25). However, whether the Shunammite of 1 Kings is the same as the Shulammite of the Song (6:13) is a moot question. In any case, there is no certainty that Solomon actually married Abishag. Finally, there is the metaphorical model that sees the name Solomon as simply depicting the honor of the groom "in his kingly state as Solomon-for-the-day".⁸⁰

The processional scene concludes with a brief glimpse of the groom, who was crowned by his mother with a wedding wreath for the nuptials (3:11).⁸¹ This was the happiest day of his life!

The Final Anticipation (4:1-15)

With the home-taking at hand, the anticipation for sexual consummation is measurably heightened. The language of the Song becomes increasingly intimate and erotic. A flurry of romantic descriptions flow from the lips of the groom as he contemplates the beauty of his bride. She is veiled, of course, in the eastern fashion of weddings, but her eyes are just barely visible through the soft material (4:1a).⁸² Her hair cascades down her back like goats running down the slopes of the central mountains (4:1b). Her teeth are perfectly even and dazzling white, just like sheep freshly shorn and washed (4:2). He can make out her red lips and rosy complexion⁸³ behind the veil (4:3). Her neck, adorned with the layered platelets of a rich necklace, was as elegant as a tower covered with glittering shields (4:4). The

⁷⁹ Delitzsch, p. 69.

⁸⁰ So, Orr, p. 709.

⁸¹ That this event does not refer to a kingly coronation is evident in that it is the mother who places the crown, not the high priest (cf. 1 Kg. 1:32-48; 2 Kg. 11:12-20).

⁸² For the metaphor comparing her eyes to doves, see the comment on 1:15.

⁸³ The Hebrew word is a hapax legomenon (appears only once). Translators offer various contextual renderings: "temples" (NIV, NASB), "cheeks" (NAB, RSV) and "lips" (NEB).

intimacy of describing her breasts, especially if the metaphor of “browsing among the lilies” refers to kissing (cf. 2:16b; 5:13), indicates passionate anticipation (4:5). The “mountain of myrrh” and the “hill of incense” are not geographical features, but metaphors for the young woman’s body that will soon be accessible to him (4:6). In his eyes, this young woman is completely without flaw, the perfect picture of feminine beauty (4:7). That they will belong to each other in this most complete sense is no more than is expressed in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and Paul’s instructions in the New Testament: May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer—may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love (Pro. 5:18-19). The wife’s body does not belong to her alone, but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband’s body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife (1 Cor. 7:4).

So, the groom invites his bride to join him (4:8). Once more, the point here is not geography nor wild animals, but lyrical metaphors that symbolize the sacred journey toward consummation. In the next several verses, the young man will describe the woman as his “bride” some half dozen times, a clear reference to the marriage event (4:8-12; 5:1). The term “sister” strikes the modern reader as an oddity, but in the ancient Near East, the word served not only as a term for siblings, but also as a synonym for “darling”.⁸⁴ She has captivated him completely (4:9-10)! Passionate kisses and the waft of perfume (4:11) have brought him to the brink of what so far have been a locked garden and a sealed spring—symbols of the intimacies of sexual consummation reserved and protected for one lover only, and for him by marriage only (4:12-15). The garden motif, which surfaces at various places in the Song, is an erotic symbol for sexual delights. Especially, it represents the physical charms of the young woman.⁸⁵

Union (4:16-5:1)

After the extensive lyrical descriptions of anticipation, the actual consummation of the marriage is described in two brief stanzas. First, the young woman speaks a single word of contrast, “Awake” (4:16a)! Until now, the urgency has been not to awaken sexual consummation before the appropriate time (cf. 2:7b; 3:5b). Now, the moment has arrived in the covenantal context of marriage! She

⁸⁴ It may well be that this term derives from the ancient custom in which it was permissible for a man to marry his sister (Gen. 20:5f.). In Hurrian society, the practice existed of adopting one’s wife as a sister to form the strongest possible marital bond, though later, of course, sister-marriage was forbidden in the Torah (cf. Lv. 18:9, 11), cf. H. Wolff, *TWOT* (1980) I.31-32.

⁸⁵ For an extensive discussion of the garden motif, see Carr, pp. 55-60. The motif appears in 4:12, 15-16; 5:1; 6:2, 11, and always in reference to the young woman.

calls upon the winds to blow on her garden, the symbol of her sexual treasures, and waft her perfume to her lover. What once was a locked garden and a sealed spring is locked and sealed no longer (cf. 4:12), for she openly invites him into the sacred boundaries (4:16b).

He eagerly accepts her invitation (5:1a). The garden of sexual union has been worth the wait. Purity before the marriage enhances fulfillment in the marriage. The metaphors of myrrh, spice, honey, honeycomb, wine and milk all speak of the richness of the sexual experience to the newly married couple (5:1b).

A final benediction on the purity of conjugal love appears in the imperative, “Eat, O friends, and drink; drink your fill, O lovers” (5:1c). The speaker(s) is unidentified. Some commentators, based on the Jewish tradition in the Septuagint, see the words as spoken by the groom to the wedding party that they should feast in honor of the event. Others suggest that the words are spoken by the guests to the wedded couple, a public affirmation of their newly acquired right to each other. Yet another approach views it as a blessing from God, who gives approval to the sexual consummation that he ordained from the beginning of time for husbands and wives (cf. Gen. 2:24). Regardless, the basic sense is clear: what the bride and groom now enjoy in each other-what they have waited for and now received-is to be affirmed as honorable, right and appropriate!

Lost and Found (5:2-8:4)

In most love stories, the romantic climax is the wedding itself. The Song is more realistic, for the story of relationship continues after the consummation of marriage. As before, the theme is universal and as old as the world. All relationships must be maintained, not the least of which is the marriage relationship, and fluctuations in a marriage can be as mercurial as they were in courtship.

Lost Again (5:2-8)

Whether this episode is a dream sequence or the state of being half-awake and half-asleep (5:2a), the important thing is that the young man knocks on the bedroom door of his young wife (we continue to assume that there is continuity between this pericope and the preceding ones). His intent is surely sexual union, the conjugal prerogative of married couples. Perhaps he has been away for a time, attending to other duties. In any case, it is late, for the heavy dew has already distilled in the night (5:2b).

She, however, responds with apathy. Though she is unclothed⁸⁶ and sexually

⁸⁶ The **תַּחֲשִׁיטָּה** (= garment) is the long, shirt-like undergarment worn next to the skin, cf. W. Holladay, *A Concise*

ready,⁸⁷ she is too slow to respond (5:3). Though her lover attempts to gain entrance (5:4),⁸⁸ by the time she responds he has left (5:5-6). Once again, she looked for him but could not find him; she called, but there was no answer. As before, she went out into the night to find him, stumbling across the soldiers who guarded the city walls at night. This time, the encounter was more ominous than previously, for they were abusive to her (5:7). This time, she did not find him quickly, and the stanza ends with her plaintive cry to the chorus of women in Jerusalem that they help her (5:8). If they discover him, they are to relay her urgent message that she is desperate to be reunited.

A Mate Worth Having (5:9-8:4)

The separation of the lovers and the poignant request for help from the young girls in Jerusalem offers the chance for exchange. They ask what is so remarkable about her man that she is so desperate to find him (5:9). She responds with a long soliloquy praising the physical attributes of her mate. The series of metaphors are similar to his previous description of her (cf. 4:1ff). His healthy complexion (5:10), black wavy hair (5:11), evenly set eyes (5:12), rich cheeks and lips (5:13), chiseled arms and torso (5:14), sculpted legs (5:15) and generous mouth (5:16a) all testify to his worthiness of her admiration and love.

Just as important, her mate is also her friend (5:16b). Compatibility is not sexual only; there is more to their relationship than mere physical attraction.

The chorus of girls query why her lover has slipped away (6:1), since they are now fully convinced that he is worth seeking! She responds by announcing that the mutual passion between husband and wife has resumed (6:2)!⁸⁹ The temporary separation has ended, and this time her mate has found her. Each belongs wholly to the other (6:3)!

Now follows another elaborate description of the young bride's attributes. He praises her beauty, for it is like the capital cities of Israel and Judah (6:4).⁹⁰ Her

Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 167.

⁸⁷ The reference to "feet" is what we would call "loaded language." Feet are a euphemism for the genitals, cf. Holladay, p. 332. It is unclear whether the text refers to the young woman washing her feet from the dusty roads or serves as a double entendre for sexual consummation. In context, the latter meaning seems warranted.

⁸⁸ On the face of it, this entrance is to the room. However, once more the subtlety of language may imply more, since the "hand" is also a euphemism for the male genital organ, cf. Pope, pp. 517-519.

⁸⁹ For the garden metaphor, see comments on 4:12-15 and footnote #53.

⁹⁰ After the division of the unity monarchy upon Solomon's death, Tirzah in Ephraim became the capital of the north (1 Kg. 14:17; 15:21, 33; 16:6), while Jerusalem remained the capital of the south. Not until the Omri dynasty was the capital of the north moved to Samaria (1 Kg. 16:24). If this passage bears upon the dating of the Song's composition, then it must have been written in the half century between Solomon's death and the transfer of the northern capital to Samaria.

eyes and cascading hair (6:5), her dazzling teeth (6:6) and her rosy complexion (6:7) excite and captivate him.

Though kings might have harems filled with many beauties, none can compare to his bride!⁹¹ She surpasses them all, the favorite of her mother and the object of admiration by commoners and royalty alike (6:8-9). When she arises, she looks as breath-taking as a sunrise. Her brilliance can only be compared to the celestial bodies, for in his eyes, she is truly heavenly (6:10).⁹²

In the wonder of spring, the young woman walks among the gardens, admiring the new growth. The vibrancy of life mirrors the passion of her love for her mate.⁹³ As she wends her way through the orchards and vineyards, voices follow her, bidding her return so that she can dance (6:13).⁹⁴ The plural form suggests that the callers are either the chorus of women in Jerusalem or the wedding guests who have attended the feast. In either case, she demurely questions why they should want to look at her as she dances.⁹⁵ An answer is not long in coming, and it is provided by her lover and husband.⁹⁶

The entire description moves deliberately from her feet (7:1) to her head (7:9a). He admires her graceful legs (7:1), her waist (7:2),⁹⁷ and her breasts (7:3). Moving upward, he comments on her stately neck, the depth of her eyes, and the refinement of her nose (7:4).⁹⁸ At the top, her head crowns her whole body, her

⁹¹ The dramatic interpretation sees this reference to Solomon's harem in the early days before he had amassed such large numbers of women through political alliance (cf. 1 Kg. 11:3). However, Solomon is not mentioned, and it seems better to leave the text as it is without being more specific.

⁹² This phrase is identical to the final clause in 6:4. The different NIV renderings are possible because the niph'al participle of the verb **לָלַח** (= to lift the banner, to be organized in sections) and its modifier **יָפִי** (= awe inspiring, terror inducing) are ambiguous. The NIV "troops" (so also NAB, NASB) and "stars" (so also NEB) are based wholly on context, since neither word is in the Hebrew text. Literally, the text reads, "as ones raising banners" or "as ones organized into sections". The traditional English rendering, "terrible as an army with banners" (so KJV, RSV) lends itself to the allegorical interpretation of the church militant. If, however, a non-allegorical model is followed, such a rendering has less appeal.

⁹³ Translators and commentators agree that the Hebrew syntax of this verse is very difficult. The erotic overtones of the garden should not be missed, but the imagery of the chariots is obscure at best.

⁹⁴ Here is the only use of the term Shulammitte in the Song. Is this term the equivalent of Shunammite (cf. 1 Kg. 1:1-4, 15; 2:17-22)? No consensus has been reached.

⁹⁵ The dance of Mahanaim is obscure as well. Mahanaim is located in the transjordan, and there is probably some cultural association that is unknown to us today. Presumably, the dance in question is a wedding dance.

⁹⁶ Some commentators see the section 7:1-5 as coming from the chorus of women or wedding guests, but most see the entire section 7:1-9 as coming from the male.

⁹⁷ The Hebrew word is obscure, and several commentators suggest that the imagery and context suggest the vulva rather than the navel, cf. Carr, p. 157; Pope, pp. 617-620.

⁹⁸ Comparing her nose to the tower of Lebanon probably is intended to describe nobility, not size.

dark hair framing her face and captivating her husband (7:7).⁹⁹ She is ravishingly beautiful (7:6), and his excitement mounts as he anticipates union with her again. He wants to smoothen her body with caresses and kisses (7:7-9a).

His eagerness for union is matched by her own! She invites his passionate kisses (7:9b), for each of them truly belongs to the other (7:10). She suggests that they retire to the countryside to savor the richness of springtime-and there they will make love (7:11-12). In the country, they will enjoy the scent of mandrakes, the pungent aphrodisiac of the ancient Near East (7:13a; cf. Gen. 30:14-16).¹⁰⁰ The delights of sexual union for husband and wife are truly both “new and old”, for there is the experience and memory of previous unions as well as the anticipation and mystery of delights yet to be discovered (7:13b).

Hypothetically, she wishes that she could publicly express her affection as openly to her husband as she could to her brother. A sister might kiss her brother in public, but in most cultures such intimacies are considered awkward for husbands and wives (8:1).¹⁰¹ The public intimacy of a nursing brother certainly could not be reproduced in public between husband and wife without scandal. Still, she longs for such intimacy, and she freely offers her body to her mate, just as he freely caresses and embraces her (8:2-3). Finally, the scene concludes with the refrain that consummation should not be aroused prematurely (8:4; cf. 2:7b; 3:5b). Here, however, the context is significantly changed. Previously, this refrain was a warning against premarital sexual fulfillment because the lovers were not yet united in marriage. Here, it serves as a reminder that even in marriage, after conjugal intimacy has been achieved, there is yet the need for mutual timing between husband and wife. Any time is not always the right time, and the needs of each partner must always be considered.

Affirmation (8:5-14)

The closing section of the Song presents all the characters from the previous scenes: the friends, the young woman, the family and the young man. Here on the part of each is an affirmation of the sacredness of pure marital love.

The couple now is depicted as returning across the desert, and she is leaning on him as they come (8:5a).¹⁰² Their friends see them at a distance and ask who

⁹⁹ The NIV “like royal tapestry” is doubtful. The Hebrew word אֶרְגָּמָן (= dyed wool) probably refers to color.

¹⁰⁰ *IDB* (1962) III.256-257.

¹⁰¹ The public openness of intimate romantic expressions in America since the sexual revolution of the 1960s notwithstanding, public intimacy between husband and wife can only be considered as unusual in view of long-standing cultural reservations throughout the history of humankind.

¹⁰² The interpretation that she is leaning on him because she is now pregnant with their first child (so Orr, p. 712) is

they are. Earlier, the young woman has asked to go to her parental home, where she was conceived (cf. 8:2), but in fact, they have gone to his parental home where he was conceived (8:5b). There they reaffirmed their love to each other in sexual union. So now, firmly content in each other's love, she entreats his life-long commitment (8:6a). His pledge is to be like a seal, and it is to be as final as death. The jealousy of love described here is not the petty emotion of insecurity, but rather, the rightful jealousy of one man for one woman for life. Such exclusiveness is comparable to a flame that can never be quenched (8:6b-7).¹⁰³

The final section has several interpretive problems. First, it is unclear who is speaking. Some suggest that the conversation is between the bride, who speaks of her younger sister, and Solomon (so *The Living Bible*). Here, the scenario is as follows. The bride speaks about the vulnerability of her younger sister, who has not yet reached sexual maturity (8:8). Solomon responds that they will take steps to protect her virginity (8:9). The bride then emphasizes her own sexual maturity, now fulfilled in marriage (8:10). Other interpreters understand the words to come from the friends of the couple (so RSV, NEB). Here, the friends of the newly wedded couple both ask and answer the question about their young sister (8:8-9). As before, she is not ready for marriage, so they will protect her until she is of age. The bride, as before, comments on her own sexual maturity (8:10). Still others take the statements to be quoting the bride's older brothers (cf. 1:6) when she was a girl (so NAB). When she was younger, they took measures to protect her virginity (8:8-9). Now, of course, she is fully mature and fulfilled in her own marriage (8:10). Yet another option is to take the words as a birth announcement by the married couple (Orr). Here, the expression "young sister" is a euphemism for "little daughter" (8:8). It is the parents who will protect the little girl's virginity until she is mature enough for marriage (8:9). The bride then comments to her husband that in a similar way she has kept herself for him alone (8:10). Though the above interpretations envision different circumstances, all have in common the importance of protecting virginity until marriage.

The reference to Solomon's vineyards is equally obscure. A contrast is presented between Solomon's administration of the royal vineyards¹⁰⁴ and the

ingenious and barely possible, but it may squeeze more out of the text than is warranted without some further corroboration.

¹⁰³ The consonantal text at the end of 8:6 ends with *yah*, which some translators understand to be a shortened form of the divine name *Yahweh* (so JB, ASV, NASB). If so, the rendering "like the very flame of the LORD" is a possible translation (see NIV footnote). Here, the love that is as strong as death and that cannot be washed away by rivers is as eternal as God himself is eternal. Most translators, however, opt for a more conventional translation which views the expression שלֹהֲבֵתִיָּה as a superlative, i.e., "a most vehement flame" (RSV, NIV, NAB, NEB).

¹⁰⁴ The place-name Baal Hamon is not a known location. Literally, it means "lord of wealth", and as such, alludes to Solomon's riches, cf. K. Jung, *ISBE* (1979) I.378.

young woman's administration of her own vineyard. Obviously, Solomon is not the beneficiary of this comparison.¹⁰⁵ If the vineyard motif earlier in the Song holds true here (cf. 1:6; 2:15), then the reference may well be a metaphor for Solomon's large harem, on the one hand, as contrasted with the young woman's personal gift of herself to her husband on the other. With 700 wives and 300 concubines (cf. 1 Kg. 11:3), Solomon was hardly in a position to maintain daily relationships with them all. The normal pattern for kings with large harems in the ancient Near East was to assign them to women's quarters with eunuchs as overseers. Such a situation may be implied in Solomon's renting out his vineyard to tenant farmers (8:11). The Shulammite, by contrast, is a "one man woman" (8:12). She reserves herself for her husband only. Solomon pays to have his harem kept; she gives herself to her mate as an act of personal freedom.

In the final lines of the Song, the young man invites his friends to affirm his union with his wife (8:13). She, for her part, calls him to herself so they may celebrate their union with each other (8:14).

¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, this passage makes it unlikely that the groom is Solomon literally, even though in his wedding the groom might be "king for a day."

Qoheleth

Wisdom in the ancient Near East was a long and respected tradition, and individuals with wisdom expertise formed a special class of advisors (cf. Ex. 7:11; Dt. 1:13; Est. 1:13-14; 6:13; Job 15:17-18; 34:2; Pro. 1:5-6; Je. 8:8-9; 10:7; Oba. 8). In non-Israelite cultures, the *hakam* (= wise man or woman)¹⁰⁶ was a person skilled in special knowledge, such as, medicine, divination, craftsmanship, diplomacy, awareness of the wider world, and the use of proverbs and riddles to teach how to live successfully.¹⁰⁷ To some degree, ancient ideas about wisdom must have affected the Hebrew concept of wisdom due to the cultural exchanges that were prevalent in the ancient Near East. One biblical example of such cultural exchange is to be seen in the Queen of Sheba's visit to Jerusalem to hear the wisdom of Solomon (2 Chr. 9:1-12).¹⁰⁸ The Israelite concept of wisdom tended more toward an educated discipline resulting in sound judgments about life. Besides the word *hokmah* (= wisdom), the related words *binah* (= understanding) and *t'bunah* (= insight) suggest that Hebrew wisdom was the "intensely practical art of being skilful and successful in life."¹⁰⁹ Wisdom was the expression of religion outside the cult, and the wise person stood alongside the priest and prophet as leaders in the community. Often enough, the wise were an essential part of the royal court, standing as personal advisors to the king (Je. 50:35; 51:57). They, along with priests and prophets, formed a triple resource for the monarchies (Je. 18:18).

Fundamental to the Hebrew notion of wisdom is that it derives directly from the reverence and fear of Yahweh (Job 28:28; Ps. 111:10; Pro. 1:7; 9:10; 15:33). Similar to the wisdom of the ancient Near East in general, Hebrew wisdom was often collected in short proverbs, that is, expressions of practical aphorisms frequently set in antithetic couplets. The Book of Proverbs abounds in such maxims.

¹⁰⁶ The Hebrew word for the wise person was not restricted to the male gender, for a woman could use the gift of wisdom (cf. Jg. 5:29; 2 Sa. 14:2; 20:16) and the noun for a wise person appears with both masculine and feminine gender endings (e.g., Is. 19:11; Je. 9:17 [9:16, Hebrew Bible]).

¹⁰⁷ H.-P. Muller, *TDOT* (1980) IV.364-379; G. Sheppard, *ISBE* (1988) IV.1074-1075.

¹⁰⁸ Another striking example of cultural exchange came with the discovery of the "Instruction of Amenemopet," an Egyptian wisdom text from between the 10th and 6th centuries BC exhibiting striking parallels with Pro. 22:17--24:22, cf. J. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1958) 237-243. While the question of direct literary dependence cannot be answered with any certainty, the similarity of content surely argues for a common pool of wisdom ideas. Still another example within the canon of the Hebrew Bible is the wisdom of Agur and King Lemuel (Pro. 30-31), neither of whom seem to have been Israelites.

¹⁰⁹ W. Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979), p. 189.

A few examples of ancient Near Eastern wisdom tackled larger subjects that are essentially philosophical in nature, such as, the Akkadian Proverbs of the Eloquent Peasant,¹¹⁰ a work that offers a critique of social injustice. In the Hebrew Bible, the books of Job and Ecclesiastes fall under this more philosophical category, Job dealing with the problem of innocent suffering and Ecclesiastes dealing with the problem of existential meaning.

Because of its insight into human meaning, Ecclesiastes has had a number of well-known champions. Thomas Wolfe, author of *You Can't Go Home Again*, wrote, "...if I had to make [a dogmatic judgment on literary creation], I could only say that Ecclesiastes is the greatest single piece of writing I have ever known..." Other admirers of Ecclesiastes include Leo Tolstoy, George Bernard Shaw, William Butler Yeats, Thomas Hardy, T. S. Eliot, John Updike, George Orwell and Ernest Hemingway.¹¹¹

Introduction

Author and Date

The speaker in this book tags himself with the title Qoheleth, a participle form based on the root *q-h-l* (= to gather, assemble). The English title Ecclesiastes comes from the Greek Septuagint, where it is derived from *ekklesia* and means "the one calling an assembly." The exact nuance of the word is difficult to capture in English, and some of the various attempts are worth reiterating, including the transliteration qoheleth without any attempt to translate: "preacher" (KJV, NASB, RSV), "teacher" (NIV), "leader of the assembly" (NIVmg), "speaker" (NEB), "qoheleth" (NAB), "philosopher," "president" or "spokesman."¹¹²

But just who is Qoheleth, and when did he write? Unquestionably, the author patterns himself after Solomon, the son of David (1:1), the king of Israel (1:12), even though the name Solomon does not appear in the book. This first person claim to have "grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled in Jerusalem before" (1:16) leaves little doubt that the author intends an identity with the one who asked God for wisdom (2 Chr. 1:7-12) and was heralded as "greater in wisdom than all the kings of the earth" (2 Chr. 9:22-23; cf. 1 Kg. 4:29-34). All are agreed upon this point. However, there are some mitigating

¹¹⁰ Pritchard, pp. 250-252.

¹¹¹ D. Pawley, "Ecclesiastes: Reaching Out to the 20th Century," *BR* (Oct. 1990), pp. 34-36.

¹¹² It is also worth noting that in the Hebrew text (cf. 12:8) the title Qoheleth appears with the definite article, indicating that it is not a proper name.

factors. In the first place, the opening of the book is offered in the third person (1:1-2) as are a few later interludes (7:27; 12:8), though most of the rest of the book is in the first person. Does this mean one writer is presenting the wisdom of another, or is the writer adopting the third person to stand outside him/herself temporarily?¹¹³

Those who argue for Solomon as the author generally also suggest that the book was composed near the end of his life after he had built a large harem of non-Israelite wives who turned his heart away from Yahweh (1 Kg. 11:1-13), hence, the darkly pessimistic tone of the work. Most scholars, however, judge it is more likely that the writer is not Solomon (why else avoid his name?) but intends to faithfully present the wisdom of Solomon. The author expresses the wisdom for which Solomon was famous by rehearsing the projects of Solomon's life. In any case, the pessimism in the book is not its final word, but rather its penultimate word. At least one strand of Jewish tradition held that the book was composed by the company of Hezekiah, probably with the understanding that this group edited a Solomonic text.¹¹⁴ Since the time of Luther most scholars, conservative or otherwise, have held that the book, while written as an idealistic representation of Solomon, was put in final form by someone later.¹¹⁵

The Form of the Book

Unlike the Proverbs and the Psalms, which are collections of wisdom material with a variety of independent themes, Qoheleth contains an implicit narrative line. The author is "going somewhere" with his thoughts. The book recounts a grand experiment in existential reflection.¹¹⁶ Thus, any attempt to reach final conclusions about the book's meaning apart from consideration of the whole is bound to fall short. To be sure, the book has many proverbial sayings that stand on their own, but between the prologue (1:1-11) and the epilogue (12:9-14), the main body of the book evidences a coherence that is hardly haphazard. Increasingly, modern scholars agree that the book is the unified composition of a

¹¹³ The Massoretic text offers the possibility that a woman is the writer by dividing the consonantal text of 7:27 as *'amerah qoheleth* (= says Qoheleth [feminine]). The feminine construction would exclude Solomon, of course. Most scholars reject the Masoretic division and divide the words as *'amar ha-qoheleth* (= says Qoheleth [masculine]), the same as in 12:8.

¹¹⁴ *Baba Bathra* 15a; other Jewish traditions cite Solomon as the author, cf. *Megilla* 7a; *Shabbath*, 30.

¹¹⁵ See discussion in E. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 347-349.

¹¹⁶ Here, we disagree with those who assume that the book is a group of independent pericopes that can be explained entirely from within themselves, cf. G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), p. 227.

single author.¹¹⁷ And, it is the prologue and epilogue that frame this experiment with life. Thomas à Kempis accurately perceived this wider perspective when he wrote, "'Vanity of Vanities, and all is vanity,' save to love God and serve him only."¹¹⁸ Still, there is no obvious structure for the main body of the work, so much so that Franz Delitzsch of the last century wrote, "All attempts to show...an all-embracing plan...have hitherto failed, and must fail."¹¹⁹ Most contemporary commentators of whatever theological persuasion tend to agree.

As many have observed, there are frequent repetitions in the book that serve to underscore its themes. The primary term, of course, is *hebel* (= vanity), but it is joined by terms such as toil, work, wise, good, time, know, sun, see, fool, eat, profit, wind, death, just, wicked, portion, memory and vexation.¹²⁰ Together, these themes address what the writer considers to be the most important categories within human life.

Canonicity

The Book of Ecclesiastes belongs to the third section of the Hebrew Bible, *Kethubim* (= the writings). It is generally accepted that this third section of the Hebrew Bible achieved canonical status later than the Torah and the Prophets if, for no other reason, than that its books were generally written later. Still, there is substantial reason to believe that the books of the Hebrew Bible were fixed as canonical before the time of Jesus.¹²¹ Though there was a reexamination of canonical status by the rabbis at Jamnia in the late 1st century, Ecclesiastes along with the others was reaffirmed. And, since the Septuagint as the Christian version of the Bible contained Ecclesiastes, the book was not challenged in the Christian church.

Exposition

Derek Kidner has well written: "The voice of the Old Testament has many accents, from the impassioned preaching of the prophets to the cool, reflective comments of the wise--and a whole world of poetry, law, story-telling, psalmody and vision in between."¹²² In all this variety, there is no writer quite like Qoheleth.

¹¹⁷ B. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), p. 582.

¹¹⁸ The Imitation of Christ, I.1.

¹¹⁹ F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, trans. M. Easton (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 188.

¹²⁰ R. Murphy, *The Tree of Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1990) 50.

¹²¹ F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1988), pp. 30-34.

¹²² D. Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, & A Time to Dance [BST]* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1976), p. 13.

He is an explorer, pushing the boundaries of human life. He takes his readers on a journey in search of existential meaning.

The book is not particularly easy. On the surface, Qoheleth sounds like an unmitigated pessimist. His opening cry, repeated periodically, sounds like an accusation: "Utter futility-everything is meaningless!" But there is more to Qoheleth than skepticism. He intends to bring his readers to the conclusion that the only thing giving meaning to life is the presence and recognition of God. However, though this is his conclusion, he does not start here. He will only arrive by a circuitous route-over ten chapters! On the way, he puts himself and his readers in the sandals of the humanist. He intends to lead them in a systematic search for the meaning of life by following the path that most men and women follow.

Qoheleth is not an atheist, for atheism was hardly an option in the ancient Near East. Rather, he begins as a secularist-a man who is preoccupied with the observable world and its culture. It is not that he denies God so much as he ignores him in the existential search. He begins much like a modern person concerned with financial security, personal happiness, leisure, social status and pleasure. Systematically, he moves from lifestyle to lifestyle-from the ancient counterpart to our modern stereotype of the beer-swilling "good ole boy" who is obsessed with television sports to the young executive who is a pragmatic intellectual driven to succeed to the artistic idealist who dabbles with reality while trying to find meaning in aesthetics.¹²³ He invites his readers to follow his quest.

At the outset, it is critical to recognize that Qoheleth adopts a provisional self in the mode of Solomon, king of Israel. Solomon as the author's provisional self was surely carefully chosen, for Solomon had both the time and the means to conduct such an exploration, and in fact, there is abundant evidence that he closely followed this very path (cf. 1 Kg. 4:20-34; 5:13-18; 7:1-12; 9:17-19, 24, 26-28; 10:1--11:8). Solomon had a much wider range of opportunity than most folks enjoy. He was rich beyond the dreams of avarice, intellectually brilliant, and had both the leisure and power to pursue whatever he wanted. He faced no serious political threats, and the affairs of state set up by his father were stable and required a minimum of effort. In short, he had both the time and resources to do whatever he wanted, and before Qoheleth is done, in the robes of Solomon our author will guide his readers in exploring intellectualism, philosophy, decadence, sensual pleasure, aesthetics, politics, and entrepreneurial business. Qoheleth is an ancient version of the modern phenomenologist who is able to bracket the parts of life that he does not want to consider while he concentrates on isolated segments.

¹²³In many ways, Qoheleth's search for meaning is similar to Soren Kierkegaard's existential search in *Either/Or*.

In modern terms, he climbs to the heights of Ernest Hemingway's brilliance, Marilyn Monroe's sensuality, and Howard Hughes' wealth and creative genius—a man living in the (supposedly) best of all possible worlds with brains, beauty and money. To be sure, Qoheleth does not conclude by saying this is how life should be lived. In fact, he warns the reader at the outset that there will be profound disappointment. He drives relentlessly to his final conclusion that life ought to be lived in the fear of God. Anything less will be a climax of despair. Still, the reader only reaches this last point when desperate for an answer. Qoheleth's resolve is to see how far a person might get in life without the fundamental framework of deep reverence for God.

Qoheleth's approach raises complications, of course. There will be tensions between Qoheleth's deepest self and his provisional self. Still, all this is part of the game, and in many ways, his experiment is very much like a game except that the stakes are the highest possible.

The Prologue (1:1-11)

After briefly introducing his provisional self (1:1), Qoheleth sets forth his thesis for life as a secular humanist. The critically descriptive word is the Hebrew noun *hebel* (= vapor, breath), which frames the book's content at the start and finish (1:2; 12:8). This word is frequently translated as "vanity" (KJV, NASB, NAB, RSV, ASV) or "meaningless" (NIV) or "emptiness" (NEB), but translators have found the full nuance of the word difficult to capture in English. In the first place, the more straightforward translation of "vapor" fits better metaphorically with the repeating aphorism "all is vapor and a chasing after wind" (1:14b; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 16; 6:9). Some translators opt for rendering *hebel* the same way each time it appears in the book, while others vary the translation depending on the context, with options ranging between "absurdity", "fleeting", "futility", "frustration", "illusory", and so forth. Obviously, Qoheleth intends the word to carry potent symbolic value with a semantic range.¹²⁴ The opening line "vapor of vapors" is a Hebrew superlative expressing emptiness in its consummate state.

Qoheleth's question sets the agenda for the entire experiment, "What is to be gained" (1:3)? What is the point? Probably every human has considered the banality of existence, a seeming final contradiction between life and meaning. This emptiness is what the modern existentialists call *angst* or *forlornness* and *despair*. It is the same futility expressed in Macbeth's famous soliloquy:

¹²⁴ For a more thorough treatment of Qoheleth's use of *hebel*, see D. Miller, *JBL* (Fall 1998), pp. 437-454, where Miller concludes that the primary semantic range is insubstantiality, transience and foulness

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time, and all our yesterdays have lighted fools to the way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.¹²⁵

From the treadmill of daily labor (1:3) to the endless cycles of nature (1:4-7) to the weary repetition of human experience (1:8-10)-nothing seems to matter! As the French say, "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose" (the more things change, the more they turn out to be the same). Nature seems to demonstrate this pointlessness. Human experience seems tedious with repetition. It doesn't even help to be famous, because in the end no one even remembers-and if they do, they don't care (1:11). Oddly enough, we find the same basic question on the lips of Christ, "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world yet forfeits his soul" (Mt. 16:26//Mk. 8:36)? Jesus' question captures the entire thought of the book in a single line.

So, Qoheleth's question is the fundamental question of life. What is to be gained? Does anything have meaning? Is history going anywhere? Is nothing worth remembering? Does anything have enduring value? Or, is life merely a stagnant heap of oblivion? With this question, Qoheleth sets out on his journey and beckons his readers to follow to the end.

Solomon's Understudy (1:12--2:11)

In the guise of Solomon, David's son (1:1) and king over all Israel (1:12), Qoheleth devotes himself to the question of existential meaning (1:13a). The question is like a huge burden that God has laid upon the human race (1:13b). Qoheleth's observations lead him to conclude that in and of themselves, all the activities of human life have no enduring value (1:14). They are vapor! As an intellectual observer, he devoted himself to study, wisdom, observation, experience and knowledge. In doing so, he abstracts himself out of the circumstances so that he takes the part of an objective spectator. At once, he is both the one plunging head-long into the activity of his experiment and also the one standing back and watching to see what effect it has upon himself. He explores, but he explores by wisdom. Still, in the end he discovers that intellectual pursuits are not satisfying. As an intellectual, he finds the same anguish as others, for the more one understands, the more one aches (1:18).

One of Qoheleth's fundamental observations is the severity of human limitation. Humans pride themselves on their ability to change things for the

¹²⁵ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V.v.19ff.

better, but in the bigger picture, their boast is unfounded. Life cannot be straightened out; its shortfall cannot be recouped by human effort (1:15). So, though Qoheleth explores life as a sort of renaissance man (1:16), he discovers the maddening limitation of human existence. He even resorted to nihilism, exploring absurdity and debauchery along with intellectualism, though neither yielded true satisfaction (1:17). He denied himself nothing, experimenting with every conceivable pleasure (2:1-2). Still, everything was vapor. All the while, he remained an objective observer, abstracting himself from his activities so as to observe their effects upon him (2:3). He dabbled in architecture and horticulture (2:4-6), and he reinforced his leisure by purchasing more slaves to do the menial tasks that his experiment required (4:7a). He tried ranching (2:7b), financial enterprise (2:8a), music (2:8b), and sexual variety (2:8c).¹²⁶ In the end, Qoheleth advanced more than any of his predecessors (2:9).

Yet, when all his experimentation was finished and he came to terms with his observations, he discovered that all delights and pleasures were short-lived. They captivated him while he was in the process (2:10), but when the process was finished, there was nothing left. Everything was vapor (2:11).

Conclusions About Wisdom and Folly (2:12-16)

In reflecting upon his grand experiment, Qoheleth contemplated the effect that intellectual pursuits and decadence had produced in himself (2:12a). He had been thorough in his research, so much so that his successor would have nothing left to try (2:12b)! He discovered that there is a relative value in that wisdom is better than folly (2:13). The wise person is aware of the world around him, while the fool is aware only of himself (2:14a). However, like the modern existentialist, Qoheleth came face-to-face with the age-old nemesis that reduces everything to ashes--the prospect of his own death (2:14b-15). The certainty of death, what Hemingway named, "That old whore," cancelled any enduring value. During the last years of his life, Hemingway was beset with high blood pressure, diabetes, a bad liver, and severe depression. He remarked to a friend, "What does a man care about? Staying healthy, working good, eating and drinking with his friends, enjoying himself in bed. I haven't any of them--none of them." So, as John Donne wrote four centuries earlier, "Ask not for whom the bell tolls--it tolls for thee!" The twentieth century conclusion of European existentialists and literary

¹²⁶The expression *shiddah weshiddoth* appears only here in the Hebrew Bible, and there is some question about its meaning. Guesses range from "cupbearers" (LXX) to "goblets" (Targums and Vulgate) to "musical instruments" (Luther) to "mistresses" (RSV, NIV). Most modern scholars opt for the latter, cf. Kidner, p. 32. The Anchor Bible offers the following rendering, "...the pleasures of the flesh, concubine after concubine," R. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), p. 214.

commentators on the Western cultural crisis was preempted nearly three millennia ago by Qoheleth! The wise and the fool come to the same end-death.

The Limited Value of Work (2:17-26)

Qoheleth's grand experiment brought him to a single overpowering emotion: "I hated life" (2:17a). Central to all life is work, even the work of someone caught up in satisfying the demands of leisure. Qoheleth saw everything, felt everything, drank everything and did everything. In the end, all was grievous; everything was vapor (2:17b). Any accomplishment must be left to others, and the one who inherits has as much chance of being an undeserving fool as anything else (2:18-21). But what does the one who works compulsively get out of it? Only pain, grief, lack of sleep and vapor! As Huxley says in *Brave New World*, one can tie his lamp to the masthead and steer by it, but the voyage ends in a deep and deadly hatred of life.

So, where does that leave us? Are we to blow our brains out with a double load of buckshot as did Hemingway? Should we, like Huxley, compel our spouses to give us LSD at the hour of death in the hopes of finding some final truth in the psychedelic visions inside our own heads? No! There is another way. Qoheleth only hints of it here, and he will leave its full development until the end of the book. Yet he points the reader in the right direction. Only one approach remains. It is this: life and work only have meaning if they are related to the God who gives them (2:24-25). So long as life and work are ends in themselves, they are vapor, for everything will be left to someone else. But when they are understood as gifts of God, there can be satisfaction and enjoyment. So, enjoy life-not as an end in itself, but as a gift of the Creator. God is not an absentee landlord. He is a gracious provider, giving freedom to enjoy his daily gifts. Meaning is derived, not from the gift but from the giver. Life is not so much to be taken as received. The real meaning of life is to be found in a person's relationship to his or her Creator (2:26a). Any other path leads to vapor, a chasing after wind (2:26b). Qoheleth's statement that everything will be handed over to the one who pleases God is a premonition of the final verdict: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever" (Rv. 11:15)!

Seasons of Life (3:1-15)

Commentators differ in their assessment of what is arguably the most beloved passage in Ecclesiastes. Is our writer decrying the tyranny of time or extolling the rhythms of a contented life before God? Both viewpoints have much to recommend them, and it may be that they are not mutually exclusive. Certainly

there is a season for all activity (3:1), and the polarities of experience ring true (3:2-8). Still, with even the most balanced of lives, there comes a point when the question must be asked, "But what does the doer gain from all his toil" (3:9)? Modern observers of the seasons of human life call it "mid-life crisis." The desperate question of meaning (3:10) lies side-by-side with the affirmation that God has ordered time in beautiful cadence (3:11a). Is the rhythmic ebb and flow of time all there is? This is the question that rings like a hammer on the anvil of Qoheleth's mind. What is left when the seasons of life are ended? Are we to be like Ozymandias in the classic verse by Shelley, a lonely colossus crumbling in a forgotten desert where "the lone and level sands stretch far away?" "No," says Qoheleth, "this is not all there is!" There is something more-the awareness of eternity-and this something is the only thing that gives ultimate meaning to the rhythms of life (3:11b).

The problem, of course, is that as finite humans we see only bits and pieces (3:11c). Unlike God, we cannot see the future, so for us the present is difficult to understand as well. For the person who does not take God into account, there is a terrific collision between the innate thirst for transcendent immortality and the blunt reality of imminent death. Qoheleth puts his finger on the human pulse and concludes that only for the believer does the certainty of death not lead to despair. In turn, this knowledge of the God who sees the totality of life from beginning to end frees the believer to appreciate and enjoy the rhythms of life as divine, if temporary, gifts (3:12-15).

God's Judgment (3:16--4:3)

The preceding phrase in 3:15, "God will call the past to account," anticipates the theme of this next section. The structure is important as it proceeds from "I saw something..." (3:16) to "I thought in my heart..." (3:17) to "I also thought..." (3:18) to "So I saw [or, concluded]..." (3:22).

The initial observation is that the world is full of injustice (3:16). Qoheleth's observation is the ancient equivalent of the American realism school of literature from the pens of such writers as Ernest Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis, Willa Cather, Jack London and Stephen Crane with their commitment to describing life in all its brutality, injustice and meaninglessness. Qoheleth's initial observation leads to the reflection that justice will only be achieved by the God who is able to call the past to account (3:17). It is God who, through the certainty of death, urges humans to recognize that apart from him they are only animals, brutal to each other and meaningless to themselves (3:18-21). In light of these observations, the only conclusion to be reached concerning the rhythmic activities of life is to enjoy them as temporary gifts (3:22). They may be enjoyed, but they will never yield ultimate

meaning, since time is full of injustice and awaits the future when God will balance the scales.

It is a tribute to the image of God in humans that, however flawed and shot through with massive injustice, we continue to care deeply about the importance of true justice. It is out of this visceral longing for justice that Qoheleth offers his strong dose of realism. The reader must remember, of course, that for the time being Qoheleth is writing as a secularist whose experiment is carried out "under the sun," that is, in the world at ground level without any assumptions of faith and God. In such a world, there is rampant oppression, exploitation and misery (4:1). If God is not there, Qoheleth drives us to what T. S. Eliot called "an overwhelming question," that is, the question of meaning. If God is not there, then nothing matters. The dead are better off than the living, and the unborn are better than both (4:2-3)!

Nine to Five (4:4-12)

Though the expression "sunup to sundown" has been replaced by the modern description "nine to five," men and women still struggle with the pointlessness of work. Too often our work has no value beyond a utilitarian means to an end. We seem to have more leisure but less constructive use for it. For most of the history of civilization, rest periods were intended for recuperation in order to work better. Today, instead of resting so they can work, people use work in order to have money to play. The highest value is not the work week but the weekend. Our work is characterized by non-meaning. Though once we upheld the ideal of work as a means of contributing to society, the community and the family, today work is a means to the end of supporting ourselves as individual consumers. For Qoheleth, work by itself was futile, a chasing after wind. In our own century, work has become even less meaningful for us than it was for him!

Qoheleth's evaluation of work begins with motivation. The driving force behind work is ambition, or as he puts it, "man's envy of his neighbor" (4:4). This striving to "get ahead," the incentive of rivalry, and the profit/loss factor leaves the worker with no enduring meaning. Of course, other motivations (or lack of them) are hardly better. The drop-out is a fool who shirks work and literally "eats his own flesh" (4:5, Hebrew). The workaholic finds no enduring worth in his work, while the loafer is self-destructive. The best a person can achieve is a middle ground between the two extremes-working enough but not too much (4:6)!

The most hopeless of all workers is the radical individualist, the "self-made man," who has no other end in view than accumulating wealth. He has nothing above his own selfish interests to respect or obey, no principles to live or die for beyond his own profit/loss margin. Like the multi-millionaire who was asked how

much money was enough, he responds, "Just a little more" (4:7-8)! Work that is relationally motivated, on the other hand, has at least some relative value, for it contributes to friendships, helping others, protection and stability (4:9-12). Work can be meaningful if it reaches beyond the self. The benefits of work must not be to make the rich richer, but to serve the needs of others. But the compulsive consumer is starkly alone, much like the rich farmer in Jesus' parable who continued to build greater barns but was not "rich toward God" (Lk. 12:13-21).

Advancement is Empty (4:13-16)

The beginning aphorism springs from the previous remarks about amassing wealth. A poor, wise youth is better than a foolish king who though rich has gradually become desensitized (4:13). The meaning of 4:14 is beset with translational ambiguities in the Hebrew text due to the uncertainty of how to take the pronouns.¹²⁷ Here, we follow the meaning that the youth advances toward the throne until his popularity outstrips his predecessor (4:14-15). Still, even this popularity is fleeting, for the public is fickle. The youth who becomes king will eventually suffer the same isolation as his predecessor (4:16).

Vows and Faithfulness (5:1-7)

From the worker, Qoheleth turns to the worshipper. If meaning is elusive within work and social advancement, what about religion? While Qoheleth seems to favor deep piety, he gives serious warning to the man or woman who is cavalier in religion expression. Qoheleth's approach to religion is in terms of vows, which are promises made to God or promises made to others with God as witness. Vows in ancient Israel could be of various kinds. Jacob, for instance, bargained with God for protection (Ge. 28:20-22), while David made a devotional vow concerning a permanent site for the building of the temple (Ps. 132:2-5). Invariably, vows were confirmed by oaths like, "As Yahweh lives..." or "God may do whatever he wants with me and even more besides if..." Qoheleth advises that vows are to be treated seriously! To be casual with God is to be flippant toward his sovereignty. What people commit to God, they must be prepared to maintain.

So, caution in religion is advisable (5:1a). Rash promises are the sacrifice of fools (5:1b-3). Vows should be taken seriously, for it is better not to promise God anything at all than to make promises and renege (5:4-6a). Failure to fulfil one's vows invites divine judgment (5:6b). Vows are to be made in solemn awareness of God's sovereignty, not in grandiose and dreamy words (5:7).

¹²⁷See discussion in M. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1983) 96.

The Midas Touch (5:8--6:12)

Like the fabled King Midas of Phrygia, who was blessed and cursed with the gift that everything he touched turned to gold (and so he feared that he would starve to death), Qoheleth relentlessly explores the emptiness of wealth. He begins by commenting on the detractions of poverty. He observes that the poverty-stricken person is caught in the coils of bureaucracy so that he or she can never secure justice. Officials are more interested in the opinions of their superiors, all the way up to the king, than in the plight of the poor (5:8-9). Consequently, the person without sufficient means to bribe officials are certain to be oppressed, for as is stated elsewhere, "A gift opens the way for the giver and ushers him into the presence of the great" (Pro. 18:16).

However, there are dark sides to wealth, and one of them is that the love of money is addictive. The person in love with wealth always wants more (5:10). The more he amasses wealth, the more there are those who want to help him spend it. The only thing left to the wealthy person is to feast his eyes on the vultures who want to spend his capital (5:11). While common laborers can sleep deeply, whether or not they get enough to eat, the wealthy man gets no rest at all. He is preoccupied with how to preserve what he has gained (5:12). His wealth burns him while he hoards it, and it burns him again when he loses it in the whims of misfortune (5:14). He leaves the world as naked as the day he entered it (5:15-16). The personal toll caused by his wealth is tragic, bringing misery, frustration, sickness and rage (5:17).

There is a better approach to life than the addiction to what Jesus called "the deceitfulness of wealth," and to this better way Qoheleth now turns. Hard work, prosperity, and even abundance may be rightfully enjoyed so long as one understands them to be the temporary gifts of God during earthly life (5:18-19). Still, such things are privileges, not rights, and whatever a person has must be accepted as gifts to be received with appreciation. Only in this way can a person avoid being caught up in the self-reflection of despair (5:20). At the same time, all wealth is temporary. Even if a man gains everything he could hope for, he may still die prematurely and leave his accumulated wealth to others (6:1-2). On the other hand, if he fathers a hundred children and manages a long life, he will still die in the end and leave it all to someone else who probably will not even care that he gets a decent burial. It would be better to be stillborn (6:3)! The stillborn child who has no meaning at all has more rest than a rich man who lives on and on but does not enjoy his wealth as the gift of God (6:6a). And in the end, both the stillborn and the aged miser find death just the same (6:6b).

So, Qoheleth is brought to this profound observation: men and women toil endlessly, but they find no fulfillment, since tangible things, like food, do not meet

their deepest needs (6:7). The wise man is no different than the idiot in this regard. The poor man, even if he ingratiates himself to his superiors, gets nothing for his trouble (6:8). Rich or poor, it is better to simply look upon the goods of earthly life (with an eye toward their beauty as God's gifts) than to try to possess them (6:9). The drive to possess, like everything else, ends as vapor! Humans cannot escape their limitations, nor can they alter the world God has made by renaming it (6:10-11). God has already named what exists and sovereignly known the humans he created, so multiplying definitions doesn't change anything. In any case, existence is full of unanswered questions, both during life and after death (6:12).

The Search for Wisdom (7:1--8:17)

Inasmuch as the Book of Ecclesiastes falls within the genre of Hebrew wisdom literature, it is no surprise that Qoheleth spends considerable time examining the human experience of wisdom. Wisdom was supreme for the citizen of the ancient Near East (cf. Pr. 4:7). The literary form of wisdom, especially in ancient Israel, is most frequently the poetic expression of adages and aphorisms in couplets, sometimes synonymous and sometimes antithetic. The parallelism of the two lines stimulated the reflective mind by allowing the ideas to play one against the other.¹²⁸

Here, Qoheleth collects the wisdom of his age and sets it out for the reader (7:25). Like Diderot and Jean L'Ambert in the 1700s, the Enlightenment encyclopedists who tried to summarize the totality of philosophic and scientific knowledge of the age, Qoheleth set out to investigate the limits of wisdom, but like others before him, he discovered that the task was impossible (7:23-24; 8:16-17). Still, he allows the reader to "look over his shoulder" during the effort and share his observations.

He begins with a pun in which "name" (shem) is compared with oil (shemen), possibly the kinds of oil mixed with perfumes (7:1a; cf. Am. 6:6). Just as depth of character is better than the superficiality of an artificial scent, so a funeral is more instructive than a birth (7:1b). It is a gloomy sort of wisdom that promotes funerals over parties, but Qoheleth is not exploring pleasure, but wisdom, and parties do not cause one to reflect on life. Funerals do! The reality of death forces humans to contemplate the meaning of life, while fun and games are by their very nature diversionary (7:2-6; cf. Ps. 90:12).

Then follows four dangers, the danger of power that corrupts (7:7), the danger of impatient pride (7:8), the danger of a quick temper (7:9), and the danger of nostalgia's selective memory (7:10). Each in their own way thwart the way of

¹²⁸ G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), p. 28.

wisdom, which preserves life (7:11-12). True wisdom recognizes the human limitations that God has imposed and seeks to learn from both joyful and painful experiences, since both come from his sovereign hand (7:13-14). It is quite permissible to enjoy the good moments of life as divine gifts, but it is also important to recognize that difficult times shape character. Both the good and the difficult come from God! C. S. Lewis agrees emphatically in his oft quoted observation: God whispers to us in our pleasures, but he shouts to us in our pains-it is his megaphone to a deaf world.

In a fallen world, life is not fair. The righteous are often exploited, while the wicked frequently succeed (7:15). Since life is unfair, one should not gauge morality by what happens in the observable world. The belief that virtue will be fully rewarded in this life-or that corruption will be fully repaid-is a counsel of despair (7:16-17). The one who fears God should hold onto both righteousness and wisdom, but he should avoid unwarranted expectations about just deserts in this life (7:18). Still, wisdom is the right way to go so long as one does not anticipate perfection in oneself or in others (7:19-22). If Qoheleth is disillusioned with moral rectitude in men, he is even more disillusioned with moral rectitude in women (7:26-28). His cynicism in this regard is surely overstated. Still, all humans have strayed from God's righteousness into their own schemes (7:29; cf. Is. 53:6; Ro. 1:28-32).

So, who is really wise (8:1a)? Only the one who can face all of life's unfairness with gracious demeanor (8:1b)! The wise man faces the grim realities of life with balance. He can cope with the absolute authority of a king, serving honestly and respectfully (8:2-6). He can confront the inevitability of his own death with composure (8:7-8a). He can recognize and avoid the bondage that comes with immorality (8:8b).

Shifting now to prose, Qoheleth continues his observations about the unfairness of life by pointing out the hypocrisy of those who seem to be religious while exploiting others, and the lack of criminal deterrence when the wheels of justice turn too slowly (8:9-11). Criminals often live long lives, even though good sense dictates that old age should be the reward of the godly and reverent (8:12-13). Still, justice must await the end, while the present life is unfair; the profligate gets the reward while the moral person gets the shaft (8:14). Life's unfairness is vapor indeed!

Finally, as he concluded earlier (3:12), Qoheleth advises his readers to accept life as God's day-to-day gift (8:15). The desire to capture the boundaries of wisdom will never be fulfilled in this life "under the sun" (8:16-17). It is as one man put it: The good Lord set definite limits on man's wisdom, but set no limits on his stupidity!

The Emptiness of Death (9:1-12)

The reader is now approaching the end of Qoheleth's grand experiment. He has explored the different accents of life from the sandals of the secularist, who looks at life "under the sun." He has invited the reader to observe with him the hard reality and even cynicism that is inescapable. In this quest, Qoheleth has discovered many things, such as the rhythms of life, the unfairness of society, and the tedium of existence. Finally, he has concluded that the deeper meaning of existence cannot be discovered merely by observation and experimentation. Final wisdom is elusive. To be sure, preliminary wisdom is achievable, such as the observation that there are some relative values in the world, but when all has been examined, humans cannot discover the full meaning of life.

Now Qoheleth intends to examine the most universal category of life which to this point he has treated only briefly, and it is the reality of death. As is expressed in The Book of Common Prayer, "In the midst of life, we are in death." Qoheleth is not suicidal; rather, he examines the meaning of death in all its unexpectedness. Death is not a choice we make, but rather, a choice made for us, often without warning. In fact, humans are not even sure that in the end they will be loved or hated (9:1). The only thing certain is the certainty of their own death (9:2). To view the present life "under the sun" as the totality of existence means that justice will never be satisfied, because everyone dies, both the good and the bad (9:3-6). Logic urges that good people should live longer, capable people should be successful, strong people should win, and smart people should well-fed and rich (9:11-12). In fact, life often brings quite the opposite.

So, the very best thing a person can do during life "under the sun" is to accept the good gifts of God and enjoy them to the full. Good food, the small comforts, the blessing of a good marriage, the fulfillment of creative work-this is as good as it is likely to get "under the sun," and there are no guarantees (9:7-10). Everything can come crashing down in a moment (9:12)!

Wisdom is Better than Folly (9:13--10:20)

If the value of wisdom "under the sun" is relative, Qoheleth still wants to press home the truth that wisdom, even relative wisdom, is superior to folly.

As an example, he recounts an anecdote about a siege in which a poor but wise man saved a small city from a powerful antagonist. Still, humans are fickle, and while the wisdom of the poor man was better than folly, it was quickly forgotten (9:13-16). Nevertheless, quiet wisdom is to be valued, even though its value is relative (9:17-18).

Wisdom, as valuable as it is, can be overwhelmed by just a little foolishness (10:1-3). One sort of folly is the quickness with which the fool resigns under

pressure. Under the guise of principle, he abdicates his post, when his real motive is injured pride (10:4). Calmness, not rash action, should prevail, for as the modern cliché puts it, "What goes around comes around" (10:4-7)! Wisdom admits that there are risks in any venture, so the wise person faces life's risks with unruffled calm (10:8-11). It is the fool who thinks he can explain every foible in life, but his multitude of words betrays his stupidity (10:12-15).

Qoheleth closes with a few social observations. A kingdom is blessed if its leaders are responsible (10:16-17), but neglect is the pathway to ruin (10:18). Indolent fools who live to party are no better than the sloth who allows his roof to collapse (10:19). The person of wisdom will be cautious about voicing his most private thoughts, even in the safety of his own quarters, for the news of his opinions will eventually make their way to the very ones of whom he is critical.

The Bottom Line (11:1--12:14)

At last Qoheleth has taken us to the threshold of his conclusion. What he has said will either drive us over the precipice or drive us to agreement. In view of all he has explored, he has discovered that the activities of life under the sun are vapor. Nothing is enduring; nothing has final meaning. Eternity is in the human heart, but death thwarts the urge for transcendence. So then, what is the point of living at all? If one believes in God at all, the implications deserve to be followed right through to the end. In fact, this is Qoheleth's "bottom line"-that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. But, as we have come to see, he saves this for last.

In this quest, we, the readers, have been allowed to put on the robes of Solomon and to observe the world under the sun without an intimate knowledge of God. We have not returned empty-handed, for we have discovered much wisdom. We know something of relative values. We have discovered that in living under the sun there is nothing better than to enjoy life with one's spouse and find satisfaction in one's work. We have seen that it pays to do good, even in this life, and the life of the fool is self-destructive. When times are good, we ought to enjoy them as a gift. When they are bad, we ought to reflect on the whole of life, not just its pieces.

Still, Qoheleth is no blind optimist. He clearly recognizes the darker side of life, for even in the best of circumstances there is a dark thread woven in the woof and warp of existence. We see it in the motives of envy and greed that inspire some people to succeed. We see it in the lonely tycoon, the injustice of the legal system, and the unexpected foibles that, in spite of all our efforts, bring humans to failure. In the end, everyone faces the grim reaper, and no one knows when his end will come. The future is always a question mark. So, again and again,

Qoheleth cries out, "Vapor, vapor, utterly vapor--everything is vapor!" No less than twenty-seven times he uses this word. In the modern parlance of T. S. Eliot, "This is the way the world ends, not with a bang but a whimper."¹²⁹

In bringing us to his final conclusion, Qoheleth first urges the wisdom of generosity and foresight, but more than that, the venture of faith. If it is true that no human can second guess God and the future (11:5), it is also true that men and women must follow their deepest values and trust in their Maker. This includes a confidence in the rightness of altruism (11:1), the responsibility to be generous to those less fortunate than oneself (11:2), and the wisdom of knowing that the patterns one adopts early in life will set the direction for the whole (11:3-4). Procrastination and idleness are deadly, so one must make the most of all opportunities (11:6-7). Above all, life under the sun should be an adventure in joy, for if life is the gift of God, as Qoheleth has argued earlier, then it should be appreciated and received as such (11:7-10).

Such joy is not just "whistling in the dark," however. It springs from the fundamental commitment to live fully for one's Creator from earliest childhood (12:1). Qoheleth's choice of the word "Creator" is deliberate, for most people live as though the universe and themselves are only the result of blind, unconscious force. They accept that the universe exists-and they know that they exist too-but there is no reason, no cause, no purpose, and no universal intelligence behind it all. But while one can believe that all existence is absurd and does not matter, no one can live that way. Every action in life instinctively cries out for meaning. Qoheleth says that the sooner one realizes this, the better! One must not wait until it is too late, until like the old man in Eliot's *Gerontion* he says, "Here I am, an old man in a dry month, being read to by a boy, waiting for rain."

When Qoheleth says to "remember the Creator," he is not speaking of merely a mental act; rather, he calls for his readers to drop their pretense of self-sufficiency and commit themselves to God. His images of old age are haunting-the chill of winter, nightfall and storm (12:2). The "house," that is, one's physical body, begins to deteriorate. Teeth fall out, and eyes fail (12:3). One has limited access to the outside world and can no longer walk to the mill (12:4a). Older people do not sleep well, and even though they arise before dawn, their loss of hearing prevents them from enjoying the songs of the birds (12:4b). Older people are afraid of heights and public life (12:5a). Their hair turns gray, they lose agility, and their sexual desire dies (12:5b). Nothing remains but the funeral service (12:5c). So, Qoheleth urges, before life is exhausted in futility and despair, remember the Creator (12:6-8)! This, and this only, provides ultimate meaning!

¹²⁹ From *The Hollow Men*

The Epilogue (12:9-14)

The closing section of Ecclesiastes offers a short biographical note about Qoheleth and his valuable teaching (12:10). It urges the readers of the book to allow its wisdom to goad them toward ultimate meaning, a meaning that is fixed firmly in God (12:11). Books come and go (12:12), but only one conclusion matters. It is the resolution to reverence God, to obey him, and to remember that he, and only he, is able to provide a final resolution to the unanswered questions of life under the sun (12:13-14).

The Lamentations

The first prophetic voice to directly declare that Jerusalem and Mt. Zion would be leveled by invaders was Micah in the 8th century BC.

*Therefore because of you, Zion will be plowed like a field,
Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble,
the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets.*

Micah 3:12

Of course, the Deuteronomic theology had threatened this very thing for a long time. The curses for covenant disobedience included the loss of the promised land (Dt. 28:49-52, 64-68), and such a loss necessarily included any sacred shrines, such as the temple. At the time of the first temple's dedication, Yahweh was even more explicit in voicing to Solomon this potential for disaster.

But if you turn away and forsake the decrees and commands I have given you...then I will uproot Israel from my land, which I have given them, and will reject this temple I have consecrated for my Name. I will make it a byword and an object of ridicule among all peoples. And though this temple is now so imposing, all who pass by will be appalled and say, 'Why has the LORD done such a thing to this land and to this temple?'

2 Chronicles 7:19-21

Though Micah was the first to pronounce doom on the first temple, he certainly was not the last. Isaiah, his contemporary, hinted at the same thing (Is. 3:26). A century later, the voice of Jeremiah declared unequivocally that what God once did to Shiloh, he now would do to Jerusalem and the temple (Je. 7:12-15; 26:4-6). Though some citizens thought the offenses against the temple were temporary and that the treasures stripped from the temple to pay tribute to the Mesopotamian power-brokers would soon be restored (Je. 27:16; 28:1-4, 10-11; cf. 2 Kg. 24:13; 2 Chr. 36:10), Jeremiah predicted that the temple treasures still left would soon follow to Babylon (Je. 27:16-22). God intended to smash Jerusalem like a clay jar (Je. 19:11-15). Joel, too, declared that the temple was in danger (Joel 2:1), and Huldah bluntly announced that God would bring disaster upon it (2 Chr. 34:22-28). Ezekiel, though exiled to Babylon in the first deportation along with King Jehoiachin (cf. Eze. 1:1-2), preached that the glory of Yahweh had abandoned the first temple in preparation for its ultimate destruction (Eze. 10:3-5,

18-19; 11:22-25). God was against Jerusalem, and a third of its citizens would die in the siege, a third would perish outside the city, and the rest would be scattered to the winds (Eze. 5:8-12, 14-17). Even if intercessors like Moses and Samuel prayed for the city it would not be enough (Je. 15:1-4). Even if righteous men like Noah, Job and Daniel were in the city, they would barely save themselves (Eze. 14:14, 20). Zedekiah, the last king in David's line, would be executed in Babylon (Eze. 17:16-21). Yahweh had drawn his sword from the scabbard, and Jerusalem and the temple would be his victims (Eze. 21:1-5). Jerusalem was like a white-hot smelter, and God's wrath was the fire that would melt it down (Eze. 22:17-22). Ezekiel's final doomsday oracle, the cooking of Jerusalem (24:3-12), was preached in Babylon on the day Jerusalem was put to siege (Eze. 24:1-2).

Of course, such a message was hard to accept in view of the glowing promises of the Davidic covenant (2 Sa. 7:8-16). Had God not chosen Mt. Zion as his dwelling-place forever (Ps. 46:1-7; 48:1-14; 78:67-69; 132:13-16)? Had he not chosen David's family to rule from Jerusalem forever (Ps. 89:3-4, 19-29, 34-37; 132:11-12, 17-18)? Surely Zion could never be captured by a pagan enemy, for even though the city might be attacked, it would be saved by Yahweh at the last moment (Is. 29:1-8; 31:4-5; Mic. 4:11-13)! Had not Yahweh saved the city "for the sake of David" when Sennacherib of Assyria invaded (Is. 37:33-37)?

Upon such a royal theology, the citizens of Jerusalem based their hopes that the city and temple were impregnable. When Micah predicted coming disaster, he was rebuked by his colleagues (Mic. 2:6-7). Surely the **LORD** would not do such a thing! God was among Jerusalem's citizens, so surely they were safe from disaster (Mic. 3:11). The people who listened to Zephaniah were complacent, like "wine left on its dregs". They said, "Yahweh will do nothing, either good or bad" (Zep. 1:12). Jeremiah, his contemporary, struggled mightily against a prevailing attitude fostered by false prophets that Jerusalem always would be spared (Je. 4:9-10; 5:12-13; 6:13-14; 8:11; 27:9-10, 14-15). The worshippers at the first temple believed themselves to be utterly safe, no matter what (Je. 7:9-10). When Jeremiah predicted that God would destroy the temple, he was threatened with execution as a heretic (Je. 26:10-12).

Among the exiles of the first deportation, Ezekiel also contended with false optimists who insisted that the prediction of disaster would fail (Eze. 12:21-22), or if it happened at all, it would not happen for a long time (Eze. 12:26-27). Ezekiel, for his part, considered such voices to be whitewash that obscured the real state of affairs (Eze. 13:10-16). Nevertheless, Ezekiel's oracles were dismissed as simply illustrations that had no true historical relevance (Eze. 20:49).

In the end, Jerusalem and the temple did fall. The Babylonians breached the walls, sacked the city, executed the king and burned the temple (2 Kg. 25; 2 Chr.

36:15-20; Je. 39, 52; Eze. 33:21-33). What Jerusalem's citizens thought could never happen, happened! The Lamentations are written out of this context. Most scholars agree, since several parts of the Lamentations offer first-hand accounts of the terrible disaster, that the poems were composed not very long after the event, possibly even in 587/6 BC, the year of Jerusalem's fall.¹³⁰ Though the author is unnamed (see below), he must surely have been present at the disaster.

As is typical in Jewish circles, the book is named after its first word in Hebrew, *'echah* (= how!). In the Septuagint (Greek) and Vulgate (Latin), it is called "Tears" or "Dirges" (Threni), and the English title is derived from the Latin superscription, *Theni, id est lamentationes Jeremiae prophetae*.

Author

Tradition, both Jewish and Christian, credits the Lamentations to Jeremiah, taking the lead from the Septuagint, which contains the superscription, And it came to pass, after Israel was taken captive, and Jerusalem made desolate, that Jeremias sat weeping, and lamented with this lamentation over Jerusalem, and said....¹³¹

This tradition was adopted by the Vulgate in Christian circles and by the Talmud in Jewish circles. Nevertheless, the superscription is not an original part of the text, and formally the work is anonymous. To be sure, Jeremiah was surely present when Jerusalem was destroyed (cf. Je. 39:11-14). Furthermore, earlier in his lifetime he composed funeral dirges for Josiah upon his death (2 Chr. 34:25), so such compositions certainly were within his range of literary experience. Various internal arguments, largely concerning style and phraseology that seem similar between Lamentations and Jeremiah, can be cited.¹³² Consequently, Jeremiah must remain a viable candidate for authorship, even though the question cannot be settled with finality. (However, see the comments on the third lament.) Those who doubt Jeremiah's authorship rely upon perceived dissimilarities between Jeremiah's theology and some parts of Lamentations.

Literary Style

Lamentations consists of five dirges for the death of Jerusalem and the

¹³⁰ O. Eissfeldt can be taken as typical, cf. *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, trans. P. Ackroyd (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), pp. 503-504.

¹³¹ A more recent tradition is that Jeremiah composed the poems in a cavern in Jerusalem near Gordon's Calvary, now called the Grotto of Jeremiah, the site General Charles Gordon (1883) believed to be Golgotha, D. Cole, D. Bahat and H. Shanks, *Jerusalem Archaeology Slide Set* (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1983), p. 25.

¹³² A good summary of them can be found in E. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 343.

temple. Of these, four (chapters 1-4) are written as acrostics, each strophe beginning with the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet in order.¹³³ The strophes in chapters 1, 2 and 4 correspond to the verse divisions. In chapter 3, however, each strophe has three lines, and all three lines in each strophe begin with the appropriate alphabetic letters for this sequence. Hence, chapter 3 contains sixty-six verses. Chapter 5, even though it contains twenty-two verses, is not an acrostic.

The dominant meter of the poems is the *qinah* (= lament), the traditional rhythm of the Hebrew dirge (3 + 2 beat, similar to English iambic pentameter).¹³⁴ Examples are:

*Ah, how she lies / deserted / the city /
[once] full of / people (1:1)
She went into exile / Judah / after affliction /
and after harsh / labor (1:3)*

One other literary factor should be observed. The five poems seem to form a stepped parallelism or chiasm.

- A 1st Lament: The disaster of Jerusalem
- B 2nd Lament: From glory to shame
- C 3rd Lament: Disaster mitigated by hope
- B 4th Lament: From glory to shame
- A 5th Lament: The disaster of Jerusalem

In this sort of structure, the themes at the beginning and end match each other while the middle section becomes emphasized. Chiastic structure is common in Hebrew poetry, sometimes appearing in single lines, sometimes in tri-cola and sometimes in longer passages.¹³⁵ In the Lamentations, the theme of redemptive hope falls squarely in the middle of the chiasmus, thus making it emphatic.

¹³³ The acrostics in chapters 2-4 have the irregularity that the Hebrew **ד** precedes the letter **ו**.

¹³⁴ E. Gerstenberger, *Psalms Part I with an Introduction to Cultic Poetry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 10-11.

¹³⁵ W. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986), pp. 204-207.

Annual Recital

Like the other books in the Megilloth, Lamentations was read during the annual cycle of sacred days in Israel's liturgical year. Specifically, it was read on the 9th of Ab (June/July), the day of reflection upon Jerusalem's destruction. Though other fasts also were observed in connection with the tragedy of Jerusalem (cf. Zec. 7:3, 5; 8:19), the fast of the fifth month (Ab) became the premier fast in Judaism. Though originally the anniversary of the temple's destruction was the 7th of Ab (2 Kg. 25:8-9), by the second century AD it was changed to the 9th to accommodate the destruction of the second temple (AD 70) and the failure of the second Jewish revolt (AD 135).¹³⁶

The First Lament (1)

The opening dirge can be divided into two major sections, the first (verses 1-11) written in the third person and the second (verses 12-22) written in the first person. Both rely heavily on personification, where Jerusalem is first depicted as a widow (1:1ff.) and later as refugee of war (1:12ff.). The city has gone from being a queen to a slave (1:1). Her friends and lovers-her political allies-have all abandoned her (1:2, 7), many of her citizens are now in exile (1:3, 6), and the rest are eking out a precarious existence (1:11). The ancient celebrations that were staged at the temple have disappeared (1:4).

The poet is quite straightforward that this disaster was a divine act of judgment because of Judah's covenant breaking ways (1:5, 8), but the grief over the country's terrible loss compels an agonizing petition for mercy. Twice, the poet lapses into direct addresses to God (1:9b, 11b). The fundamental structures of Israelite life-the land (1:3), the temple (1:4, 10) and the royal family (1:6)-all are devastated. Expressions such as "daughter" or "virgin daughter" appear frequently in the book-some twenty times, which is quite remarkable for such a short work. Obviously, this language expresses the metaphor that Jerusalem is personified as a bereft woman. It may also serve to illustrate that the city is itself the "daughter" of the temple mount, a way of expressing the relationship and priority between the city and the sacred shrine.¹³⁷ Jerusalem has been exposed like a prostitute publicly stripped (1:8) and indifferent to the menstrual blood defiling her clothing (1:9).

Changing from her plea to God for mercy, the city, still personified as a bereft victim of war, now entreats her political neighbors for sympathy (1:12). The

¹³⁶ H. Ellison, "Lamentations," *EBC* (1986) VI.697.

¹³⁷ The term "daughter," for instance, in other contexts can refer to peripheral villages that depend upon a central city, cf. I. Hopkins, "The 'Daughters of Judah' Are Really Rural Satellites of an Urban Center," *BAR* (Sep/Oct 1980), p. 44-45.

despair of Jerusalem was an act of God (1:13), and the tragedy of judgment was a divine yoke that God put on Judah's neck (1:14). As Isaiah once pictured it, Yahweh trod the grapes of wrath, and Jerusalem was the victim (1:15; cf. Is. 63:2-4). Without comfort (1:16) or solace (1:17), Judah bears the righteous judgment she deserved (1:18, 20). She is abandoned by friends (1:19) and mocked by enemies (1:21). Yet out of the ashes of despair, Jerusalem prays for revenge as Samson once prayed (1:21b-22; cf. Jg. 16:28).

The Second Lament (2)

The second dirge intensifies the description of tragedy. Even more explicit is the affirmation that this destruction has been a divine act, and each of the first eight verses directly says so. "The Lord" has covered Jerusalem with his anger (2:1), "he" has swallowed Jacob's homes (2:2) and "he" has cut off Israel's families of power (2:3). "The Lord" is now the foe (2:4); "he" is the enemy (2:5)!

The section is rich in poetic figures of speech. The verbs "hurled down" (2:1), "swallowed up" (2:2, 5), "cut off" (2:3), "poured out" (2:4), "laid waste" (2:6), "abandoned" (2:7), "handed over" (2:7) and "tear down" (2:8) all depict the violence of Jerusalem's overthrow. Metaphors, such as, the divine "cloud of anger" (2:1), Jerusalem as God's "footstool" (2:1b), the "horns" depicting the resources of Judah's power (2:3), and Yahweh "stringing his bow" for judgment (2:4) make the fall of Jerusalem gripping and visual. The repeating imagery of wrathful fire that "burned" and "consumed" (2:3-4) is both metaphor and reality, since the Babylonians burned the temple and every important building in the city (cf. 2 Kg. 25:9; Ps. 74:7-8). The plaintive personification of ramparts and walls that "lament" (2:8) and the repetitive descriptions of desolation, when Yahweh "has not remembered" (2:1), "has withdrawn his right hand" (2:3), "has spurned" (2:6) and "has rejected and abandoned" (2:7) graphically depict God's refusal to defend the city. God deliberately measured the extent of his judgment like a surveyor with a measuring line (2:8). All the leaders of Judah have met the same fate as the city-princes (2:2), kings and priests alike (2:6). Finally, and worst of all, the altar and sanctuary-the very place Yahweh chose for his eternal dwellingplace-was consigned to desecration (2:6-7).

The horror of war was no respecter of persons (2:21-22). It destroyed royalty and religious leader alike (2:9, 20b), elders and youth (2:10), children and infants (2:11-12, 20a). The false prophets, especially, are held up for censure, because they failed in their calling to warn against Judah's covenant violation (2:9b, 14).¹³⁸ Now,

¹³⁸ One of the continual struggles of the true prophets were the opposing voices of the false prophets, who whitewashed the enormity of Israel's sins and casually dismissed the potential for judgment (cf. Je. 23:9-40; 28:1-17; Eze. 13:1-23).

the city is the object of scorn (2:15-17). She holds up her hands in pitiable despair, crying until she can cry no longer (2:11a, 13, 18-19).

The Third Lament (3)

Ronald Knox, in his translation of the Lamentations (1955), has attempted to reproduce the acrostic style in English with some success.¹³⁹ Notice how he accomplishes this in the first two sets of triplets in the third dirge.

KNOX

*Ah, what straits have I not known,
under the avenging rod!
Asked I for light, into deeper shadow
the Lord's guidance led me;
Always upon me, none other, falls
endlessly the blow.
Broken this frame, under the wrinkled
skin, the sunk flesh.
Bitterness of despair fills my prospect,
walled in on every side;
Buried in darkness, and, like the dead,
interminably.*

NIV

*I am the man who has seen affliction
by the rod of his wrath.
He has driven me away and made me
walk in darkness rather than light;
Indeed, he has turned his hand against me
again and again, all day long.
He has made my skin and my flesh grow old
and has broken my bones.
He has besieged me and surrounded me with
bitterness and hardship.
He has made me dwell in darkness like those
long dead.*

So far, the laments over Jerusalem have been offered in both the third person and the first person, but there has been no doubt but that in both cases the personification represents the city of Jerusalem and the temple. With the emphatic “I” as the first word in the third dirge, however, the question arises as to whether or not this lament is offered at a more personal level by an individual, such as, Jeremiah himself. The weeping poet of Lamentations (3:48-49) might well be the weeping Jeremiah (cf. Je. 9:1; 13:17; 14:17). The imagery of “dwelling in darkness” in a pit (3:6, 52-54) recalls Jeremiah’s descent into the mud cistern (cf. Je. 38:6), while the mocking ridicule of enemies (3:14, 61-63), the dilemma of unanswered prayer (3:8, 44) and the bitterness of existence (3:15) all have their counterparts in Jeremiah’s life and ministry (cf. Je. 15:10, 18; 17:15; 18:18; 20:7-8, 10, 14-18). Even the imprecatory prayer for just deserts to the persecutors (3:64-66) has its parallel in the confessions of Jeremiah (11:20; 17:18; 18:18-23).

¹³⁹ *The New Testament in the Translation of Monsignor Ronald Knox* (New York: Sheed and Ward, Inc. and Burns and Oates, Ltd., 1944)

Whether or not the poet is Jeremiah himself, not a few commentators have observed that the author at last seems to have the experiences of Jeremiah in mind.¹⁴⁰

The theme of this third lament, once again, is God's wrath. The wide-ranging metaphors for divine punishment—the rod (3:1-3), the siege (3:5-6), imprisonment (3:7-9), attack by savage carnivores (3:10-11), ambush (3:12-13), and goring (3:16)—all evoke mental images of terror and desperation. However, the third lament does not simply wallow in despair. Rather, it raises a vision of hope beyond disaster. This vision of hope was inherent in the Deuteronomic code (cf. Dt. 30:1-10), in Solomon's prayer of dedication for the first temple (2 Chr. 6:24-31, 36-39) and in the oracles of the prophets. Especially in the writing prophets, the messages of judgment invariably were mitigated with a vision of hope beyond judgment. So, also, the sufferer in this dirge looks beyond the present disaster of righteous judgment toward a merciful God "whose property", as the traditional language of the church phrases it, "is always to have mercy". So, in remembering judgment (3:19-20), the sufferer also remembers hope (3:21; cf. Hab. 3:2b).

This hope already has a concrete expression in that because of God's compassion a remnant survived the disaster of Jerusalem (3:22).¹⁴¹ God's covenant love (חסד), compassion (רחם) and faithfulness (אמונה) are demonstrated with every sunrise (3:22). So, the person of faith must look to Yahweh himself as his share of what belongs to him, not merely to the city of Jerusalem which he has lost.¹⁴² Waiting for Yahweh is a familiar refrain for the people of faith (Is. 40:31; 49:23; Mic. 7:7; Hab. 2:3; Ps. 27:14; 37:9; 40:1, etc.)! The Lord will not fail those who wait in hope (3:25-26). Suffering can be educational, and it is good for the believer to learn from the yoke of suffering while he is young (3:27-30). The instruction to "offer his cheek to the one who would strike him" (3:30) parallels the undeserved suffering of the Servant of the Lord (Is. 50:6), and both passages anticipate Jesus' teaching on innocent suffering and non-retaliation (Mt. 5:39//Lk. 6:29). Hope for the future is bound up in God's character, whose unfailing love surpasses his judgment (3:31-33). God is not oblivious to the injustices of life (3:34-36), and while he allows both good events and painful ones, there is an inscrutable divine purpose in human experience, both good and bad, to which men and women must surrender (3:37-39).

¹⁴⁰ See, for instance, T. Meek, *IB* (1956) 6.23 and R. Martin-Achard & S. Re'mi, *Amos & Lamentations [ITC]* (Grand Rapids/Edinburgh: Eerdmans/Handsel, 1984), p. 102.

¹⁴¹ With a slight emendation of the MT following the Syriac Peshitta and the Aramaic Targum, the RSV offers, "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases..." in 3:22a.

¹⁴² The term חלק (= portion, share of the property) is a common word-play on the idea of inheritance or property that is assigned by lots, and in this context, serves as a metaphor for the relationship between a human and God.

The mention of sins in 3:39 as one of the causes of suffering prompts the poet to take stock of what has happened to Judah. Shifting from the first person singular to the first person plural, he now speaks on behalf of the community under judgment, urging repentance (3:40-41). The prayer frankly acknowledges the nation's sin and rebellion (3:42). It details the disaster (3:43, 45, 47), the mockery (3:46) and the grief (3:48-49, 51). Though God has not yet answered his prayer for relief (3:44), the petitioner anticipates that he soon will (3:50). Previous experience has taught him that God answers prayer, for God has saved him before (3:52-58). Now, he prays for God to save him once again from the scathing mockery of his enemies (3:59-63). He concludes with a curse upon his tormenters (3:64-66).

There are three levels at which the third dirge can be read. Collectively, of course, the primary circumstance is communal-the sufferings of Jerusalem for her sins and covenant violation. Individually, the prophet Jeremiah and his troubles are also in view, as discussed above. However, as is typical in many individual laments in the Psalms, the sufferings of this poet can also be read as the sufferings of every human. Some are deserved; some are undeserved. Through them all, God only can be trusted "to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment" (cf. 2 Pe. 2:9). Within the interpretive framework of the individual sufferer, it is not a great leap to see in these passages a prefiguring of the suffering Christ, though of course, not for his own transgression but suffering vicariously in behalf of others. The evangelists may allude to this very association when they describe Jesus being struck in the face, thus offering "his cheek to one who would strike him" so that he would "be filled with disgrace" (cf. Mt. 26:67; Jn. 19:3).

The Fourth Lament (4)

Like the second dirge, this one emphasizes the horrors of the national loss. Jerusalem once was rich, but now her wealth has been reduced to clay (4:1-2). Parents, in their desperation to survive, neglect their children (4:3).¹⁴³ Citizens young and old are destitute (4:4-9). So desperate were the conditions of siege that some had resorted to cannibalism (4:10; cf. Eze. 5:10). Yet all this disaster was a divine judgment (4:11). Though for centuries Jerusalem appeared to be secure from all attack (4:12), the sins of the nation caught up with her (4:13). Jerusalem had been secure because of God's protection, not her natural defenses, and when Yahweh withdrew his protection because of the flagrant sins of the false prophets and priests, the city could not survive. There was so much death and corruption in the city that the priests were defiled to the point that no one would seek them out

¹⁴³ Apparently, the female ostrich had the reputation of neglecting her young (cf. Job 39:13-17).

(4:14-16; cf. Lv. 21:1-4; Nu. 35:23).

At various times Judah had hoped that Egypt would be her ally against the Mesopotamian empire-builders (cf. Is. 30:7; 36:6; Je. 37:4-15), but when the final day came, Judah looked for help in vain (4:17). Soon it was unsafe even to walk in the streets (4:18),¹⁴⁴ and when refugees fled the city, they were caught and killed (4:19; cf. Eze. 5:1-4, 11-12).¹⁴⁵ One figure, in particular, tried to escape at night with some of his troops-king Zedekiah, the “Lord’s anointed”, but he, too, was captured (4:20; cf. Eze. 12:1-14; 2 Kg. 25:4-7). The treachery of the Edomites held bitter memories, for they rejoiced at the fall of Jerusalem (4:21-22; Ob. 8-14; Eze. 25:12-14; 35:5; Ps. 137:7). Yet Edom, also, would drink of the wine of God’s wrath!¹⁴⁶

The Fifth Lament (5)

The final poem differs from the others in several ways. First, even though it has twenty-two stanzas, it was not composed as an acrostic. The poem serves as a corporate prayer representing the whole community. The meter changes from dirge to a pray for compassion. Whereas most of the other four dirges are dominated by the qinah meter (3 + 2 rhythm), this dirge is composed mostly in a 3 + 3 rhythm and some 4 + 3 rhythms.

This prayerful recitation of Jerusalem’s tragedy is intended to move the heart of God. Here, it is not only the people who remember, but they urge God to remember, too (5:1). The promised land has been lost (5:2). Judah’s citizens have become refugees, barely eking out an existence (5:3-4, 9). In the past, the people of Israel entered into suzerainty treaties with Egypt and Assyria for economic or political advantage (cf. Ho. 5:13; 7:11; 8:9; 11:5; 12:1 Je. 2:18-19, 36-37; Eze. 17:15; 2 Kg. 16:7-9), but all such political alliances were covenant violations that led to their downfall (5:7; cf. Ex. 34:12, 15; Dt. 7:2). Now, they were bearing the consequences of their sins-slavery (5:8), starvation (5:9), fever (5:10) and rape (5:11). The corpses of Judah’s royal sons had been exposed for shame (5:12a), and both old and young alike were reduced to forced labor (5:12b-14). Now there was no joy or celebration, for the wages of sin were hard indeed (5:15-18)!

Yet, as terrible as all these things were, the sovereignty of God offered a beacon of hope (5:19). If the kingdom of Judah was not the kingdom of God, it

¹⁴⁴ Whether this was due to curfews during the siege or Babylonian violence after the wall was breached is unclear.

¹⁴⁵ Obadiah adds that the Edomites cut down fleeing fugitives at the crossroads and handed over any survivors to the Babylonians (cf. Ob. 14).

¹⁴⁶ The “cup” is a common prophetic metaphor for divine judgment (cf. Is. 51:17, 22-23; Je. 25:15-29; 49:12-13; Eze. 23:31-34; Hab. 2:16).

equally was true that the failure of Jerusalem was not the failure of God. It remained for the survivors to turn their hearts toward Yahweh. Would he eternally forget them and banish them forever (5:20)? The question had been asked before (Ps. 13:1) and would yet be asked in the future (Ro. 11:1), and the answer seems implicit in God's redeeming love. Because God is who he is, it is always in order to pray for his mercy (5:21). Still, the final haunting line leaves open an ominous possibility (5:22).¹⁴⁷ One should probably read 5:20-22 as a chiasm so that the middle of the three concluding verses-5:21-is the emphatic one.

¹⁴⁷ In the Jewish synagogue reading of this passage, the rabbis always repeat 5:21 after 5:22 so that the final lines of the poem are less daunting, cf. Meek, p. 38.

The First Pogrom

The exile of the Jews was the most daunting theme of the Old Testament writing prophets. Early on, prophets began to raise the possibility of exile about two centuries before it actually happened. In the eighth century BC, Isaiah named his two sons, Maher-shallal-hash-baz and Shear-yashuv, and they became ominous portents toward the future (Is. 7:3; 8:1, 18). Jerusalem and Judah faced doomsday because of their unfaithfulness to Yahweh (Is. 3, 22, 29). Micah preached that Zion would be plowed like a field (Mic. 3:12). As the time drew closer, voice after voice predicted the inevitable destruction of Judah and Jerusalem. Zephaniah denounced Jerusalem as a city of oppressors under judgment (1:4; 3:1ff.). Jeremiah said that even if Moses and Samuel were alive to intercede, it would be too little too late (Je. 15:1-4). Habakkuk predicted that the Babylonians would be the scourge to punish God's wayward people (Hab. 1:5-6), and Ezekiel preached an unrelenting message of doomsday for Judah and Jerusalem (Eze. 9, 12, 15, 20, 24).

The worst fears of the citizens of Judah were realized. An early deportation of nobles to Babylon in 605 BC (cf. Da. 1:1) was followed by a more massive deportation in 598/7 BC (2 Kg. 24:8-17), including the king, and a total destruction of the city and the temple in 587/6 BC (2 Kg. 25). Yet a few more were deported to Babylon five years later (Je. 52:28-30). The years in exile lasted until the transition between the Babylonian and Persian Empires in 539 BC. Cyrus the Great of Persia implemented a new policy toward displaced peoples. Just as the Book of Isaiah had predicted, Cyrus allowed such peoples to return to their ancestral homes and rebuild their ancestral temples (Is. 44:26-54:3; 2 Chr. 36:22-23).¹⁴⁸ Some fifty thousand Jews began the arduous trek to the west (Ezr. 2:64-67). Later, more Jewish exiles came to Jerusalem with Ezra (Ezr. 8), and apparently, some smaller groups trickled back on their own (Zec. 6:9ff.).

Not all Jews returned to Judah and Jerusalem, however, nor did all Jews even want to return. Jeremiah had sent a letter to the exiles of the first deportation that they should not expect to return home soon. Instead, they ought to settle in their new land and find a means of support (Je. 29). Apparently, they took him seriously, for Ezra had a difficult time finding Levites to accompany him to Jerusalem (Ezr. 8:15b-20). Nevertheless, communications were maintained

¹⁴⁸ Cyrus' decree, as made clear in the famous Cyrus' Cylinder, was not for the Jews alone. Cyrus announced that he "resettled upon the command of Marduk, the great lord, all the gods of Sumer and Akkad whom Nabonidus has brought into Babylon...unharmd, in their (former) chapels, the places which make them happy," J. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1958) 1.208.

between the Jewish communities in Jerusalem and Persia (Ne. 1:1-3). Especially in the eastern part of the Persian Empire, Jews settled in various areas, including Babylon, Elam, Parthia, Media and Armenia.¹⁴⁹ The Book of Esther is the only work in the Hebrew Bible that directly addresses what came to be called the Diaspora Jews living in Persia.¹⁵⁰

Several introductory issues require comment concerning this book, and they revolve around four issues: provenance, historicity, canonicity and purpose.

Provenance

Concerning provenance, not much can be said with certainty. There is no internal indication concerning authorship. The work does not seem to be autobiographical, since it is written in the third person. Jewish traditions vary on possible authorship. Flavius Josephus, probably reflecting then current synagogue tradition, considered Mordecai to be the author.¹⁵¹ According to the Talmud, the men of the Great Synagogue wrote the scroll.¹⁵² However, neither of these opinions have won the day, and most scholars of all persuasions agree that the author is simply unknown. As to where and when the book was written, the familiarity of the author with Persian life and customs suggests that it was written within the Persian Period (539-332 BC). References to the Medo-Persian archives in 10:2, the absence of Greek words, and the presence of Old Persian terms that passed out of use by the Greek Period make it less likely to have been composed later the late Persian Period.¹⁵³

Historicity

The question of historicity is vexed by mixed evidence. While many critical scholars have followed the Jewish precedent from as early as the second century AD that the book is a pious fiction,¹⁵⁴ more on the order of the Book of Judith in the

¹⁴⁹ G. Alstine, *ISBE* (1979) I.963. Also, more than a century later, the first banking house in world history was established by the Jewish Murashu family, cf. F. Fensham, *The Book of Ezra, Nehemiah [NICOT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 11.

¹⁵⁰ In the Apocrypha, however, Diaspora Jews are featured in the book of Tobit.

¹⁵¹ Antiquities XI.6.1.

¹⁵² *Baba Bathra* 15a. The Great Synagogue in Jewish tradition was believed to be an assembly of Jewish scholars from the 5th to 3rd centuries BC who, following Ezra's lead, were active in recognizing and preserving the canon of the Hebrew Bible.

¹⁵³ M. Heltzer, "The Book of Esther," *BR* (Feb. 1992) 27.

¹⁵⁴ Rabbi Samuel in the 2nd century said that the book was apocryphal, cf. *Megilla* 7a. L. Brown says that all modern scholars regard Esther as having "no historical basis", though surely his opinion is overstated, cf. M. Black and H. Rowley, eds., *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (Hong Kong: Thomas Nelson, 1962), I.381.

Apocrypha, there are clear agreements between several parts of the story with known Persian history. That the book contains an accurate portrayal of Persian palaces and mannerisms has been known for a long time. The king in view, Ahasuerus in the Hebrew text, is clearly identified with Xerxes I (486-465 BC) in a cuneiform text.¹⁵⁵ Also, a court official of Xerxes I named Marduka, a name which has the same consonantal radicals as the name Mordecai (i.e., MRDK), suggests a historical person. Jews of the Diaspora often took non-Jewish names, and Mordecai, which is the Hebrew vocalized equivalent of Marduka, would not be at all unusual.¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, the interval between the dates in Esther regarding the banishment of Vashti in Xerxes' third regnal year and his remarriage to Esther in his seventh regnal year corresponds to what is known of his fierce campaign with the Greeks in which he was defeated at Thermopylae and Salamis in his 6th regnal year.¹⁵⁷ The Persian Council of Seven (1:14; cf. Ezr. 7:14) is also known from ancient extra-biblical sources. That Persian authorities sent out official decrees in various languages (3:12; 8:9) is verified in Persian, Akkadian, Lydian, Lycian, Greek and Aramaic inscriptions and papyri. Finally, the form of the book suggests that its author considered it to be historical inasmuch as it begins with a typically historical formula (1:1).¹⁵⁸

On the other hand, there are definitely some historical challenges. The most apparent is that two ancient historians, Herodotus (5th century BC) and Ctesias (4th century BC) report the name of Xerxes' queen as Amestris, not Vashti or Esther. Amestris was noted for her cruelty, so one would hesitate to identify her with Esther in any case. Furthermore, Persian custom was that the queen should be a member of the ruling dynasty or Persian aristocracy, which Esther certainly was not. (On the other hand, Herodotus also mentions that Xerxes had a harem, so the possibility of him having more than one wife cannot be discounted.¹⁵⁹)

Another problem is that Susa was not the Persian capital as implied in 1:2; still, it was an administrative center and the winter residence of the king.

A third objection is that if the Mordecai of the Book of Esther was exiled to

¹⁵⁵ To be sure, the LXX translated the name as Artaxerxes (this lead is followed by Josephus as well), and some scholars have suggested Artaxerxes II as the Persian monarch (404-358 BC). However, this option is not as popular as it once was due to the discovery of the cuneiform identification of Xerxes I, cf. D. Payne, *ISBE* (1982) II.159.

¹⁵⁶ Daniel, Azariah, Mishael and Hananiah, for instance, all took Babylonian names (cf. Da. 1:6-7). Esther, also, is a Babylonian name (cf. Est. 2:7).

¹⁵⁷ Xerxes began his war with the Greeks in 490 BC, and the campaign lasted, with interludes, until 479 BC. The Greeks defeated him at Marathon (490 BC) and Salamis (480 BC), cf. E. Burns, et al., *World Civilizations*, 6th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), I.183.

¹⁵⁸ D. Harvey, *IDB* (1962) II.151; Heltzer, pp. 28-30.

¹⁵⁹ Herodotus, VII.114; IX.108.

Babylon in 598/7 BC along with Jehoiachin (2:5-6; cf. Ezr. 2:2; Ne. 7:7), then he must have been well over a hundred years old at the time of the story. Grammatically, however, the one described in Esther 2:5-6 as being exiled by Nebuchadnezzar can be Kish, Mordecai's ancestor, as well as it can be Mordecai. Furthermore, the Mordecai listed in Ezra and Nehemiah is listed as returning to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel and not remaining in Persia, so he is unlikely to have been the Mordecai in Esther.

A final historical objection is that while the Persians generally allowed some ranking officials from various nationalities, the highest ranks were reserved for Persians and Medes, thus casting doubt upon Haman the Agagite's appointment as prime minister (3:1) and Mordecai's later appointment to the same position (10:3). Still, it should be remembered that Nehemiah was a Jew who attained a high rank in the Persian administration (Ne. 1:11; 2:1), and so did Zerubbabel (1 Esdras 3:4; 4:13), so while the account in Esther may be unusual, it does not stand alone. In the end, the case for historicity is not without solid support, while the case for a fictional story cannot be required.

Canonicity

The Book of Esther appears in the third collection of the Hebrew Bible called Kethubim, although in the English Bible, following the Septuagint, it has been relocated to follow the post-exilic historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah. It is the last of the five Megilloth, the books that are read in the Jewish annual festivals (see the later discussion under purpose).

For both Jews and Christians, there has been some question about canonicity. Among the Jews, Esther is the only Old Testament work not found at Qumran. In the late first century, after the first Jewish revolt, the rabbis at Jamnia reexamined the issue of canonicity, and the canonicity of Esther, along with a few other books, was debated. In the end, all the traditional books of the Hebrew canon were retained. In Christian circles, Esther is missing from the canon lists of Melito of Sardis (c. AD 170), Athanasius (AD 367) and Gregory of Nazianzus (AD 389), but it is present in canon lists by Origen (AD 185-254) and later church fathers and was included in the canon lists of the Councils of Hippo (AD 393) and Carthage (397). Much later in the Reformation, Luther's famous negative comment was: "I am so hostile to this book [2 Maccabees] and to Esther that I wish they did not exist at all; for they Judaize too greatly and have much heathen impropriety." Luther's opinion notwithstanding, Esther has remained firmly fixed in the canons of all branches of Christianity.

There are two primary reasons why the canonicity of Esther has been challenged. First, it seems to be entirely secular and does not even contain a

reference to God.¹⁶⁰ So acute was this problem for Jewish readers that later Jewish expansions to the Book of Esther were included in the Septuagint containing copious references to God, Jewish piety and devotion.¹⁶¹ However, it is agreed by all that these expansions were not part of the original work. Neither does the book speak of the Torah, the covenant, the temple or other features of the faith of Israel. In the New Testament, the Book of Esther is never referenced. The book treats Jewishness strictly in ethnic terms, not religious terms, thus emphasizing a type of nationalism that seems odd for a canonical work. The traditional theology of the prophets, by contrast, emphasizes the concept of a remnant more in line with Paul's New Testament assessment that true Jewishness is essentially a matter of faith, not ethnicity (Ro. 2:28-29).

The second canonical challenge is the celebration of raw vengeance, which seems ethically and morally suspect (9:5-17). Not only did the Jews slaughter more than 75,000 citizens of Persia, Esther personally requested the summary execution of the ten sons of Haman.

How should such challenges be answered? The usual approach is to emphasize that God is at work in history even when one does not see him overtly. Thus, part of the message of Esther is the theology of providence and God's hiddenness. Furthermore, while there are no direct references to God, such phrases as "relief and deliverance...will arise from another place" (4:14) may very well imply divine providence. So why are references to God absent in the book? Various speculations have been offered. One is the idea that the author deliberately omitted any reference to God because the account was inserted in the Persian archival records (cf. 10:2).¹⁶² Another is that Esther belongs to the genre of wisdom literature, which typically uses the name of God much less than other types of literature.¹⁶³ Yet another is that since the book was read at the feast of Purim, a

¹⁶⁰ Some interpreters claim to have found acrostics containing Yahweh's name in initial or final letters of Hebrew words read either forward or backward (1:20; 5:4, 13; 7:7), and some Jewish scribes wrote these letters in bold type to emphasize this hidden value. On the whole, however, this approach seems too arbitrary to have much value, especially since one can use the same method and find the name Satan equally well as the name Yahweh (2:3; 2:4). More promising are the six unusual spellings of the word *y'hudim* (= Jews) among the thirty-six appearances of the name. These six unusual spellings each contain an extra *yod* (4:7; 8:1, 7, 13; 9:15, 18). The alphabetic letter *yod* also doubles for *yad* (= a hand), and the *yod* is a common circumlocution for Yahweh in the Jewish prayer book. Thus, some rabbis suggest that there are six times when divine intervention rescues an individual Jew or the Jews as a whole. The extra *yod* in the six unusual spellings of the word Jew may point to the hidden hand of God among the Jews to protect them, cf. R. Sabua, "The Hidden Hand of God," *BR* (Feb. 1992), pp. 31-33.

¹⁶¹ These expansions may be found in the Apocrypha under the title *Additions to Esther*, and they also were canonized by the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent (1546) and appear as a prologue and as insertions in the text following 3:13; 4:17; 8:12 and 10:3.

¹⁶² J. Wright, *NBD* (1982) p. 350. Here, it must be admitted that the text does not clearly say that the book was added to the Persian archives, only that the account of Mordecai's elevation was recorded.

¹⁶³ Here, however, the argument is hard to sustain that Esther is a wisdom book, since it does not contain the usual

celebration with much merrymaking and excessive drinking, the name of God was omitted deliberately to prevent accidental blasphemy.¹⁶⁴ Still another is the theological explanation that the Jews of the diaspora were no longer the theocratic people of God, since they did not return to Jerusalem and Judah. Hence, the covenant name of Yahweh was no longer associated with them.¹⁶⁵ None of these explanations are entirely satisfactory, but the traditional approach, that the book intentionally describes God's hiddenness in history, is probably the best.

As for the Jewish celebration of vengeance, one must remember that the book is still in the Old Testament period of God's progressive self-revelation. War and slaughter were characteristic of the times, both for Israel and her neighbors. Furthermore, one must not lapse into the notion of expecting the ethics of Jesus in Old Testament characters. Many Old Testament characters are figures of courage and faith, but also, of moral degeneracy (e.g., Gideon, Jephthah, Samson, Saul, David, Solomon, Uzziah, etc.). To observe that the book celebrates vengeance is not at all the same thing as saying that God approves of vengeance. Hence, to expect the book to rise to the ethical level of the Sermon on the Mount would be severely anachronistic. The absence of God's name in the book may very well suggest a divine censure for a series of events in which heroism and brutality were strangely mixed.

Purpose

The attempt to provide an interpretive model for the Book of Esther has engendered several possibilities. The main purpose of the book is not in doubt. It is to provide the historical grounds for a Jewish annual festival not prescribed by the Torah, the Feast of Purim. Furthermore, if the hiddenness of God in history is at all a component, then a corollary purpose is to demonstrate God's providential care of his people with implied protection for the community in Jerusalem, which was part of the Persian Empire and subject to the program. Also, if the absence of God's name is of any interpretive significance, then Huey's idea that the book shows

characteristics of wisdom literature, cf. F. Huey, Jr., "Esther," *EBC* (1988) IV.785.

¹⁶⁴ B. Anderson, *IB* (1954) III.829-830. The Talmud, for instance, allowed considerable excess at Purim, including the advice, "Drink wine until you are no longer able to distinguish between 'Blessed be Mordecai' and 'Blessed be Haman'" (*Megillah* 7b). An old Jewish proverb has it that "On Purim anything is allowed." This tradition notwithstanding, such an explanation implies that the Feast of Purim preceded the book (possibly as a pagan festival), while the clear intent of the book is just the opposite—to describe the events that preceded and gave rise to the Feast of Purim.

¹⁶⁵ E. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 358. However, such a viewpoint is doubtful, and it certainly does not seem to be what the Jews themselves believed. Furthermore, if the Jews were no longer the covenant people, why would such a book be a candidate for canonicity in the first place?

God's displeasure by divine silence may have merit.¹⁶⁶

However, alongside these more generally accepted purposes have come several other suggestions. One is that the Purim festival did not originate with the Jews, but was taken over by them from their Mesopotamian neighbors. As such, major figures in the book were believed to be linked to mythological characters in Babylonian religion, with Mordecai representing Marduk (the most important male deity) and Esther representing Ishtar (the most important female deity). The consonants in both sets of names, MRDK and 'SHTR, are identical. In this view, the names Haman and Vasti parallel the Elamite deities Human and Mashti, and the point of the book is supposed to demonstrate the victory of the Babylonian deities over their Elamite counterparts. As ingenious as this interpretation may be, it is not very compelling. Direct links to a Babylonian or Persian festival have not been conclusively demonstrated.¹⁶⁷ On the other hand, the medieval attempt to allegorize the book is just as tenuous, where Esther was believed to symbolize the virgin Mary while the gallows of Haman prefigured the cross.¹⁶⁸

The attempt to identify a typological link between Agag in the days of Samuel (3:1; cf. 1 Sa. 15:32) and Mordecai's ancestor, Saul ben Kish (2:5; cf. 1 Sa. 9:1-2), also seems strained.

In the end, the reader of the book does best to follow the traditional interpretive motifs of divine providence and the historical background for the Feast of Purim. The added motif of divine displeasure, even amidst the protection of the covenant people, seems consonant with the theology of the earlier prophets.

Exposition

Esther Becomes Queen

Vashti is Deposed (1)

The story of Esther is set in the Persian Period during the reign of Xerxes I (Ahasuerus in Hebrew, Chshayarsha in Old Persian). The Medes and the Persians, who brought about the demise of Babylon, had ethnic roots in the migrations of tribes from the east and south of the Caspian Sea. Large numbers of them settled in northwest Iran. In the 9th and 8th centuries BC, they were under tribute to Assyria,

¹⁶⁶ Huey, pp. 780, 786-788, 793-794.

¹⁶⁷ B. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), p. 600.

¹⁶⁸ In the LXX, the Greek ξυλον (= tree, cross) is used in Esther to describe Haman's gallows, and it is the same word in the New Testament used to refer to Jesus' cross in a number of passages.

and in the 7th century BC they struggled with the Babylonians. Under Cyrus the Great, the Persians annexed large tracts, including Assyria, Syria, Armenia and Cappadocia, and then turned their attention to Babylon. When Babylon fell, Cyrus issued his great edict that the displaced gods could be returned to their temples and displaced peoples could return to their homes, including the Jews. The story of Esther occurs among the Jews who chose to stay in the heartland of the new Persian Empire. After Cyrus the Great (559-530 BC), several other rulers held the Persian throne: Cambyses II (529-522 BC), Darius I Hystaspes (521-486 BC) and Xerxes I (486-465 BC), the latter being the emperor in the book of Esther. Thus, the story of Esther occurred less than a century after many of the Jews had returned to Jerusalem under Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel and Ezra.

The Persian Empire was governed in districts called satrapies, as established by Darius, and provinces, as mentioned here.¹⁶⁹ The governors in these districts were more-or-less kings with absolute civil authority, answering directly only to the emperor. The loyalty of the satraps, on the other hand, was guarded by other officials—a secretary, a chief financial officer and the commander of the local army—who were appointed to work with the satraps but who answered directly to the emperor. Yet other officials called “the eyes and ears of the king” could appear without warning to inspect conditions in the various districts.¹⁷⁰

In Xerxes’ third regnal year, the emperor staged a six months celebration for the Persian nobility in Susa (1:1-4).¹⁷¹ Susa, the ancient capital of Elam, was the winter residence of the emperor, and along with Ecbatana, Babylon and Persepolis, was one of the Persian administrative capitals.

EXCAVATIONS AT SUSA

Susa was identified positively in the mid-1800s and excavated by French archaeological teams for nearly a century between 1884 and 1979. Most of the objects from this excavation now reside in the Louvre, Paris, among them the ancient law code of Hammurabi. Susa was the eastern terminus of the great Royal Road that stretched westward all the way to Sardis, Lydia.

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¹⁶⁹ Herodotus, III.89-94. Herodotus offers conflicting information for the number of satrapies, variously mentioned as twenty-one, twenty-three and twenty-nine. Daniel (6:1), on the other hand, speaks of 120 satraps, that is, the provincial governors over these districts, though there may have been several governors to each district. Xerxes served twelve years as the satrap over Babylon until he became the emperor of Persia. By the time of Esther, we hear of 127 provinces (1:1). These districts may have been administrative subdivisions of the satrapies.

¹⁷⁰ R. Hayden, *ISBE* (1988) IV.345.

¹⁷¹ Susa appears as Shushan in Hebrew. 180 days is six lunar months of 30 days each.

At the end of the six months celebration, Xerxes gave a lavish, week-long stag party especially marked by fine wines (1:5-8).¹⁷² Simultaneously, his queen, Vashti, gave a similar banquet for the women in the royal palace (1:9). At the end of the week, when Xerxes was mellow from his wine,¹⁷³ he sent his eunuchs¹⁷⁴ with a summons for Vashti to display her beauty to his officials, a demand that she promptly refused (1:10-12).¹⁷⁵ As a result of Xerxes' anger and the advice of his counselors and legal experts, probably the "Council of Seven" known from Herodotus,¹⁷⁶ the emperor ordered Vashti deposed on the grounds that her insubordination might infect every family in the empire (1:13-22). Her dethronement was published by dispatches throughout the whole empire.

Esther is Chosen (2:1-18)

It is apparent that the search for a new queen did not begin immediately, since Vashti was deposed in Xerxes's third regnal year (1:3), and his remarriage to Esther did not occur until his seventh regnal year (2:16). Between these two dates, Xerxes was preoccupied with a disastrous campaign against Greece, which he began in 480 BC. With a huge land force reinforced by ships, he crossed the Hellespont over a bridge constructed by Phoenician and Egyptian engineers. After sacking Athens, he suffered defeats at Thermopylae and Salamis. His Phoenician and Egyptian fleets deserted him, his land army was defeated at Plataea, and his Persian fleet was defeated at Mycale. Xerxes finally withdrew to Persepolis and Susa.¹⁷⁷

It was apparently upon his return that he began the search for a new queen (1:1-4). A Jew named Mordecai, who had adopted an orphaned cousin named Hadassah, offered this adopted daughter as a candidate (2:5-9). Hadassah, whose Persian name was *Esther* (= star), was received with favor among the group of candidates.¹⁷⁸ Why Mordecai offered his adopted daughter as a potential bride to a pagan king is unclear, though Nehemiah and Malachi faced similar problems in

¹⁷² Various ancient writers, such as, Herodotus, Xenophon and Strabo, testify to the drinking prowess of the ancient Persians, cf. C. Moore, *Esther [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), p. 7.

¹⁷³ Lit., "when his heart was good with wine"

¹⁷⁴ Eunuchs, emasculated males, were often used as high officials in Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian administrations, and especially, as supervisors in the women's quarters of royal households. The Persian notion was that castrated males made for loyal, but docile, servants, cf. D. Burke, *ISBE* (1982) II.200-201.

¹⁷⁵ Some Jewish interpreters suggest that Vashti was ordered to appear nude, except for her crown, cf. Moore, p. 13.

¹⁷⁶ Herodotus, III.31, cf. Ezra 7:14.

¹⁷⁷ R. Hayden, *ISBE* (1988) IV.1161.

¹⁷⁸ A tradition as old as Josephus says that altogether there were 400 candidates, cf. *Antiquities*, XI.6.2. Josephus also says that the virgins were brought to the king's bed, one each day, until a selection had been made.

Jerusalem (cf. Ne. 13:23ff.; Mal. 2:11ff.). Esther, for her part, apparently had no compunctions about Jewish dietary laws, such as were characteristic of some earlier exiles (cf. Da. 1). Also, Esther was forbidden by Mordecai to reveal her Jewish identity (2:10-11), which may account for the fact that her Persian name is used throughout the book. A year of beauty treatments followed for the candidates, and each night one of the virgins was brought to the emperor. If she was not recalled, her candidacy ended, and she was transferred to the second harem under a different supervisor, presumably to spend her life in isolation from the king (2:12-14; cf. 2 Sa. 20:3).

At Esther's turn, she wisely did not adorn herself according to her own personal whim, but relied on the advice of the harem master, Hegai, who must have known the emperor's taste better than anyone else. Esther pleased Xerxes immensely, and he accepted her as his queen, celebrating his remarriage with a national holiday and a banquet for the nobility (2:15-18).

The Plot

Mordecai Saves Xerxes (2:19-23)

The conclusion of chapter 2 offers an aside that will become important later. During the gathering of the virgins in the search for a new queen,¹⁷⁹ Mordecai was serving Xerxes in an official capacity (2:19). The expression "at the king's gate" is explained by other ancient historians, who indicate that Persian officials were posted at the gate of the palace.¹⁸⁰ Esther, for her part, had kept her national identity a secret, just as Mordecai had instructed her (2:20; cf. 2:10). During this period, Mordecai became aware of an assassination attempt plotted by two eunuchs who guarded the king's private quarters, and through Esther, the king was informed and the plot foiled (2:21-22). The perpetrators were hanged,¹⁸¹ and the incident was entered into the Persian archives (2:23), a daily record kept in the Persian court of internal affairs.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ The phrase "a second time" has long puzzled interpreters. It is missing in the LXX, but present in the Masoretic Text. Possibly it refers to a contingency of candidates who arrived too late, or perhaps there was an effort to displace Esther by parading the candidates before Xerxes again.

¹⁸⁰ Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, VIII.1, 6; Herodotus, III.120. The king's gate was more than an entrance; it was the management center for the whole palace administration and supplies, cf. M. Heltzer, "The Book of Esther: Where Does Fiction Start and History End?" *BR* (Feb. '92) p. 29.

¹⁸¹ Since impaling was practiced in Persia, some scholars suggest that such a practice may be intended here, cf., M. Greenberg, *IDB* (1962) II.522.

¹⁸² Moore, p. 31.

Haman is Elevated and Insulted (3)

The next incident in the narrative introduces the reader to Haman who, in Jewish tradition, was a descendent of Agag, the Amalekite in the period of Samuel and Saul (3:1; 1 Sa. 15:8-9, 20, 32-33). Haman was elevated to the role of prime minister by Xerxes with all the attendant honors (3:2a). Mordecai, however, refused to bow to him. If the title *orosanges* (= Benefactor of the King) had been awarded Mordecai as an honor for his discovery of the assassination plot, which seems likely, he would have had the privilege not to prostrate himself before anyone except Xerxes himself.¹⁸³ Privilege notwithstanding, pressure was brought to bear on Mordecai to bow to Haman (3:3-4), and when he refused, Haman was so incensed that he began planning to kill not only Mordecai, but all Jews as well (3:5-6). The *pur* was cast to determine the day for the pogrom,¹⁸⁴ and the day chosen was less than a year away (3:7).

Following up on his plot, Haman offered Xerxes a description of the Jews which depicted them as a threat to the empire requiring forcible removal (3:8-9). Xerxes gave his consent to accomplish the pogrom and his royal signet ring to seal the order (3:10-11). Conveniently, Haman did not mention Mordecai, and of course, no one knew of the queen's nationality. Scribes were summoned to publish the order, and dispatches were sent with copies throughout the empire (3:12-15a). Xerxes and Haman, in accordance with Persian custom, sat down to drink over the decision.¹⁸⁵ The citizens of Susa, however, were unsettled by this order, apparently not sharing Haman's anti-Semitism (3:15b).

The Petition

The next several episodes in the drama, which form the largest section of the book, detail the circumstances by which Esther made her petition to Xerxes in response to the pogrom against her people. Guided by Mordecai, her adopted father, Esther took her life in her hands to make her appeal.

Mordecai's Instructions (4)

Mordecai, naturally, was terribly distressed over the edict engineered by

¹⁸³ Heltzer, 29-30.

¹⁸⁴ The *pur* was a Mesopotamian method of casting lots with a small multi-sided object, similar to dice. In the debris of Susa, archaeologists found such an article inscribed with the numbers 1, 2, 5 and 6, cf. E. Mack, *ISBE* (1986) III.1057.

¹⁸⁵ According to Herodotus, the Persians drank over decisions they made while sober and reconsidered decisions they made while drinking, cf. I.133, quoted in Moore, p. 42. The excavation of many rhytons from ancient Persia illustrates the high value they put upon ceremonial drinking.

Haman. After all, the fate of his people had been decided because of his personal refusal to acknowledge the prime minister. His expression of grief, with loud wailing, fasting, the tearing of his clothes and the use of ashes, was typical of Oriental demonstrations (4:1).¹⁸⁶ He stopped short of entering the royal quarters, however, since his attire of mourning was forbidden there (4:2). Other Jews throughout the empire joined him in his grief (4:3). We should have expected these expressions to have included some reference to prayer, since such actions were usually considered to be religious. Moore is probably right in suggesting that their omission was deliberate.¹⁸⁷

Esther, also, heard about Mordecai's distress. His actions were public and obvious, and no doubt the rumor mill spread the news of his mourning in many quarters. Nevertheless, Esther's efforts to console him were unsuccessful (4:4). Through one of the eunuchs as an intermediary, she pursued the meaning of this demonstration of grief, discovering to her horror the full implications of the pogrom, including a text of the edict (4:5-8). Through the eunuch, Mordecai urged Esther to make an appeal directly to Xerxes. The problem, of course, was that such an appeal would itself be life-threatening. Persian monarchs were not to be approached without an invitation, and the penalty for violation was execution (4:9-11a).¹⁸⁸ It had been a full month since Esther had seen her husband (4:11b). Of course, if the king extended his scepter to her, Esther would not suffer the death penalty, but the risk was a real one!

Mordecai's response is one of the great challenges to commitment in the Bible (4:12-14). If Esther refused to take the risk, salvation for the Jews would come from elsewhere, but this was her opportunity. This passage is the closest one comes in the book to an affirmation of divine providence. Esther determined to approach the king, whatever the cost. In her reply to Mordecai, she summoned the Jews to three days of fasting before her daring entrance, and as she expressed it, "If I perish, I perish" (4:15-17).

The First Banquet (5)

On the third day, Esther prepared herself and entered Xerxes' throne room. The emperor accepted her, extending to her his golden scepter and asking the reason for this daring initiative (5:1-3).¹⁸⁹ Instead of making her appeal

¹⁸⁶ R. Harrison, *ISBE* (1979) I.318.

¹⁸⁷ Moore, p. 47.

¹⁸⁸ Josephus actually indicates that the emperor's throne was surrounded by guards with axes to enforce this rule, cf. *Antiquities*, 11.6.3.

¹⁸⁹ The expression "half my kingdom" was probably an Oriental exaggeration (cf. Mk. 6:23).

immediately, Esther requested the king's presence, along with his prime minister, at a banquet (5:4-5). Over wine, the king again pressed Esther as to the cause of her unprecedented boldness, but Esther only deferred her answer to yet another day at a second banquet (5:6-8).

The reason for this delay is not immediately apparent. Perhaps the psychological moment was not right. Perhaps Esther herself was having second thoughts about how to approach the difficult subject. Certainly the postponement heightens the suspense of the story!

Haman, for his part, was entranced. To be invited to a private banquet with the emperor and the queen two days running was heady indeed! His ebullience was dampened by the fact that Mordecai remained resilient in his refusal to bow before him, but he swallowed his anger for the moment (5:9-10a). At home, he bragged to his family and friends about his good fortune to be so honored by the emperor and his queen (5:10b-12). As for Mordecai, his wife and friends suggested that Haman arrange to build a huge gallows with which to wreak his revenge on this stubborn Jew (5:13-14).¹⁹⁰

The Irony of Mordecai's Recognition (6)

In the meantime, Xerxes struggled through the night with insomnia. Finally rising and calling for a reading of the Persian court's daily record, he realized that he had not yet fully honored Mordecai for the discovery of the assassination plot (6:1-3; cf. 2:21-23). Such neglect was a serious oversight, since Persian monarchs considered it a point of honor to promptly reward their benefactors.¹⁹¹ Xerxes set himself to remedy the oversight immediately.

Coincidentally (or, providentially) Haman was just arriving at the court in the early morning to place before the emperor his call for the execution of Mordecai (6:4). Before he could present his request, Xerxes summoned him. "What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?" Xerxes asked (6:5-6a). Assuming on the basis of the previous day's banquet that the honor must surely be for himself, Haman outlined an ostentatious display of accolades, including a royal robe, a royal crested horse, a parade and a public commendation (6:6b-9). What bitter chagrin for him to find that the man to be honored was Mordecai (6:10)! He could hardly present a plea for Mordecai's execution now! Haman had no choice but to obey, and when all was done, he returned home

¹⁹⁰ As with the perpetrators of the plot against Xerxes (cf. 2:23), some scholars envision an impaling stake rather than a gibbet. The LXX reads *σταυρω* (= to impale), though the Mishnah describes a gibbet, cf. M. Greenberg, *IDB* (1962) II.522.

¹⁹¹ Herodotus III.138, 40; V.11; VIII.85; IX.107 as cited in Moore, p. 64.

shattered and humiliated (6:11-13a).

When his wife and friends heard what had happened, their superstitions convinced them that Mordecai was destined to rise, but Haman to fall (6:13b). In the midst of this tumultuous conversation, the summons came for the second banquet (6:14).

The Second Banquet (7)

At Esther's second banquet, Xerxes' curiosity must have been keen indeed. What was this petition that his queen had so carefully drawn out? Esther proceeded to reveal the threat to both her people and herself. The pogrom against the supposed enemies of Persia included the queen (7:1-3)! Esther stated that if she and her people had been sold as slaves, it would not have been so serious, but that they had been sold for annihilation would be a terrible loss to the king himself (7:4).¹⁹²

Xerxes' anger suggests that he had not fully realized the extent of the pogrom. When Haman first presented the alleged threat to the empire, the Jews were not mentioned by name, and in any case, Esther's identity was a secret. Now, however, it was obvious that she was included in the pogrom. Furthermore, the one who engineered this pogrom was none other than Haman (7:5-6). Furious, Xerxes excused himself. Haman began to beg Esther for his life, falling before her. If he followed typical Near Eastern gestures of humility, he may even have seized her feet and kissed them in his terror (7:7). Xerxes returned just as Haman prostrated himself on the couch where Esther was reclining.¹⁹³ "Will he even molest the queen while she is with me?" he exclaimed. The emperor's exclamation was so abrupt that immediately the servants covered Haman's face as a man condemned (7:8). One of the eunuchs offered the information that Haman's gibbet was available, the one he had erected for Mordecai. "Hang him!" the king said. And it was done (7:9-10).

The Problem and Its Solution

The unveiling of Haman's scheme against the Jews and his subsequent execution, as significant as it was, could not undo the threat. The immutable nature of Medo-Persian law was the problem. Such law could not simply be

¹⁹² The Hebrew grammar in the final sentence of 7:4 is ambiguous and can yield more than one meaning. Some translations take it to mean that if the Jewish people merely had been sold into slavery, the circumstance would not have been important enough to bother the king (so NIV, NEB). Others take it to mean that the destruction of the Jews would economically injure the empire (so NAB, RSV, ASV, JB, NASBmg).

¹⁹³ An Aramaic targum says that an angel pushed him on the couch, cf. Huey, p. 826.

countermanded, even by the emperor himself (1:19; 8:8). A similar circumstance occurred in the story of Daniel (cf. Da. 6:8, 15), and Darius was compelled to put Daniel in the lion's den, even though it was against his personal wishes (cf. Da. 6:14, 16). This characteristic of Medo-Persian law probably aimed at protecting royal decrees from subversion. In later Persian history during the reign of Darius III, the emperor executed a man he knew to be innocent because of this immutable standard.¹⁹⁴ Hence, the only alternative was to neutralize the law.

The New Edict (8)

The day Haman was executed became the same day that Esther revealed her full identity as the adopted daughter of Mordecai. Xerxes appointed Mordecai to replace Haman as his prime minister, giving him the royal signet, while he gave Haman's estate to Esther (8:1-2). Persian law allowed the state to confiscate the property of condemned criminals,¹⁹⁵ and Esther promptly appointed Mordecai as executor. As gratifying as these things were, however, they could not compensate for the terrible decree that still hung over the Jews. Esther again sought audience, and once again she risked her life to plead with Xerxes (8:3-4).

The only solution was to neutralize the pogrom by drawing up another decree. Xerxes was willing, and he gave his officials the latitude to word the new decree as they thought appropriate (8:5-8). They did so on the 23rd day of Sivan (May-June), still several months in advance of the day of the pogrom (8:9a; cf. 3:7). The new decree was duly written up in various languages, sealed by Mordecai with Xerxes' signet, and dispatched to the provinces (8:9b-10). The counter-edict gave the Jews the right to defend themselves against the pogrom, and even more, it made apparent that the pogrom was under official displeasure (8:11-14). The city of Susa, which had been dismayed by Haman's original edict, now rejoiced in the counter-edict, while the Jews in all the provinces celebrated (8:15-17a). Some pagans even "became Jews" (8:17b), though this statement can be taken in more than one way. Though it might mean that pagans became proselytes, it could also mean that they simply professed to be Jews out of the opportunism of the moment.¹⁹⁶

The 13th Day of Adar (9:1-17)

At last the day of the two edicts arrived. There was still considerable anti-

¹⁹⁴ J. Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1978), p. 128. This reference appears to be the only outside source corroborating the unique feature of Medo-Persian law.

¹⁹⁵ Herodotus, 3.128-129.

¹⁹⁶ The LXX, on the other hand, says that many Gentiles were circumcised.

Jewish sentiment in the empire, some even in official circles (cf. 9:7-9), though the second decree officially discouraged the pogrom (9:1). The Jews clearly had the upper hand, however, and with the government's help in the provinces and Mordecai as prime minister, the Jews took advantage of the second edict to slaughter their enemies. They massacred 500 in Susa alone, including the ten sons of Haman, and they killed 75,000 in all (9:2-17). Their action does not seem to have been merely defensive, but they actively sought out anti-Semitism and crushed it.

Esther especially requested for Susa a one day extension of the blood bath and also that the corpses of Haman's sons be impaled for public exposure. Another 300 were slaughtered on the next day. However, though the Jews took vengeance on their enemies, they did not take advantage of the right to plunder the estates of their enemies (9:10b). Other than in Susa, with its one day extension, the Jews throughout the empire used the 14th day of Adar for celebration (9:17b).

If the historical-critical issues loom large for this book, the ethical issue looms just as large. What can be said in justification for this slaughter? While at least it can be said that those killed by the Jews were enemies actively seeking their destruction (9:2), it also is not hard to see why many early Christians, not to mention Luther and others, had canonical reservations about this book. The spirit of vengeance is not simply a by-product of a violent age in which the major spiritual value is elsewhere, as in the Book of Judges, but it is the central and crowning event of the book. Some suggest that the Jews only killed those who were directly attacking them, thus interpreting the slaughter as more-or-less an entirely defensive measure.¹⁹⁷ Certainly, the second decree seems to have been formulated with defense in mind (cf. 8:11). However, without special pleading the language describing the actual slaughter smacks of attack, not defense (cf. 9:2, 5-10, 15). Other interpreters offer no justification at all, preferring instead to relegate the blood-bath to an example of how God's people should not behave.¹⁹⁸ The absence and silence of God in the book is interpreted to be a deliberate feature of divine disapproval.

In one sense, the Book of Esther does not stand alone with respect to this moral issue. Other examples could be produced, but probably none more graphic than Psalm 137, the poem that laments the Jews' exile to Babylon and concludes with the vengeful words, Happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us-he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks. What role does this psalm and the Book of Esther have in the faith of the people of God? Do these

¹⁹⁷ C. Keil, *KD* (rpt. 1970), p. 316.

¹⁹⁸ Huey, pp. 786-787.

passages endorse vengeance, or should they be sanitized or even expurgated from Scripture?¹⁹⁹

A third alternative, and in the author's opinion a better one, is that such passages speak to us of both the passionate devotion as well as the terrible fallibility of humans, and both these aspects of the human constitution must be part of any biblical anthropology. Such a psalm-and such a book-must be read in light of the gospel. The material should be neither sanitized nor rejected; it must be affirmed as a paradigm of the human condition in both its grandeur and misery. As such, there is both continuity and discontinuity between the Old Testament view of humans and the coming of Jesus Christ. Christ himself comes into the world as a human, yet without sin, and in Christ this paradigm of human nobility and depravity finds its resolution. Christ fulfills the longing of all humans while at the same time he judges their sin.²⁰⁰

A striking example can be found in the confessions of Jeremiah. As this 7th century prophet looked ahead to the terrible destruction of his own people by the war machine of the Babylonians, he prayed for vengeance on his enemies:

Let me see your vengeance upon them (11:20).

Drag them off like sheep to be butchered (12:3).

Bring on them the day of disaster (17:18).

Give their children over to famine...let their wives be made childless

and widows; let their men be put to death, their young men slain by the sword in battle.

Do not forgive their crimes or blot out their sins from your sight (18:21-23).

Jeremiah's misery was so great that he pronounced a curse on the man who brought his father the news that he had been born (20:15-16).

The resolution to such cries for vengeance did not come until there was another man led like a lamb to slaughter, a victim of terrible suffering who suffered ridicule and abuse. This man, also, was tempted to express vengeance and retribution. He, too, faced a bleak and bitter hopelessness that stood in stark contrast to the prosperity of his accusers. Unlike Jeremiah, however, he did not pray, "Do not forgive their crimes." Instead, he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk. 23:34). So, the Book of Esther must be read in light of the cross. It cannot be otherwise, for in the eternal purposes of God,

¹⁹⁹ John Bright points out that while some Protestant pray books contain readings from Psalm 137, the final verse are conveniently omitted.

²⁰⁰ See the very insightful discussion in J. Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), pp. 234-241.

there must be both an Old and a New Testament. Both are the Word of God. Each is incomplete without the other.

The Feast of Purim (9:18-32)

Due to the extension of the second edict, the Jews in Susa used the 15th of Adar for celebration, thus giving rise to a two-day annual celebration as the Festival of Purim, the 14th and 15th (9:18-22). The name for the festival derived from Haman's casting of the pur to decide the day of the pogrom (9:23-28; cf. 3:7). Both Mordecai and the queen codified by official letter the celebration of Purim by the Jews in all the Persian provinces (9:29-32).

The annual celebration of Purim proceeded according to the following custom: the festival was preceded by a day of fasting (the 13th of Adar), and in the evening, lamps were lit in the homes and all attended a special service in the synagogue. The next two days were for celebration, exchanging gifts and yet another synagogue service to hear the reading of the Book of Esther. While the story was being read, the congregation would erupt in curses against Haman and anyone else deemed to be wicked, and the service would close with a solemn blessing on Mordecai, Esther and the Jewish community. Considerable latitude was allowed during the festival, including drunkenness. Eventually the festival became a carnival in which participants dressed up in costumes and masks.²⁰¹

Epilogue (10)

The Book of Esther closes with the statement that Xerxes imposed an empire-wide tribute on his subjects (10:1). The relevance of this levy is not immediately clear, but perhaps it was a measure initiated by Mordecai to compensate Xerxes for the loss of the 10,000 talents promised by Haman (cf. 3:9).²⁰² The book ends with an acclamation of Mordecai, the new prime minister of Persia, for his role in helping preserve the Jews (10:2-3).

²⁰¹ R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Religious Institutions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), II.514-515.

²⁰² Moore, pp. 98-99.